

Fetus Magic and Sorcery Fears in Roman Egypt

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ON MAY 22nd in the year 197 CE, an élite young farmer in the village of Karanis, in the Egyptian Fayyum, one Gemellus Horion by name, presented a formal complaint to the Roman *stratēgos* “concerning the outrages perpetrated by” his neighbors. It seems that these neighbors had twice taken the harvest from Gemellus Horion’s fields, three of them marching out in broad daylight and then launching some kind of sorcery or binding spell, to “surround [the victims] with malice [φθώνφ ... περικλίσαι],” so that these neighbors could not be hindered in their robbery.¹ And if it were not unusual enough for a formal complaint to revolve around an act of sorcery, what has especially intrigued papyrologists about the events Gemellus Horion describes are the means by which the binding spell was accomplished: not by burying a lead tablet somewhere, or leaving a bound poppet on his threshold, but by throwing a *fetus* (βρέφος) at the harvesters. Furthermore, these neighbors—one Julius, his wife, and a friend—not only performed this strange action once, but then retrieved the *brephos* and did it again, this time in front of a group of village elders. And it was effective, for nobody tried to stop Julius and his cronies from taking the harvest.

When Youtie and Pearl first (1944) published this complaint as part of an archive of Karanis papyri, they immediately noted (pp.124–125) the magical sense in which the fetus was used and understood. Yet the text has never been drawn systematically into the larger scholarship on ancient magic and its social world. This paper seeks to develop some of the implications of

¹ *P.Mich.* VI 423–424, ed. H. C. Youtie and O. M. Pearl.

Julius's act, his choice of magical "material," and Gemellus Horion's complaint about being thus "surrounded with malice," both in light of new archaeological evidence for uses of stillborn fetuses and in the context of new understandings of magic as a phenomenon of ancient social life.

1. Situating the Spell

a. A complaint by Gemellus Horion

There are a few notable features to these incidents that bear consideration for the study of ancient religion. At the most general level, the Karanis papyrus constitutes the only first-hand example of an appeal to Roman administrators to resolve crises that have arisen in the world of ritual aggression and protection—magic.² To be sure, Gemellus Horion is in a unique position to make such an appeal. As he makes clear in the beginning of his petition, he is the descendant of an Antinoopolitan army veteran granted citizenship, so he comes from an élite social rank. The petition, in fact, is part of a considerable archive found in 1924 in a Karanis house structure, whence we learn that Gemellus Horion was also the complainant in several other suits over the late second century, in all of which he highlights his social status as well as the fact that he is blind in one eye.³ Hence Horion might have been an outsider to some

² Cf. *P.Oxy.* XXII 2342, an early II CE petition from Oxyrhynchus, which may, in passing, be accusing a woman not only of embezzling proceeds from wine, but also of "casting an evil eye over us [ἡμῖν κατοπτέουσα]" (29). But the papyrus is lacunose, the wording unclear, and the ostensible accusation not elaborated. See *P.Oxy.* XXII p.127, note on line 29, and Peter van Minnen, "Berenice, a Business Woman from Oxyrhynchus: Appearance and Reality," in A. M. F. W. Verhoogt and S. P. Vleeming (eds.), *The Two Faces of Graeco-Roman Egypt* (P.Lugd.Bat. 30 [1998]) 59–70. N.b.: I use "magic" here in the *etic*, or comparative, sense (see H. S. Versnel, "Some Reflections on the Relationship Magic–Religion," *Numen* 38 [1991] 177–197; Valerie I. J. Flint, *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe* [Princeton 1991], esp. 3). When referring to ancient uses of the label *mageia* I will use the transliterated Greek term.

³ *P.Mich.* VI 422 [*SB* XXII 15744] (197 CE), 425 (198), 426 (199/200); *P.Mich. inv.* 2920 [*SB* IV 7361 (210/1), ed. H. C. Youtie, *ZPE* 15 (1974) 149–152]. On the Karanis archive of Horion and his family see Youtie and Pearl, *P.Mich.* VI pp.117–119; Richard Alston, *Soldier and Society in Roman*

local traditions, including magical traditions. Yet it would be wrong to assume that he would not have shared in the assumptions and anxieties about ritual power in the larger community and how it could be wielded. Before anything else, the complaint conveys fear and frustration at the power of this *brephos*. This object initiated the “outrages perpetrated [τῶν τετολημμένων]” by Julius.

We also learn from this archive that, earlier the same spring (“after I had done the sowing”), the neighbor Julius and his brother had also “violently and arrogantly entered my fields ... and hindered me in them by the power they hold in the area [δυνάμι τῆ περι αὐτοὺς ἐπὶ τῶν τόπων].”⁴ While we probably cannot interpret the neighbors’ *dunamis* here in any more supernatural sense than what would have come with social authority, we do learn that their return at harvest-time with a magical *brephos* occurred in the context of simmering conflict.

b. *To “surround with malice [φθόνῳ ... περικλίσαι]”*

The text also gives rare first-hand testimony to ritual aggression itself in its social and performative context. By throwing the *brephos*, Julius seeks to “hem in” or “surround” Horion’s people “with malice.” The formulation is unusual, evidently meaning to describe an experience for which a standard public or legal terminology is wanting. Yet the context suggests that the individual victims felt themselves restricted in responsive movement because of some force here designated “malice”—presumably some conjured and projected force linked both to Julius’s own ill-intent and to the medium of the *brephos* itself.⁵

Egypt: A Social History (London/New York 1995) 129–132; Jane Rowlandson, *Women and Society in Greek and Roman Egypt* (Cambridge 1998) 139–143.

⁴ *P.Mich.* VI 422.22–29 (= *SB XXII* 15774.11–15).

⁵ φθόνος often carries the sense of “envy”; and it was envy, theoretically, that motivated Julius’s robbery of Horion’s harvests. However, in ancient literature and art the word had a vividly supernatural sense—a malice that strikes out, afflicts, and must be controlled by *apotropaia*: see Katherine M. D. Dunbabin and M. W. Dickie, “*Invidia rumpantur pectora*: The Iconography of Phthonos/Invidia in Graeco-Roman Art,” *JAC* 26 (1983) 7–37. Thus also in *P.Mich.* 423–424, the explicit link between ritual performance and the immobilization of the victims that the complaint describes militates

To feel oneself supernaturally restricted or bound by another's malicious display or act—that is, by some performance beyond an “evil eye”—invites an association between Julius's symbolic gestures with the fetus and the ancient ritual custom of binding spells—*defixiones* or *katadesmoi*—for which we have abundant evidence from around the ancient world, often in the form of lead tablets. These magical invocations, sometimes phrased as letters to chthonic or alien deities, sought to control the bodies and fates of opponents in sporting events, shop-rivals, social rivals, and quite often erotic interests. The commissioning and inscribing of *defixiones* seems to have offered people in the ancient Mediterranean world a sense of additional efficacy and security for the resolution of social crises in which one often felt impotent, such as mercantile competition, erotic longing, and perceived injustice. In consigning victims to the depredations of spirits, lingering illness, death, or simply being “bound,” *defixiones* gave their clients the confidence that everything possible had been done to resolve a situation.⁶

As much as *defixiones* (like magic everywhere) might aid the normal struggles and tensions of social life in antiquity, they could be employed with quite aggressive intentions—in the hope of stealing others' wives or even killing rivals. Since most *defixiones* were, at least ostensibly, commissioned secretly and then deposited in secret locations for the sake of the relevant gods, we normally understand their efficacy—even the efficacy of homicidal spells—to lie on the side of the client, who gains a kind of catharsis through the course of ritual procedures (like consulting an expert, procuring the ingredients, pronouncing the spell, and depositing the tablet), rather than on the side of

against interpreting φθόνος in an abstract sense: “encircle with their envy” (as in Rowlandson, *Women* 143 no. 107).

⁶ In general see John Gager (ed.), *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World* (New York 1992), including materials from A. Audollent, *Defixionum Tabellae* (Paris 1904). On the function of binding spells, see Bronislaw Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays* (Boston 1948) 1–71; Christopher A. Faraone, “The Agonistic Context of Early Greek Binding Spells,” and John J. Winkler, “The Constraints of Eros,” in C. A. Faraone and D. Obbink (eds.), *Magika Hiera: Ancient Greek Magic and Religion* (New York/Oxford 1991) 3–32 and 214–243; Gager 21–24.

the intended victim, who might never know such a spell was commissioned. But Gemellus Horion's complaint reveals a different type of binding performance.

In his petition to the *stratēgos*, the “binding”—here phrased as “surrounding/hemming in [περικλίσσαι]”—is meant not to hinder Gemellus Horion's agricultural prowess but to prevent responsive action in a case of outright robbery. Furthermore, it is accomplished not by secretly writing a note to a chthonic deity like Persephone or Ereshkigal and dropping it down a well by night, but through a highly public performance, involving gesture (Julius's approach and throwing of an object), word (some presumable declaration that these gestures will “surround with malice”), and—most interestingly—the use of a fetus. Let us now turn to the fetus.

2. Fetuses and magic

The Karanis papyrus introduces and refers to the fetus in straightforward terms: “[Julius] again trespassed with his wife and a certain Zenas, holding a *brephos*, intending to surround my cultivator with malice so that he should abandon his labor after having harvested ... Again, in the same manner, they threw the same *brephos* toward me, intending to surround me also with malice” in front of two village elders; and finally, “Julius, after he had gathered in the remaining crops from the fields, took the *brephos* away to his house” (12–14, 16–18, 20–21). The complaint stresses the *function* of the *brephos* and its effect—to secure the robbery of Horion's crops—but adds no other details. How do we interpret the use of this strange object and the efficacy of the rites in which Julius uses it?

One might propose that there was no fetus at all, that Julius threw some doll or other object—something durable enough to be retrieved and thrown again!—in order to deceive the half-blind Gemellus Horion with something fetus-*like*.⁷ But in the

⁷ Various dolls, in wax, terracotta, and lead, were indeed employed in curse spells in Roman Egypt, although generally buried in an assemblage, not thrown: images of gods: *PGM* IV.1724ff., 2359ff., V.377ff., VII.867ff.; images of victims: P.Mich. inv. 6925 and *PGM* IV.296–466, with exemplum in the Louvre (see Gager, *Curse Tablets* 94–100, and David Martinez, *P.Mich. XVI A Greek Love Charm from Egypt* [Atlanta 1991]); *Suppl.Mag.* 1.45 (see

first performance the *brephos* worked convincingly against the cultivator, not Horion himself; and in the second, more public, performance the object worked against the visually unimpaired town elders as well. Whatever it was, the label *brephos* seems to reflect some consensus among witnesses. And why would one label a doll or bundle a *brephos* in the first place?

Nowhere in the entire extant corpus of magical papyri is a fetus specified as an ingredient for a binding spell. This absence immediately teaches us that the magical papyri, while immensely rich documentation for ritual practices in Roman Egypt, should not be taken as in any way exhaustive. Indeed, as documents for a fairly élite rank of priestly ritual expert, they may offer little information about local practices, which might never be written down or collected.⁸ In the case of the “binding fetus,” its efficacy in restraining so many people in such public situations probably came from its novelty: a new substance, a new form of curse.

Yet it is not unparalleled. In 1993, excavations of the Roman town of Kellis, in the Dakhleh oasis in Egypt, found a fourteen-

Gager 101–106); bound male figures from IV BCE Athens, in D. Jordan, “New Greek Curse Tablets,” *GRBS* 41 (2000) 9, nos. 11–13; instructions for placing wax figurines by victim’s door, in Coptic spell manual Heidelberg kopt. 679 (Marvin Meyer and Richard Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic: Coptic Texts of Ritual Power* [San Francisco 1994] 222–224 no. 110); and now Mona Haggag, “Some Unpublished Wax Figurines from Upper Egypt,” in W. V. Harris and G. Ruffini (eds.), *Ancient Alexandria between Egypt and Greece* (Leiden 2004) 231–240, figs. 1–5. See in general Jürgen Trumpf, “Fluchtafel und Rache puppe,” *AthMitt* 73 (1958) 94–102; Maarten J. Raven, “Wax in Egyptian Magic and Symbolism,” *OMRL* 64 (1983) 7–47; Robert K. Ritner, *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice* (Chicago 1993) 112–180. These magical images differ enormously from dolls used in play: see Rosalind M. Janssen, “Soft Toys from Egypt,” in Donald M. Bailey (ed.), *Archaeological Research in Roman Egypt* (*JRA* Suppl. 19 [1996]) 231–239.

⁸ Robert K. Ritner, “Egyptian Magical Practice under the Roman Empire: The Demotic Spells and Their Religious Context,” *ANRW* II.18.5 (1995) 3333–79; David Frankfurter, *Religion in Roman Egypt: Assimilation and Resistance* (Princeton 1998) 210–237, and “The Consequences of Hellenism in Late Antique Egypt: Religious Worlds and Actors,” *ARG* 2 (2000) 166–183; Jacco Dieleman, *Priests, Tongues, and Rites: The London-Leiden Magical Manuscripts and Translation in Egyptian Ritual* (Leiden 2005).

week fetus wrapped in linen cloth and a substantial length of cord (*fig.* 1a, b) in debris associated with the roof of a fourth-century house:

Ismant el-Kharab, area 31/420-D6-1/A/6: Context 1A, house 4, occupied in later fourth century CE (by ceramics, coins, texts). The wrapped fetus, object #31/420-D6-1/A/6/76 (discovered 1/14/1993), was found in Room 7B, situated in the north-western corner of the complex; this is an upper room. Context 1A comprises mud-brick collapse, probably from the walls of the room, which underlay surface sand. It had a depth of 33 cms. The fetus was within this material against the northern wall. Whilst the adjacent Room 7A preserved part of its floor, that in 7B did not survive; however, scars on the walls show its original position, and the context 1A material, although not secure in attribution, would conceivably have been above that floor.⁹

At fourteen weeks the fetus could have been miscarried or aborted. The form of wrapping and the unusual location of the fetus's deposit, however, suggest not the systematic preparation of a mummy but the assembly of a power-object, perhaps for the purpose of "binding" the house. Although cords were used to prepare mummies, the extensive and haphazard wrapping of this fetus resembles more the wrapping of amulets and power-objects than mummies.¹⁰ Wrapped papyrus amulets, for example, have recently been discovered in a temple in the Roman-era Fayyum some sixty kilometers from Karanis, as

⁹ Colin Hope, personal communication (4/11/2003, 8/5/2005). On the dating of House 4 see Gillian E. Bowen, Colin A. Hope, and Olaf E. Kaper, "A Brief Report on the Excavations at Ismant El-Kharab in 1992–93," *Bulletin of the Australian Centre for Egyptology* 4 (1993) 25–26.

¹⁰ Correspondence with Tosha Dupras (2003–2005). See preliminary notice in Gillian E. Bowen, "Some Observations on Christian Burial Practices at Kellis," in G. Bowen and C. Hope (eds.), *Oasis Papers* III (Oxford 2003) 167–182. A ca. 2-year-old child was found buried in the wall of unit C/2/2. On other burials of fetuses and infants in oasis necropoleis, see C. A. Marlow, "Miscarriages and Infant Burials in the Dakhleh Cemeteries: An Archaeological Examination of Status," in C. A. Marlow and A. J. Mills (eds.), *Oasis Papers* I (Oxford 2001) 105–110, and Françoise Dunand, "Les enfants et la mort en Égypte," in V. Dasen (ed.), *Naissance et petite enfance dans l'Antiquité* (Fribourg 2004) 13–30.

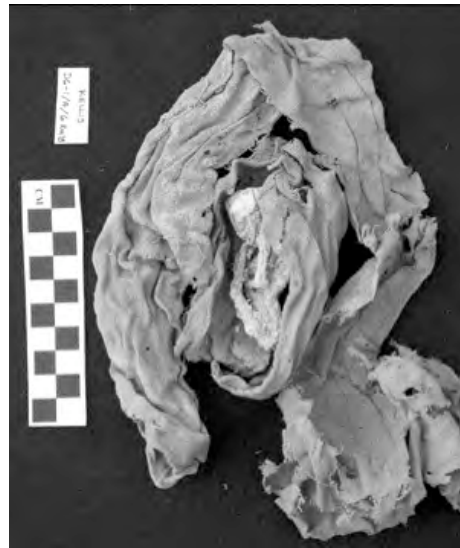


Figure 1.a–b: Kellis: associated with House 4, Rm 7B.
14-week fetus in wrapping, found in roof rubble of upper room.
L: 10.0 cm.; W: 5.0 cm.; D: 3.8 cm.

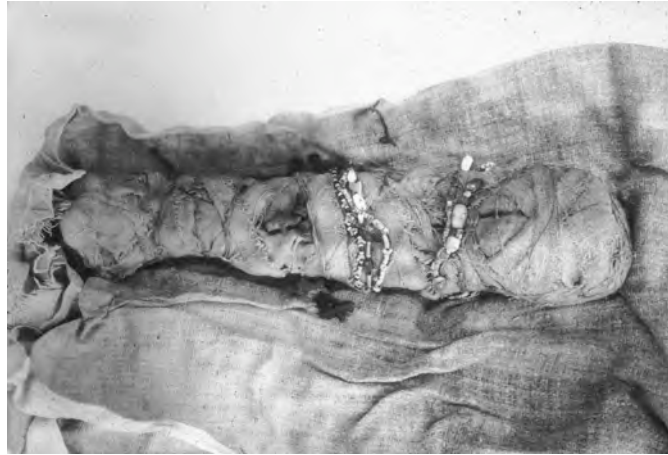


Figure 2: Egyptian, IV CE.
 Infant mummy found in the necropolis at Bagawat (Tomb 66).
 Photography by the Egyptian Expedition.
 Photograph, all rights reserved, the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

well as in Kellis.¹¹ Indeed, extensive cord-wrapping, as was done to the Kellis fetus, is a common element in the preparation of power-objects cross-culturally, allowing the expert or client a gestural focus on some concrete medium and often some verbal expression to accompany each turn of the cord. In contrast to the wrapping of the Kellis fetus, that of an infant's mummy of about the same period, from the Bagawat necropolis, includes beads and careful, tight wrapping around the contours of the body, clearly distinguishing head from feet (*fig. 2*). It thus seems certain that the Kellis fetus was prepared as a magical assemblage—a clear parallel to that in the Karanis papyrus. We may thus interpret Julius's *brephos* as, indeed, a fetus in some form.¹²

¹¹ Paola Davoli, "Excavations at Soknopaiou Nesos (Dime)," *Egyptian Archaeology* 25 (2004) 36, and correspondence (March 2005). Kellis: Colin Hope, personal communication, 7/12/2005.

¹² See also on fetal corpse preparation and burials at Kellis: Marlow, *Oasis Papers* I 107–108. It may be notable that Manichaean documents were

But why a fetus, in both cases? Was there some mythic association with the fetus that everyone knew about? It is certainly tempting to postulate some currency of beliefs in the Angry Unborn to which the use of a real fetus might appeal for vengeance—something equivalent to those broad Mediterranean fears and invocations of the untimely (and generally older) dead, who often served as emissaries for curse-spells.¹³ However, no such beliefs surrounding fetuses are implied in the Karanis papyrus, nor were symbols added to the Kellis wrappings to clarify the fetus's meaning or to control its spirit in the way that ritual materials were supposed to have been added to corpses to invoke their spirits.¹⁴ Furthermore, it does not appear from the archaeological record that fetal or neonate bodies were intrinsically regarded with the awe and fear projected onto older *aôroi*, for many domestic structures in the Roman world, from Egypt to Gaul, had newborns and infants buried in the walls—apparently as a way of keeping them within the family.¹⁵ Excavations of a Roman-era necropolis in the Khargeh Oasis produced two entire tombs filled with the carefully-prepared bodies of children, newborns, and late-term

also found in House 4, associated with the same period as the fetus (Colin Hope, personal communication, 7/12/2005). However, as much as Manichaeans—as literate individuals—maintained magical texts and rites in the course of their religious lives, magic was hardly unique to this religion, nor are their magical texts unique in the field of Greco-Egyptian magic; and there is no way to link a fetus ritually prepared in this way to Manichaean theology. On magical texts discovered at Kellis see K. A. Worp, *P.Kellis I* (Oxford 1995) pp.82–88, and Paul Mirecki, Iain Gardner, and Anthony Alcock, “Magical Spell, Manichaean Letter,” in P. Mirecki and J. BeDuhn (eds.), *Emerging from Darkness: Studies in the Recovery of Manichaean Sources* (Leiden 1997) 1–32.

¹³ See Sarah Iles Johnston, *Restless Dead: Encounters between the Living and the Dead in Ancient Greece* (Berkeley 1999), esp. 127–160, and “Songs for the Ghosts: Magical Solutions to Deadly Problems,” in D. R. Jordan, H. Montgomery, and E. Thomassen (eds.), *The World of Ancient Magic* (Bergen 1999) 83–102. Cf. Youtie and Pearl, *P.Mich.* VI p.125.

¹⁴ Cf. *PGM* IV.1872–2144.

¹⁵ See, e.g., Sally Humphreys, *The Family, Women and Death: Comparative Studies* (London 1983) 103–104; Fanette Laubenheimer, “La mort des tout petits dans l’Occident romain,” in Dasen, *Naissance* 293–315.

fetuses.¹⁶

Ingredients of magical spells tend to be more effectively comprehended through a structural approach than by searching for putative mythologies and folklore. Thus to learn the “valence” and significance of the magical fetuses at Karanis and Kellis, we should look at the customs surrounding the placement of fetuses according to the archaeological and literary record. The key factor in the domestic and entombed fetal burials just mentioned, for example, emerges in their “preaccepted” status: that they were clearly *desired* children (and certainly well beyond fourteen weeks). They were not simply *brephê*.

For a fetus to gain such a “preaccepted” status involved personal, familial, and cultural or ceremonial recognition of the woman as pregnant and the fetus as a relatively separate being: not a child but still of a status distinct from the mother. A series of post-partum rites, often signified in amulets of various types, would transform a neonate of ambivalent identity and prospects into the status of a named or anticipated family-member.¹⁷ But even before birth, recognition of the fetus would involve various social factors. We get a glimpse of this recognition process in all its private subtleties in the Astrampsychos lot-oracle that was popular in Roman Egypt. “Will I give birth?” (47), “Will my wife miscarry?” (59), “Will I rear the child?” (30) are all questions the oracle could answer, with responses like “Your wife won’t miscarry; don’t worry” (7.9) or “The child will survive with difficulty” (50.6), or even “Don’t rear the child—I advise you!” (76.5).¹⁸ By this process of recog-

¹⁶ Dunand, in Dasen, *Naissance* 23–24.

¹⁷ See in general Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, transl. M. B. Vizedom and G. L. Caffee (Chicago 1960) 50–64; and for antiquity, Beryl Rawson, *Children and Childhood in Roman Italy* (Oxford 2003) 108–111, cf. Thomas Köves-Zulau, *Römische Geburtsriten* (Munich 1990). On amulets as endowing identity and age-status, see Véronique Dasen, “Les amulettes d’enfants dans le monde gréco-romain,” *Latomus* 62 (2003) 275–289. Glimpses of naming neonates in *P.Münch.* III 57 and *P.Mil.* II 84 (in Rowlandson, *Women* 291–292, nos. 225–226).

¹⁸ Randall Stewart, *Sortes Astrampsychi* II (Leipzig 2001). See also the fetus-protection spells discussed in Jean-Jacques Aubert, “Threatened Wombs: Aspects of Ancient Uterine Magic,” *GRBS* 30 (1989) 421–449.

niton, miscarriage or neonatal death becomes the death of some construction of an individual, who must then be mourned and perhaps even safeguarded through a mortuary passage. Without that status there is no recognizable being; and so the death can be insignificant—even with a newborn.¹⁹ Papyri recording miscarriages give special attention to the health or death of the mother, while no funeral is reported for the fetus (βρέφος)—even, in those cases, for a desired baby.²⁰

Of course, there was as much flexibility in the construction of prenatal and neonatal status in early Roman Egypt as in modern times.²¹ One magical spell invokes Hermes to “come to me as βρέφη (come) to the wombs of women” (*PGM VIII.2*). Among the many caches of *ex voto* images uncovered at ancient healing shrines, the vast majority of those meant to secure pregnancy and preserve newborns were in the forms of uteruses and breasts; yet the few votive fetuses show cultural sensibilities for the *potentiality* of the fetus.²² These fetuses are desired: hence the hope and protectiveness around their bodies. It is possible that Christian beliefs contributed to the perception of prenates and neonates as status-bearing members

¹⁹ See van Genneep, *Rites* 152–153, and W. V. Harris, “Child-Exposure in the Roman Empire,” *JRS* 84 (1994) 1–22.

²⁰ *P.Mich.* V 228.22 (47 CE); cf. *P.Fouad* I 75 (64 CE), ὀκτὸ μηνῶν παιδίον νεκρόν.

²¹ A perinatal ritual tradition in modern Japan involves the dedication of miscarried, aborted, or stillborn fetuses, collectively denoted “water-children [*mizuko*],” to the Buddha Jiz at special shrines. Such deceased pre- and neonates, while rejected in one sense, still gain a recognizable status through the development of this symbolic (and social) category. See William R. LaFleur, *Liquid Life: Abortion and Buddhism in Japan* (Princeton 1992), and Helen Hardacre, *Marketing the Menacing Fetus in Japan* (Berkeley 1997).

²² Obstetrical/gynecological votive images: see Maria Fenelli, “Contributo allo studio del votivo anatomico. I votivi anatomi di Lavinio,” *ArchClass* 27 (1975) 216–224, and pl. xl; Björn Forsén, *Griechische Gliederweihungen: Ein Untersuchung zu ihrer Typologie und ihrer religions- und sozialgeschichtlichen Bedeutung* (Helsinki 1996), Abb. 48–49, 55–57, 71–73, 78–82, 90, 96, 105–106. Fetuses: see Rodolfo Lanciani, *Pagan and Christian Rome* (New York 1967 [1892]) 67; V. Dasen, “Femmes à tiroir,” and Simone Deyts, “La femme et l’enfant au maillot en Gaule: Iconographie et épigraphie,” in Dasen, *Naissance* 127–144 and 227–237.

of the community.²³ A divorce contract from 569 CE Antinoë concedes all domestic property “to the children born so far to the two of us as well as to the *brephos* in the womb,” here obviously pre-accepted and assumed to live to term (*P.Flor.* I 93.20–21). But what of those that die (or are disposed of) *without* the imputation of status and significance? The Mishnah (III CE) gives close attention to the stages and forms of miscarried fetuses in order to recommend purification regimens for the mothers; but the fetuses themselves are not granted any mortuary significance (*m.Niddah* 3).²⁴ A Coptic encomium for a miracle shrine considerably later than the Karanis and Kellis materials describes the late-term miscarriages to which a demon-afflicted woman is prone as “casting forth the child all bloody [vasHioul ebol Mpimas eFoi NsnoF].”²⁵ The mis-

²³ See Marlow, *Oasis Papers* I 109, and Bowen, *Oasis Papers* III, esp. 170, followed by M. W. Tocheri, T. L. Dupras, P. Sheldrick, and J. E. Molto, “Roman Period Fetal Skeletons from the East Cemetery (Kellis 2) of Kellis, Egypt,” *International Journal of Osteoarchaeology* 15 (2005) 326–341. I am skeptical about this interpretation of fetal burials, however. Earliest Christian prohibitions on abortion, for example, derive from Jewish tradition and serve sexual-moral boundaries more than a clear conceptualization of fetal souls: *Didache* 2.2; *Epistle of Barnabas* 19.5; Athenagoras *Apol.* 35; cf. Philo *Special Laws* 3.108–109, 117; *Jos. C. Apion* 2.202; *Sib.Or.* 2.281. Hence it is hard to link fetal or neonate burials with any established concept of a soul in those fetuses; and different Christian communities in Egypt would certainly have had quite diverse concepts of souls anyway. On the archaeological side, Roman necropoleis show a steady tendency towards including younger and younger children in traditional mortuary procedures. Furthermore, archaeology has demonstrated that traditional Egyptian mortuary practices continued quite elaborately alongside and into those communities embracing Christianity. Finally, late Roman necropoleis in Egypt do not show consistent differences between Christian and traditional burials. See Françoise Dunand and Christiane Zivie-Coche, *Gods and Men in Egypt* (Ithaca/London 2004) 333–338, and Dunand, in Dasen, *Naissance*.

²⁴ So also in much earlier Greek sacred law, the pollution occasioned through contact with a miscarried fetus depends on its stage of development, bringing birth impurity if undeveloped and death impurity if limbs are visible: *LSCG* Suppl. 115.B.24–27, on which see Robert Parker, *Miasma: Pollution and Purification in Early Greek Religion* (Oxford 1983) 50 n.67; cf. Eran Lupu, *Greek Sacred Law: A Collection of New Documents* (Leiden 2005) 209–210.

²⁵ Cyril of Alexandria [attrib.], “Miracles of the Three Youths,” ed. Henri de Vis, *Homélie coptes de la Vaticane* II (Louvain 1990) 190. Tito

carried fetuses are not depicted as children to be mourned but as interrupted pregnancies (for which the shrine is advertised as the solution).

Archaeological light on the treatment of undesired prenates and neonates comes from the discovery, in Roman Ashkelon, of some hundred neonate skeletons in a sewer beneath a bathhouse.²⁶ Now, these neonates—all one or two days old—were probably infanticides, not miscarriages; but the method of disposal is important for our purposes. While mourned corpses—of any age—belong in tombs or even domestic walls, prelate or neonate corpses without “preaccepted” status are deemed waste, which (as it were) belongs properly in a sewer.²⁷

It is by recognizing the structurally proper places of such corpses that we can begin to reconstruct the magical function of the fetuses at Kellis and Karanis. If one disturbs or mistreats the corpse of the “preaccepted” infant, for example, one might well incur the typical anguish or wrath of a ghost—an *aōros*; and there is certainly archaeological evidence of infant mor-

Orlandi puts the final editing of this cycle of homilies in the ninth-twelfth centuries: “Coptic Literature,” in B. A. Pearson and J. E. Goehring (eds.), *The Roots of Egyptian Christianity* (Philadelphia 1986) 78–80. However, this text’s depiction of obstetrical/gynecological attitudes probably reflects authentically those of a much earlier Egyptian Christianity.

²⁶ Patricia Smith and Gila Kahila, “Identification of Infanticide in Archaeological Sites: A Case Study from the Late Roman–Early Byzantine Periods at Ashkelon, Israel,” *Journal of Archaeological Science* 19 (1992) 667–675; Marina Faerman et al., “Determining the Sex of Infanticide Victims from the Late Roman Era through Ancient DNA Analysis,” *Journal of Archaeological Science* 25 (1998) 861–865.

²⁷ Only in Christian apocalyptic texts do we see a rough concept of vengeful prenates (aborted) and neonates (abandoned), imagined as punishing sexually immoral mothers in the Last Judgment: “Opposite [the mothers] is another place where the children sit, but both alive, and they cry to God. And lightnings go forth from these children which pierce the eyes of those who, by fornicating, have brought about their destruction” (*Apocalypse of Peter* 8, transl. C. D. G. Müller, in W. Schneemelcher [ed.], *New Testament Apocrypha* II [Cambridge/Louisville 1992] 630; reported also in Clem. Alex. *Ecl.* 41.2). See in general Martha Himmelfarb, *Tours of Hell: An Apocalyptic Form in Jewish and Christian Literature* (Philadelphia 1983) 96–101. In the subsequent (IV CE) *Apocalypse of Paul*, ch. 40, the babies’ spirits merely observe their parents’ torments.

tuary assemblages meant to pacify such ghosts in their proper entombments.²⁸ But if one removes the waste-fetus from its proper location with other waste, then one has simply an object of gross impurity—much as if one removed anything human-related from a sewer or rubbish heap.²⁹ The magical papyri seem to allude to this removal of “discarded stuff” from its proper place when, as part of an erotic binding spell, the performer is instructed to “go to where [someone] lies buried or where something has been discarded [ἢ ὅπου τι ἀπορέριπται], if you do [not] have a buried body.”³⁰ Corpses in particular epitomized for many ancient cultures a kind of contagious impurity, even though (as we have seen) the “natural” impurity of pre-nate and neonate fetuses was ambiguous. What secured their impurity, then, was their *removal* from proper place.³¹

²⁸ Nubar Hampartumian, “Child-Burials and Superstition in the Roman Cemetery of Sucidava (Dacia),” in M. B. De Boer and T. A. Edridge (eds.), *Hommages à Maarten J. Vermaseren* (EPRO 68 [Leiden 1978]) I 473–477. Cf. Rawson, *Children* 358–359.

²⁹ Jean-Jacques Aubert argues that the power of the Karanis *brephos* is related to a cultural fear of menstrual blood: *GRBS* 30 (1989) 437–438.

³⁰ *PGM* IV.2038–39, transl. E. N. O’Neil in Hans Dieter Betz (ed.), *Greek Magical Papyri in Translation* (Chicago 1986 [*GMPT*]) 74. I am grateful to A. Bryen and A. Wypustek for alerting me to this phrase. On the use of the dead in this spell see Christopher Faraone, “Necromancy Goes Underground: The Disguise of Skull- and Corpse-Divination in the Paris Magical Papyri (*PGM* IV.1928–2144),” in S. I. Johnston and P. Struck (eds.), *Mantikê: Studies in Ancient Divination* (Leiden 2005) 255–282.

³¹ On the ambiguous death-impurity of child-corpses in Greek tradition see Parker, *Miasma* 41, noting the many intramural child-burials in ancient Greece. Based on the Greek sacred laws on childbirth and death-impurity (cf. Parker 353–356), a referee for this essay proposed that the aggressive efficacy of Julius’s *brephos* lay in its temporary spreading of a miasma of impurity. However, Julius too would have been subject to the same impurity in carrying the *brephos* around with him; and as I have noted above, traditional interpretations of perinate remains (e.g., *m.Niddah*, cited above) and the archaeology of child- and perinate burials in the Roman world militate against a clear cultural understanding of *brephê* as vehicles of miasma in its ancient Greek sense. Impure as I argue the displaced *brephos* to be, its efficacy was far more complex, as is evident in its alleged result: “hemmed-in with malice.”

But why would an object of gross impurity serve the ritual context of a power-assemblage? This is where it is useful to refer to Malinowski's principle of the "coefficient of weirdness": that is, words, objects, and forms that stand apart from classifiable communication, that resist and even threaten coherence, and that thereby distinguish ritual materials or speech as otherworldly and powerfully ambivalent.³² Historians of African religions are familiar with these dynamics in the preparation of Kongo *Nkisi* images as well as the *Petwo* assemblages and *wanga* constructions of Haitian Voudoun.³³ But in Roman antiquity we find a particular fascination with weirdness as a kind of theatre for sorcery. The fourth-century orator Libanius claims to have found in his lecture hall "a chameleon some months dead, its head set between its hind feet, one of the forefeet gone and the other closing the mouth in a gesture of silence"; and he takes this object as a blatant attempt to bind and afflict him.³⁴ In the East in 19 CE, Germanicus, so Tacitus tells us, fell desperately ill; and "examination of the floor and walls of his bedroom revealed the remains of human bodies, spells, curses, lead tablets inscribed with the patient's name, charred and bloody ashes, and other malignant objects, which are supposed to consign souls to the powers of the tombs."³⁵

Of course, we must allow some hyperbole to this last description, reminiscent as it is of modern police investigations of "Satanic cult-sites," where every old chicken-bone becomes a

³² Bronislaw Malinowski, *Coral Gardens and Their Magic* (New York 1935) II 218–223.

³³ See Wyatt MacGaffey, "The Eyes of Understanding: Kongo Minkisi," *Astonishment and Power* (Washington/London 1993) 21–103; Elizabeth McAlister, "A Sorcerer's Bottle: The Visual Art of Magic in Haiti," in D. J. Cosentino (ed.), *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou* (Los Angeles 1995) 304–321. Babylonian spells give instructions for creating a negative semiconic amulet of "anything evil": Erica Reiner, "Magic Figurines, Amulets, and Talismans," in A. Farkas, P. O. Harper, and E. B. Harrison (eds.), *Monsters and Demons in the Ancient and Medieval Worlds* (Mainz 1987) 35.

³⁴ Libanius *Or.* 1.249, ed. R. Foerster, *Libanii Opera* I (Leipzig 1903) 190. On this episode see Campbell Bonner, "Witchcraft in the Lecture Room of Libanius," *TAPA* 63 (1932) 34–44.

³⁵ Tac. *Ann.* 2.69, transl. Grant (Harmondsworth 1977) 112.

sacrifice.³⁶ Tacitus conveys the very picture of conspiracy and terror for elite Romans: covert rituals involving human sacrifice, grotesque materials, and binding tablets, all leading to subversion and death—altogether the opposite of proper civic religion. This fascination with tableaux of weirdness could be found in imaginative literature too. Much as the poet Lucan describes the hideous accoutrements of the mythical witch Erictho, a metrical invocation to the goddess Selene in the magical papyri conjures a veritable tableau of disgust: “blood and filth, the menstrual flow [ἰχῶρα] of a dead virgin, heart of one untimely dead [ἀώρου], the substance [οὐσίαν] of dead dog, woman’s embryo ... baboon’s dung.”³⁷ None of this stuff is required for the ritual itself; rather, the performer *imputes* these impurities to the person he is trying to bind—to get Selene angry with her.³⁸

Now, it would be going much too far to imagine that every use of fetuses or other such impurities sought to replicate these tableaux or, as some classicists have asserted, to take these lists of defiling substances as somehow representative of “magic” in general.³⁹ For one thing, the Selene list is intended to outrage

³⁶ Bill Ellis, “Legend-Trips and Satanism: Adolescents’ Ostensive Traditions as ‘Cult’ Activity,” in J. T. Richardson, J. Best, and D. G. Bromley (eds.), *The Satanism Scare* (New York 1991) 279–295; Robert D. Hicks, *In Pursuit of Satan: The Police and the Occult* (Buffalo 1991).

³⁷ PGM IV.2576–86 and 2645–46. See synoptic version in Preisendanz, *Papyri Graecae Magicae*² (Stuttgart 1973) II 255–257. Erictho: Lucan *Phars.* 6.413–830, with Richard Gordon, “Lucan’s Erictho,” in M. Whitby and P. Hardie (eds.), *Homo Viator: Classical Essays for John Bramble* (Bristol 1987) 231–241.

³⁸ E.g., Heidelberg kopt. 110, which instructs the application of menstrual blood to wax dolls prepared for a magical curse assemblage (Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic* 222–224, no. 110). See Lynn R. LiDonnici, “Beans, Fleawort, and the Blood of a Hamadryas Baboon: Recipe Ingredients in Greco-Roman Magical Materials,” in P. Mirecki and M. Meyer (eds.), *Magic and Ritual in the Ancient World* (Leiden 2002) 359–377, at 371.

³⁹ Daniel Ogden, for example, compiles a great assortment of these horrific sacrifices and alleged ritual ingredients without distinguishing in any way which were literary fantasies, which popular rumors, and which might arguably have taken place: *Greek and Roman Necromancy* (Princeton 2001) 197–201.

the goddess, not beckon her. But more importantly, the *ad hoc* nature of magical rites will always involve combinations of materials both recognizable and weird. And depending on the potency and danger one desires from that coefficient of weirdness, one accessible resource may be the impure substance taken from its proper domain in “waste.”⁴⁰ That is, when one is assembling a vehicle for magical power, one draws on the widest range of strange, liminal, and often horrifying objects (or their facsimiles, as one Greek spell advocates) according to the type of performative efficacy one wants to convey. Thus since Pharaonic times Egyptian private rites included such ingredients as the phallus of an ass, faeces of diverse animals, semen of a bull, a hawk drowned in wine, ink made from the blood of a particular fish, and lizards in various forms.⁴¹

The once-discarded and retrieved fetuses of Karanis and Kellis must serve in that capacity, as objects of impurity. In Gemellus Horion’s case, the fetus was powerful enough to halt important village elders; indeed, whatever was thrown is referred to as *brepfos* rather than *mageia*. In Kellis, the location of the *wrapped* fetus on a roof may likewise imply some attempt to bind property. Here, however, one would not know a fetus was inside the wrapping unless one unwrapped it; so the assemblage may have been meant to function reflexively—for the client’s own sense of ritual efficacy and completion—rather than publicly, to frighten the dwellers. Of course, as Tacitus’s description of Germanicus’s room suggests, the discovery of such obvious instruments of sorcery could have a paralyzing

⁴⁰ Compare, however, the probably fictionalized images of fetuses violently extracted for sorcery or emergency protection: Lucan *Phars.* 6.55–60 (Erictho); Amm. Marc. 29.17 (Valens); and Nicephorus *Historia Syntomos* 53 (ed. Cyril Mango, *Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae* 13 [Washington 1990] 120–121: Pergamum under siege), on which see M. G. Varvounis, “Une pratique de magie byzantine et la prise de Pergame par les Arabes,” *Byzantion* 68 (1998) 148–156.

⁴¹ Examples taken from J. F. Borghouts, *Ancient Egyptian Magical Texts* (Leiden 1978) nos. 59, 9, 40; *PDM* XIV.743; and *PGM* XII.401–444 (facsimiles), on which see Dieleman, *Priests* 185–203. Along with LiDonnici, in *Magic*, see Arthur Darby Nock, “The Lizard in Magic and Religion,” *Essays on Religion and the Ancient World* (Oxford 1972 [1931]) 271–276.

effect on dwellers, who shift with such a discovery from blithe unawareness to terrified victimhood.

Fetus magic, then, represented a quite rare use of impure substances that themselves carried little significance when “in place” but an awesome potency when “out of place”—especially in the full theatre of magical aggression implied in the Karanis papyrus.⁴² The absence of any instructions for the use of fetuses in extant ritual manuals suggests that magic—for aggression, erotic conquest, or even protection—involved continual combinations and recombinations of local materials. The magical papyri only record some experts’ thinking about these combinations.

3. Magic and counter-magic: appeals beyond the system

Let us now address Gemellus Horion’s complaint to the *stratēgos*. The “outrages perpetrated [τῶν τετολημένων]” by Julius and his company, which Horion wants duly recorded, clearly cover more than just the theft of his harvest. The complaint details each approach that Julius makes with the *brephos*; it repeats the intention of the act: “to surround with malice”; and it describes the paralyzing effect that the thrown *brephos* exerts in each case, upon the cultivator and the village elders both, as an understandable consequence of the thrown *brephos*. To be “surrounded with malice,” the complaint implies, results in one’s inability to act in defense of one’s property. I thus take the “outrages” to revolve around the public and aggressive use of an object meant to subvert or bind one’s natural responses. The complaint does not simply record but *concerns* an act of sorcery.

⁴² On 27 Sept 2005, police at Bogota airport, Colombia, found 4–5-month fetuses concealed inside Catholic statues bound for Miami (<<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/americas/4293934.stm>>). While in no sense evidence for “Satanic” rituals (as the police suggested), fetuses and other human materials may well have a place in the hybrid and idiosyncratic sorceries alive in contemporary Africa, the Americas, and parts of Europe. The function of such “weird” materials in constructing sorcery rites would doubtless resemble what I have described in the Egyptian cases.

But why go to the Roman authorities to resolve a matter of sorcery in its local context? The question is important, for not only do historians suggest that such magic crises were quite common in the ancient world, but usually one would resolve such crises through local negotiations—at the very least through protective and counter-spells: “Astraēlos Chrēlos, dissolve every enchantment [φάρμακον] against me ... for I conjure you by the great and terrible names which the winds fear and the rocks split when they hear it”; and “preserve and protect from all sorcery and enchantment and curse tablets [ἀπὸ πάσης γοητίας καὶ φαρμακίας καὶ καταθεσίμων], and from ghosts untimely dead and violently dead, and from every evil thing, the body, the soul, and every limb of the body of Thomas, whom Maxima bore, from this day forth through his entire time to come.”⁴³ One might imagine these kinds of counter-spells were all Gemellus Horion would need to be able to pick up the *brephos* and heave it back at his neighbors.

This indeed was the way things worked in a culture of competition, envy, and recrimination. The inevitable conflicts of traditional village life would involve elaborate cycles of accusation and recrimination, followed by consultations with ritual experts, and then covert ritual actions, then perhaps public ritual actions, and then appeals to more powerful ritual experts for further counter-spells. The question would always be: who has real power? Who has more power? With whom is it safe to negotiate? To whom can I go to overwhelm the spells or maleficence of a neighbor?⁴⁴ Hence such recipes as we find in a tenth-century Coptic spell-manual:

⁴³ *PGM* XXXVI.256–264 (transl. M. Smith, *GMPT* 275); and McDaniel Coll. (Harvard) TL 33416 (Syria, IV/V CE), ed. Florent Heintz, “A Greek Silver Phylactery in the MacDaniel Collection,” *ZPE* 112 (1996) 295–300 (my translation). Compare further *apotropaia* against sorcery and enchantments instructed in *PGM* VIII.32–35; XXXVI.178ff., 221–223; LXX.26ff.; and collected in Roy Kotansky, *Greek Magical Amulets I* (Opladen 1994) nos. 32, 52.

⁴⁴ On local resolution of local problems in Roman Egypt, see Deborah W. Hobson, “The Impact of Law on Village Life in Roman Egypt,” in B. Halpern and D. W. Hobson (eds.), *Law, Politics and Society in the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Sheffield 1993) 193–219. On local resolution through

[For] a person who is bound [ntaumareb] so that he is unable to have sex with his wife: Utter the prayer [written earlier in the text] over virgin oil. A pot of water. Pour it over him. He will be released, in a marvelous way. Off(ering): koush and storax. ...

[For] a herd of cattle, when sorcery [ouHik] has been performed against you: Copy the [image of the supernatural] power with the head of a bird. Hide it in it. It will be released, in a marvelous way. Off(ering): mastic.⁴⁵

What would lead someone to depart from this kind of system of magic and counter-magic? Under what circumstances do people seek out and demand intervention from outside systems for their crises in the world of local ritual power?

Generally they do so when the power of the spell appears unresolvable through any other local means: no experts within the system appear capable of opposing the curse. The outside system strikes them not only as a last resort, but also as especially potent, with experts of a higher authority or with the power to compel the sorcerer to retract the spell or to punish him for it. The victim seeks from the outside authority *either* (a) ultimate recourse against his magical afflictor *or* (b) ultimate resolution of the affliction by a power beyond that of his afflictor. We are certainly familiar with this phenomenon in early modern witch panics, when a case of possession or repeated magical aggression often seemed to the immediate community to demand intervention by civil authorities or ecclesiastical officials in the form of ultimate recourse against the alleged afflictors ([a], above). Those accused were tortured, executed, and their powers neutralized under the aegis of official power.⁴⁶ This

consultation with ritual experts, see David Frankfurter, "Dynamics of Ritual Expertise in Antiquity and Beyond: Towards a New Taxonomy of 'Magicians'," in Mirecki and Meyer, *Magic* 159–178, and idem, "The Perils of Love: Magic and Counter-Magic in Coptic Egypt," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 10 (2001) 480–500.

⁴⁵ P.Heidelberg kopt. inv. 686 ("The Praise of Michael the Archangel"), lines 256, 270: Angelicus M. Kropp, *Der Lobpreis des Erzengels Michael* (Brussels 1966) 51, 57, transl. Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic* 339, 341, no. 135. Ntaumareb from mour.

⁴⁶ See esp. Robin Briggs, *Witches and Neighbors: The Social and Cultural Context of European Witchcraft* (New York 1996).

author was informed of a case of the other form of ultimate resolution ([b]) in Charleston, South Carolina: a local man came into one of the hospitals there, convinced that he would die in a few days from a death-curse pronounced by his neighbors for some dire offense. The hospital, he felt, was his last chance, for there was nobody else who could throw off that kind of spell. (He did not seek police intervention against his neighbors, the first kind of ultimate recourse). Interestingly, the emergency room staff extended *themselves* into the system of magic and counter-magic by giving him Pyridium, with the promise that his trouble would pass out of him. Pyridium turns urine bright orange, which they knew would allow him the sensation of eliminating the death-spell. This was a sensible and creative response for a system intrinsically aloof from the world of magic and counter-magic. However, we must note that the *agency* in this whole scenario lay with the patient: it was he who initiated the crossover in his own anxiety to rid himself of sorcery.⁴⁷

Gemellus Horion too was the principal agent in departing from the system of magic and counter-magic, but he sought the first form of ultimate recourse: punishment of his afflictor by a central authority. From his archives we know that he had always been a litigious sort, submitting a stream of complaints to Roman officials over several decades that each highlight his social rank and his bad eye.⁴⁸ This “emphasis on his status and disability,” Richard Alston has argued, “were tactics to ensure that officials would take up his case, and this may have led to his high social status amongst the farmers in [the nearby village of] Kerkesoucha. Horion may have been going blind, but he was certainly capable of looking after his own interests.”⁴⁹ For him, Roman authority represented an accessible route of appeal for *any* matter of social conflict, so submitting a formal complaint about Julius’s attack would not have involved the

⁴⁷ Source: Susan Ostendorff, R.N.; personal communications in early 1990s and 12/7/2004.

⁴⁸ See esp. *P.Mich.* VI 425–426.

⁴⁹ Alston, *Soldier and Society* 131. Horion’s status in Kerkesoucha is reflected in *P.Mich. inv.* 2920 = *SB IV* 7361.

same degree of departure to a separate system that the earlier examples involved. Still, it is a neighbor's sorcery that he brings to the *stratēgos*, not physical assault (as in at least one other complaint, *P.Mich.* VI 425); and there was a broader ideological context in which this unique complaint would have made sense.⁵⁰

Roman administration had for some time presented itself as an authority, as it were, in matters of sorcery. The empire had long shown an exceptional interest in the policing of ritual systems—diviners, spell-mongers, *magoi*, “foreign” cults. Indeed, the whole construction of *mageia* as a criminal form of ritual subversion in the Roman Empire developed out of broad cultural anxieties about secretive, foreign ritual attempts to control people. These were practices that, as Roman officials saw it, encapsulated all that could be antithetical to civic morality. Hence we see a growing interest on the Empire's part to police religious groups and ritual traditions for the sake of public morality.⁵¹ Not only *Christianoi* fell under the microscope but even Egyptian temple oracles were proscribed in a late third-century edict.⁵²

Both the motivations and the wide-spread effects of this imperial policing of ritual have been covered in great detail in recent scholarship. What is important for our purposes, though, is the resulting perception of Roman government in

⁵⁰ On the integral function of the *stratēgos* in village jurisprudence in Roman Egypt, see R. Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity* (Princeton 1993) 161–172, who stresses local attempts to resolve conflicts without recourse to Roman administrators.

⁵¹ J. H. W. G. Liebeschuetz, *Continuity and Change in Roman Religion* (Oxford 1979) 119–139; Hans G. Kippenberg, “Magic in Roman Civil Discourse: Why Rituals could be Illegal,” in P. Schäfer and H. G. Kippenberg (eds.), *Envisioning Magic: A Princeton Seminar and Symposium* (Leiden 1997) 137–163; Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Price, *Religions of Rome I* (Cambridge 1998) 218–220; Richard Gordon, “Imagining Greek and Roman Magic,” in B. Ankarloo and S. Clark (eds.), *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: Ancient Greece and Rome* (Philadelphia 1999) 253–266. Cf. Fritz Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World*, transl. Franklin Philip (Cambridge 1997) 36–60.

⁵² John Rea, “A New Version of P. Yale inv. 299,” *ZPE* 27 (1977) 151–156, with Ritner, *ANRW* II.18.5 (1995) 3355–56, and Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (New York 1987) 213.

Egypt—as, in effect, an ultimate authority in ritual matters. Even though Gemellus Horion and his scribes do not present his case with the kinds of catch-phrases, like *mageia*, that would have been red flags to Roman officials, he does seem to credit the *stratēgos*, and even the *epistratēgos*, with enough interest in his situation as sorcery-victim—in the particular sequence of “outrages perpetrated”—that they might somehow intervene with their judicial powers. Julius’s crimes, to be sure, are covered under this somewhat vague category of τετολημμένων rather than the more legally inflammatory term *mageia*, which never appears in Horion’s correspondence. Yet those “outrages” clearly are meant to cover the whole sequence of aggressive acts that surrounded good people “with malice” and allowed their being robbed of a harvest.

Indeed, there would have been some import in the association of obvious sorcery with harvest-robbery even without the use of the word *mageia*. The ancient Twelve Tables, which formed the basis of anti-*mageia* policies over the history of Rome, specifically condemn anyone who steals another’s harvest by means of spells (*veneficia*) or incantations (*carmina*).⁵³ Agricultural sorcery spells were obviously quite ancient—certainly as old as agricultural protective rites—and Roman law had evidently sought to intervene in this area of social disruption at an early date. This did not mean that people like Julius, the antagonist in this case, would have *obeyed* the law, but that there was precedent for demanding the intervention of Roman officials as ultimate authorities in cases of agricultural sorcery.

How would such a demand have taken place? Villagers in conflict situations, even those of higher social rank, were dependent on scribes to formulate their complaints and positions in the appropriate terminology of a legal petition, not so much citing particular laws as laying out an illegitimate action in plain terms that would invite a *stratēgos*’s intervention.⁵⁴ Prior to

⁵³ *XII Tab.* 8.8, with Sen. *Q.Nat.* 4A.7.2, Plin. *HN* 28.17. See Graf, *Magic* 41–42; Kippenberg, in *Envisioning Magic* 145–146; J. B. Rives, “Magic in the XII Tables Revisited,” *CQ* N.S. 52 (2002) 274, 277–279. Youtie and Pearl do mention this law as a possible context for the papyrus: *P.Mich.* VI p.125.

⁵⁴ Hobson, in *Law* 199, 203–205.

the petition itself, we must imagine considerable discussion, first among Gemellus Horion and his friends, and then perhaps as a group with the scribe: thus a neighbor's sorcery would be progressively nuanced as sorcery-based robbery for the purposes of the complaint. But the initial discussions probably addressed not Julius's arrogance in disobeying the Twelve Tables (of which he would hardly have been aware), but the unprecedented threat that Julius posed to the larger community with his magical fetus, such that he could confidently "bind" village elders in public. In the end, it seems, the Roman authorities did not take the bait, for a receipt of 207 CE in the same archive has Julius the malicious neighbor now serving as Horion's tenant farmer (*P.Mich.* VI 398). Perhaps this arrangement was forced through Roman intervention; but more likely it reflects villagers' inclinations to work things out without Roman intervention.

4. Conclusions

Since Youtie and Pearl's initial publication of this papyrus we have learned as much about the place of magic in local social conflict as we have about the particular struggles of Gemellus Horion, farmer and perennial complainant of second-century Karanis. Hostile powers and gestures could enter at any point in a conflict, performed with a glance or a dramatic curse-act or objects concealed, inevitably carried out in consultation with one holding some greater expertise in making the act efficacious. We have been able to gather this general picture of magic in action not just from literature but from archaeological findings as well—curse-tablets and amulets and *apotropaia*. How valuable, then, to return to this singular and singularly dramatic documentary witness to a binding spell performed publicly in 197 CE Karanis and consider some of its lessons: (a) that a much wider range of curse techniques and accoutrements existed than appear in the Greco-Egyptian manuals (*PGM*, *PDM*) and curse tablets; (b) that the *brephos*—we infer from its Kellis analogue—actually involved a dead human fetus, which afflicted not out of arcane mythological concepts of angry ghosts but for its weirdness and impurity; and (c) that complaining about such acts to the Roman government reflected a popular sensibility that Romans really might act in response to

subversive magic—to “surrounding with malice” prominent men to take their harvest.

Overall, the Karanis text puts us between, on the one hand, the world of local ritual expertise and the various ingredients it deemed powerful, and on the other, Rome’s capricious laws for the policing of ritual. We see a public performance of sorcery so strong as to freeze four adult men. We understand the valence of a fetus procured from its proper domain with waste. And we see the angry and desperate response of the victim, going outside the system of magic and counter-magic, sorcery and *apotropaia*, to invite in a legal institution all too ready to intervene in the horrific world of *mageia*.⁵⁵

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