

Ritual Ingredients, Folklore, and the Meaning of Invisibility

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Abstract

A range of ingredients are used in the invisibility rituals from the PGM. This discussion will explore the nature of these ingredients and lay out some of the folklore surrounding them, using Graham Anderson's definition of folklore as «anonymously transmitted culture». In doing so it will outline some of the ritual antecedents to these rites in Pliny's *Natural History*. Moreover, it will consider what the ingredients and analogic nature of such rites can tell us about their conception of invisibility itself.

Keywords

Ritual, folklore, invisibility

Introduction

In a recent article Andrea Salayová broadly explores the use of animal ingredients in the Greek Magical Papyri and in doing so asks a number of questions that are intended to help us understand the connection between animals and magic in the Greek Magical Papyri, including «Were the animal body parts used in spells chosen based on analogy?».¹ In the case of invisibility rituals in the PGM, we find the presence of both animals and plants playing a role in ritual ingredients. Their presence in such rituals suggest that they have been chosen based on analogy or what in earlier scholarship might have been categorized as sympathetic magic.² At the same time, it is fair to say that the use of such ingredients in these kinds of

¹ 2017, 191. Salayová also asks, «How many papyri spells contain at least one animal ingredient? Which animals were used the most as an ingredient? Which animal body parts were prevalent in papyri spells?». See also P. Watson 2019, 127-165 on “Animals in Magic”, as well as L. Watson 2019, 99-126 on “Magic and Herbs”. Ogden 2014, 294 addresses, among other topics, «the exploitation of animals and in particular of animal parts for magical ends».

² Most of the ingredients being used in the invisibility rituals would follow the so-called law of similarity (in particular, like produces like). For a recent discussion of the term sympathy as it relates to the ritual use of animals and plants, as well as its problematic association with Sir James Frazer, see L. Watson 2019, 106-107. Franek and Urbanová, 2019, 29-30 explain how outdated frames of sympathetic magic have been rescued by more recent scholarly approaches. Phillips

contexts are tied to folklore and folk customs that are ubiquitous across time and space. Exploring the idea of folklore as «anonymously transmitted culture», Graham Anderson notes how «a number of animals, plants, and minerals have acquired a folkloric identity of their own, both in the ancient world and beyond, sometimes at odds with scientific observation, sometimes overlapping or coinciding with it». Moreover, he also observes that in the case of medicine and magic, «our sources for ancient folklore are probably best documented and yet probably most prone to be studied from any perspective other than that of a folklorist».³ In this discussion I will briefly lay out some of the folklore surrounding ingredients found within invisibility ritual from the PGM. By doing so, it might help to explain why some of the substances have been selected in such rituals. Moreover, in tandem with philological evidence, the analysis of ingredients in some cases can help to illuminate how these rituals are envisioning invisibility.⁴

Egyptian Parallels and Pliny's *Natural History*

There is a long tradition of ritual analogy being used in Ancient Egypt, starting with the so-called homopoeic amulets whose shape represents a part of the body or a particular animal associated with a desirable trait.⁵ The invisibility rituals from the PGM appear to be part of a much longer tradition involving rituals of this kind – a tradition that we encounter periodically in other kinds of ancient literature. For example, in his *Natural History* Pliny the Elder cites two examples that predate those from the PGM.⁶ One example involves the use of both a heliotrope stone and plant:⁷

«Magorum impudentiae vel manifestissimum in hac quoque exemplum est, quoniam admixta herba heliotropio, quibusdam additis precationibus, gerentem conspici negent»

«In this also is even the most blatant example of the shamelessness of the *magi*, since when heliotrope plant is combined with heliotrope stone, with certain prayers spoken, they say that the one wearing it is not seen». (*Nat. Hist.* 37, 60, 165)

2019, 201-202 explores Stanley Tambiah's ideas on persuasive analogy in relationship to the invisibility rituals of the PGM.

³ 2006, 4, 157 and 175. Yet, when ancient folk narratives are placed into taxonomies, it is not always readily apparent where such ritual narratives and customs should be categorized. See for example, the taxonomy of Hansen 2017, 7-37. I would suggest that such rituals might fall into Hansen's broader category of credence narratives. Ogden 2014, 299 briefly discusses the use of the hyena in the context of folk traditions.

⁴ Because I have explored elements of this topic in Phillips 2019, there will inevitably be a little overlap in this treatment. I have broadened the scope of my investigation here to include all of the invisibility texts in the PGM, while exploring the significance of ritual ingredients in relationship to folklore traditions.

⁵ On which see Petrie 1914, 6-7 and 9-14 and Andrews 1994, 60-73 and 2001, 75-82, especially 77.

⁶ Ogden 2014 explores the use of animal ingredients in Pliny, calling attention to four modes of use: in amulet, in salve, by ingestion, and by fumigation (296). He cautions, however, that «a change in mode of application» of a given ingredient can lead to «radical and unpredictable changes in function». (297)

⁷ On the use of homonymous ingredients in ritual, see P.Oxy. LXXXII, p. 60, note to line 21, s.v. *κάπυιζε*.

Seeing that earlier in the passage Pliny suggests that heliotrope stone can reflect the sun like a mirror («speculi modo solem accepit»), the use of heliotrope here suggests that this amulet will in some way help redirect the sun, perhaps with the intention of blinding potential observers. Achieving invisibility in this way, i.e. by blinding and altering the senses of others, is fairly common in antiquity.⁸

The second example involves an animal part, the roasted left foot of a chameleon,⁹ and a plant by the same name: «sinistrum vero pedem torrerit in furno cum herba quae aequae chamaeleon vocetur, additoque unguento pastillos eos in ligneum vas conditos praestare, si credimus, ne cernatur ab aliis qui id habeat»

«The left foot, however, is roasted in an oven with a plant that is equally called chameleon, and when an unguent is added, these pastilles stored in a wooden container produce the result that, if we believe it, those who possess it may not be perceived by others». (*Nat. Hist.* 28, 29, 115)

Clearly, the inclusion of a chameleon in this context is sensible given that it can move about unperceived by others. How its use here helps a person achieve invisibility is not explicitly stated,¹⁰ though it suggests a kind of invisibility more akin to being camouflaged or going unnoticed rather than becoming immaterial.

Although Pliny intentionally provides few details about invocations and ritual actions, there is evidence that his sources for these rituals ultimately derive from Hellenistic Egypt.¹¹ Such rituals, however, were surely not confined to Egypt alone and oftentimes extend beyond the folklore of stones, animals, and plants. For example, in the *Cyranides*, a work somewhat contemporary to the PGM, we encounter instructions for an onyx ring that supposedly brings about invisibility, on which is inscribed an ὀρφός («a sea perch fish») which might be used here as a play on the word ὄρφνη («darkness»)¹²

Invisibility and Ritual in the PGM

There are a handful of invisibility rituals in the PGM,¹³ but of the seven surviving rituals arguably only four or perhaps five involve ritual materials. Among the seven texts, however, it is not always clear how they are defining invisibility. The philology of invisibility in PGM rituals has been addressed elsewhere. LiDonnici writes «that these spells are designed to create inconspicuousness

⁸ Phillips 2009, 28-30.

⁹ Salayová 2017, 201, commenting on Pliny's *Natural History*, notes that the chameleon was not typical of the Italian fauna and suggests North African influence.

¹⁰ Tambiah's theory of persuasive analogy again seems to be applicable here. See note 2.

¹¹ See Phillips 2011/2012, 43-44 who is following Dickie 1999.

¹² See Waegeman 1987, 115-116. This perhaps represents a similar phenomenon that is found with plant names in which the «etymology of a word indicated the therapeutic or physiological effects to be expected of it», the so-called *nomen omen*, on which see L. Watson 2019, 109.

¹³ See Phillips 2009.

rather than transparency is suggested by the term most commonly used in the texts, ἀμαυρά, which appears in a variety of forms».¹⁴ Moreover, elsewhere in my own work I have concluded that invisibility in the PGM usually meant «going unnoticed or unobserved».¹⁵ But defining invisibility as going unnoticed does not necessarily explain whether the perceptions of the victim are thought to be altered or the person seeking anonymity is being hidden or camouflaged. Moreover, LiDonnici acknowledges the difficulty in coming to definitive conclusions about words like ἀμαύρωσις given the scarcity of examples in the PGM corpus, noting «the fewer examples we have from a given group, the harder it is to figure out how the term is being used in those examples».¹⁶ But a closer look at the use of ritual ingredients in the PGM texts and the folklore of such ingredients provides us with another avenue for exploring how the nature of invisibility is conceived in such texts.

(1 and 2) PGM I 222-231 and 247-262

Two rituals from PGM I provide its users with specific directions to anoint their entire body (ὄλον | τὸ σωματί[τ]ιον, PGM I 224-225) and forehead (τὸ μέτωπον, PGM I 256) with a mixture of ingredients. In PGM I 222-231 these ingredients include the fat or eye of a small night owl,¹⁷ a scarab's dung ball, and sage oil, and in PGM I 247-262 the eye of an ape or a corpse that has died a violent death, lily oil, and *aglaophōtis* plant. Much like the Pliny texts above, both recipes seem to include items associated with affecting the vision of others or camouflaging the person wearing them – each in essence promising to make the practitioner go unnoticed, instead of granting them immateriality.

The ingredients for each ritual share some common denominators. For example, the mention of eyes in both texts implies that the practitioner is seeking to affect the vision of others. Moreover, the use of the scarab's dung ball in PGM I 223-224, and perhaps the *aglaophōtis* plant, which etymologically means «bright light», in PGM I 249¹⁸ suggests that the intent of each ritual is to blind unsuspecting victims.¹⁹ Additionally, in PGM I 222-231 it is the god Helios who is being invoked

¹⁴ 1999, 228.

¹⁵ Phillips 2009, 24.

¹⁶ 1999, 231.

¹⁷ Salayová 2017, 194-195 cites the use of eyes in the rituals of PGM 222-231 and 247-262 as evidence that «selection of animal ingredients for the spells was not accidental and the principle of analogy was being used». See also Phillips 2009, 89-90.

¹⁸ See Phillips 2009, 90-91, note to lines 223-224, s.v. κύλισμα κανθάρου, who describes how «the Egyptians over time began to equate the scarab's actions with that of a mythological beetle rolling the sun disk across the sky with its forelegs...», and 102-103, note to line 249, s.v. βοτάνης ἀγλαοφώτιδος (*aglaophōtis* is glossed in the margin of the papyrus as τὸ ῥόδον «the rose»). On the *aglaophōtis* plant (or peony), see L. Watson 2019, 101-103.

¹⁹ In addition to the passage of Pliny (*Nat. Hist.* 37, 60, 165) already mentioned in the text, one encounters other examples of blinding in the PGM and elsewhere, on which see note 8. The view that blinding could bring about invisibility persists well past antiquity. See, for example, Kieckhefer 1998, 59 (and 67 n. 40) who observes that «probably the most commonly

and indeed in PGM I 257-262 the reversal of the ritual involves moving from West to East as a kind of symbolic ritual inversion.

It is also possible that *aglaophōtis* has been included because it possesses the desired trait of being difficult to see or to find.²⁰ Aelian, *NA* 14. 27, writes: «There is a plant by the name of cynospastus (it is also called *aglaophōtis* ...) which in broad daylight, escapes unnoticed among the other (plants) and is hardly visible ...» quoting Diodorus of Tarsus, a 4th c. A.D. Bishop of Tarsus and a native of Antioch, Photius adds the following in his *Bibliotheca* (223. 215 a. 33-37): «And *aglaophōtis* alone of plants shines at night so greatly as its name indicates, and it escapes the one who desires to pick it ...». Similarly, the appearance of the night owl in PGM I 223 is significant because it is not seen during the day, which is literally what the practitioner is trying to achieve (PGM I 229-230).²¹

(3) PGM XIII 234-237

In PGM XIII 234-237 we find the use of ritual ingredients that might again suggest that invisibility is to be perceived as an act of blinding. This ritual, entitled «the marvelous (practical use for) invisibility (ἡ θαυμάσιος ἀμαυρά)» includes directions for a gilded egg to be used as an amulet: λαβὼν ὄν ἱέρακο[ς] τὸ ἥμισυ αὐτοῦ χρύσω|σον, τὸ δὲ ἄλλ[α]ο ἥμισυ χρίσον κινναβά[ρ]ει. Τοῦτο{ν} φορῶν ἀθε|ώρητος ἔση ἐπιλέγων τὸ[ν] ὄνομα. «Take a falcon's egg. Gild half of it and coat the other half with cinnabar. While wearing this (egg), you will be invisible when you say the name (which is mentioned earlier as part of the culmination of the rite)». The primary word being used in the formulary title, ἀμαυρά, does not overtly delineate how invisibility is to be constructed, but the appearance of the falcon's egg in this passage likely references the primeval egg of Re, given Helios' association with it elsewhere in the magical papyri.²² Thus, gilding the egg here seems to be intended to make it like the sun. Elsewhere in the PGM, we know that gold objects are described as being «sun-like».²³ Other scholars have noted that in earlier Egyptian amulets gold is often symbolic of the sun.²⁴

recommended means for becoming invisible in medieval works on magic was to carry an opal on oneself, so that its brilliance would blind all potential viewers».

²⁰ On which see Phillips 2009, 102-103, note to line 249, s.v. βοτάνης ἀγλαοφώτιδος.

²¹ See Phillips 2009, 89-90. In PGM IV 2943-2944 an eye of a bat, another nocturnal creature, is also used as part of a ritual to cause insomnia, i.e. make the victim more like a bat. Cf. also *Suppl.Mag.* 78, col. II, lines 3-4, which utilizes an eye (of a lizard), perhaps to aid vision, on which see Salayoná 2017, 198.

²² See Phillips 2009, 119: δεῦρό μ[οι] ... ὁ ἔκλαμπρος Ἥλιος, ὁ | ἀυγάζω[ν] καθ' ὅλην τὴν οἰκουμένην ... [ἐν]εὔχομαί σοι κατὰ τοῦ [ὄ]σοῦ, κτλ., «Come to me ... brilliant Helios, who shine throughout all the inhabited world ... I adjure you by the egg, ...» PGM III 129, 142-143, 145; cf. also PGM VII 555-556.

²³ Λαβὼν λεπίδα | ἡλιακὴν γράψον χαλκῶ γραφεῖω, «Take a thin piece of gold like the sun and inscribe it with a bronze stylus», PGM VII 919-920.

²⁴ E.g. Andrews 2001, 75-76. Phillips 2009, 120, s.v. κινναβά[ρ]ει observes that the pairing of red cinnabar with gold is not uncommon in Egyptian painting. Pinch 2001, 184 notes that «there is a common tendency to classify “warm colours” together regardless of their hue, so it is not surprising to find red used interchangeably with golden-yellow as the colour of the sun disk».

(4 and 5) P.Oxy. LVIII 3931 and PGM VII 619-622

The remaining two invisibility rituals from the PGM are more problematic. It is unclear what their ritual ingredients can tell us about their construction of invisibility. P.Oxy. 3931 (column I, lines 1-13) is a formulary that uses the cognate adjective ἀμαυρωτικόν in its formulary title (ἀμαυρωτικὸν ἄνθρωπον ποιῆσαι), but the text of the ritual clearly indicates that it seeks to achieve invisibility for the practitioner by blinding others (lines 7-8, ἀμαύρωσον πάντα ὀφθαλμ[ὸ]ν | ἀνθρώπου ἢ γυναικός, «dim the eyes of every man or woman»). The text primarily consists of an invocation that is addressed to an unnamed deity, most likely Aion/Helios. The second, highly reconstructed, column of the text includes a mélange of ingredients, perhaps intended as a facial balm (cf. PGM I 222-231 and 247-262), including crocodile dung and mature mallows. However, there are two problems. First, it is unclear whether column II is part of this invisibility ritual.²⁵ Secondly, though other invisibility rituals include the use of balms to anoint the body or forehead, there is no clear association between the ingredients cited here with acts of blinding or other kinds of invisibility.²⁶ The fact that there is no immediate connection between these ritual ingredients and the intended outcome of the ritual might indeed suggest that the two texts are not related.²⁷

Lastly, PGM VII 619-622, a formulary reputedly from *The Diadem of Moses*, gives details of a ritual that involves placing dog's head plant (κυνοκεφαλίδιον) under one's tongue. There is again no obvious association or link between dog's head plant and invisibility.²⁸ However, of interest here may be the etymological connection of the word used for a dog's head plant with the word for a dog-faced baboon (κυνοκέφαλος), an animal with ties to the cult of the sun in ancient Egypt because of how it would screech and raise its arms to greet the morning sun.²⁹ We do encounter a Christian baptism ritual that requires dog's head plant be placed in one's mouth (as in PGM VII 619-622), but it does not promise anonymity.³⁰ There also exists a much later Medieval parallel that involves placing heliotrope under the tongue to achieve

²⁵ Phillips 2009, 80 notes: «The papyrus breaks off leaving us to ponder whether text has been lost below line 13 or the text merely continues in the column to the immediate right (column ii). The first editors consider both possibilities (p. 45). If this is merely a papyrus scrap cut from a used roll that happened to have a short enough column to leave a margin of 10 cm. (approximately the height of text 1) either at the top or bottom, the very fragmentary recipe in the column to the right most likely relates to this invisibility spell (column i). If the text in column ii is not a continuation of column i, the original editors suggest that “a large amount of text, perhaps in the range of ten to twenty lines” may separate i 13 and ii 14».

²⁶ I am not aware of μαλάχη appearing in other ritual texts. In PGM XII 414 the dung (ἀφόδευμα) of a crocodile is referenced as Ethiopian soil.

²⁷ Of course, one can always speculate about the possible meanings of the reading pairing mallows with crocodile dung, but unfortunately there is simply not enough evidence here to arrive at a firm conclusion.

²⁸ See Phillips 2009, 112-113, note to line 620, s.v. κυνοκεφαλ[ί]διον βοτ(άνην).

²⁹ Kessler 2001, 430 discusses the behavior of baboons in nature and their roles in Egyptian cult. On the connection of etymology and ritual efficacy, see note 12 above.

³⁰ In Meyer and Smith 1994, 63-66, a Gnostic fire baptism, Jesus places dog's head plant in the mouths of his disciples. See also Schmidt and MacDermot 1978, 109.

invisibility,³¹ but in this case we learn that the heliotrope plant has been cultivated within the eye socket of the skull of a cat ritually sacrificed for this purpose. There is no mention of any such thing in PGM VII 619-622.

In summary a closer examination of ritual ingredients and the folklore surrounding them seems to be helpful in understanding the analogic nature of invisibility rituals in the PGM. This conclusion is bolstered by earlier examples of invisibility ritual in Pliny's *Natural History*. Such information derived from ritual ingredients also helps to supplement the limited philological evidence we have regarding our understanding of invisibility in these texts, which is more akin to going unobserved as an act of blinding or concealment than one of immateriality. That such rituals are indebted to ingredients that have been part of anonymously transmitted culture seems to reflect the nature of the material.

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³¹ Kieckhefer 1998, 60-61, and 240 (Latin text) notes that in a Munich handbook from the late Middle Ages a similar invisibility ritual is found in which the seeds of a heliotrope plant placed under the tongue result in invisibility. «Be diligent to find a black cat, born in the month of March, and eviscerate it, while keeping the heart in place; then cut out the heart with a knife that was made on the day of Venus and pluck out the eyes from the aforementioned cat with the same knife, and fill the openings of the eyes with seed from a certain plant that is called heliotrope, one in the right eye, another in the left, and a third in the heart, continually reciting these words: "SAPRESON LAMPSONES SAMPSANAY, let a person become invisible." And refill it with wax and bury it in a part of your garden in which no one enters, and water it with human blood mixed together with water, continuing this for fifteen days until a white plant grows whose seed is for this ritual, always repeating those words. Know that any plant will produce a seed, but indeed you must choose the one good seed in this way, always repeating the names. Accordingly, hold a mirror in front of you, and looking at one seed after another in the mirror, place each of the seeds in your mouth under your tongue, and always carefully examine the seed which you place in your mouth. And if you will not be able to see yourself in the mirror after one of the seeds has been placed in your mouth, know that this one is good and useful for you».

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