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Agency: How Manuscripts Affect and Create Social Realities

Edited by Michael Kohs and Sabine Kienitz

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A 'letter from Heaven', ID no. I (33 J) 176/1963, Berlin, Museum of European Cultures (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Museum Europäischer Kulturen). Written in Ernstroda near Gotha, Thuringia, and dated 1776. The original sheet of paper was folded once, making four pages. Here we can see p. 1 with the title 'Himmels=Brief, welchen, Gott selber geschrieben' ('Letter from Heaven, which God Himself has written') and page 4. The written bifolium was then folded four times. Two words were visible on the two outer sides resulting from this: 'Gottes Brief' ('God's letter'), shown on p. 4. The upper part of the letter has been cropped and part of the illumination has been cut off. Photography: Christian Krug.

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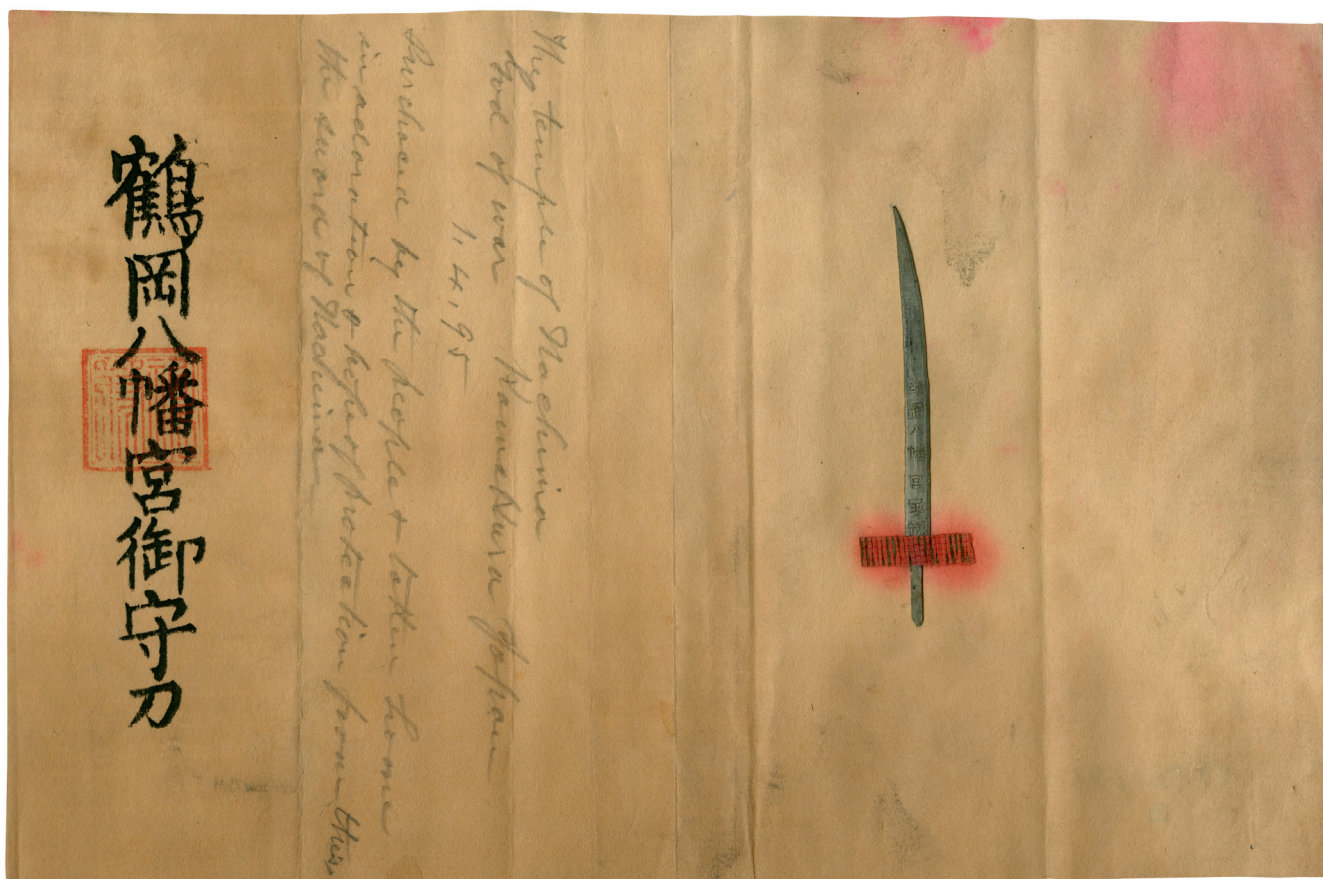


Fig. 1a: General view of the front of the amulet.

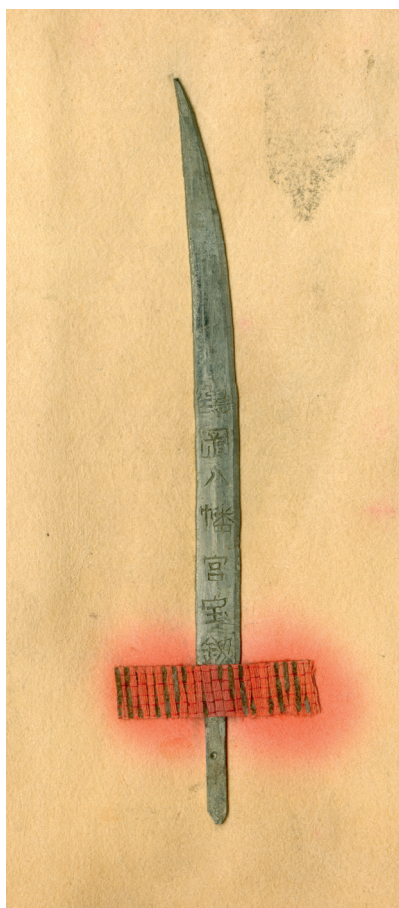


Fig. 1b: Detail showing the metal sword.

Fig. 1: Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, 29-96-693B; paper and metal, 16.5 × 24.0 cm, mid-1890s <<https://www.penn.museum/collections/object/310720>>. A Japanese *omamori* (protective amulet) from the Tsurugaoka Hachimangū, a very important shrine in the city of Kamakura, Japan, dedicated to the Shinto and Buddhist deity Hachiman, who is commonly associated with archery and warfare. The printed text on the left – actually on the ‘title page’ of the amulet, which is usually folded – reads *Tsurugaoka Hachimangū omamorigatana* (‘Tsurugaoka Hachimangū amulet sword’). The name of the shrine, Tsurugaoka Hachimangū, is also inscribed on the *omamori* itself, a little metal sword that is attached to the paper. The paper contains an additional note by the scholar and collector Maxwell Sommerville stating the provenance of the item. *Omamori* are sold in various forms at Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples in Japan. For a general overview on *omamori* see Swanger and Takayama 1981.

Article

Manuscripts as Magical Agents: A General Outline*

Michael Kohs | Hamburg

1. Introduction

Practices that are called ‘magical’ are to be found in many cultures. They are quite heterogeneous as a whole, so simply subsuming them under one term – the concept of ‘magic’ – is sometimes contested by scholars. Practices of this kind involve the production and use of manuscripts and other written artefacts to a substantial degree: on the one hand, manuscripts are used to collect and transmit knowledge about the practices, which is the case with multiple-text manuscripts (MTMs) like personal notebooks, for example, in which the owners collect recipes, formulas and models for making amulets. On the other hand, manuscripts are used in actual magical practices, the prototypical example being written amulets that are worn on the body to protect their bearers. It seems that manuscripts of this type are attributed an efficacy that is directly connected with the items themselves – not only with their contents, but with their materiality as well – and that gives them a certain degree of autonomy or independence from human behaviour as well as a certain influence upon it. This efficacy can be explained by the concept of *agency*, which enables us to understand manuscripts as socially mediated agents or ‘actors’ that are attributed their own power in dynamic processes between these items and human agents.

The intrinsic potential of manuscripts as agents and their impact in different historical practices or social contexts is a key topic in manuscript studies, but has been rather neglected in research so far. This paper addresses the phenomenon that manuscripts are ascribed magical efficacy. It does not aim to cover the topic exhaustively, but will point out certain aspects or features of manuscripts and manuscript practices that may be linked to this magical efficacy or agency, occa-

sionally referring to examples from various manuscript cultures. Following this, a basic concept of agency will be outlined briefly insofar as it may be helpful as a theoretical background for the other articles in this section. Hopefully, it will stimulate future research on manuscripts serving as magical agents.

2. Magic

The term and concept of ‘magic’ both have a long history.¹ The word itself has frequently been used in a derogatory sense, while the concept has served as a means of alienating people. ‘Magical’ practices have often been subject to marginalisation and de-legitimation at different times and across different cultures. The use of the term ‘magic’ is consequently deemed inappropriate by some, especially in a scholarly context. In contrast, the term is used in the papers in this section in an inductive, heuristic sense as a designation for a loose group of empirically defined practices that may be subsumed under the heading of ‘magic’ – in other words, we all more or less know what we mean when we talk about magic or magical practices, but without having the absolute necessity or even ability to define the term conclusively.²

¹ The English term ‘magic’ is derived via Latin from the Greek word *mageia* and the underlying term *magos*, meaning ‘wise man’ or ‘magician’, which itself was borrowed from Old Persian *maguš*, originally designating a member of a priestly caste. See Bremmer 2002 and Davies 2012, 2–5 for more details. On *concepts* of magic, see Otto and Stausberg (eds) 2013 and Otto 2011, for example.

² Thus, following Rebiger and Schäfer 2009, 2, n. 5, whenever the term is used here and in the articles in this section, it is not intended to convey any affirmative or pejorative attitude to the practices or beliefs that are denoted by it. No specific relation between the concepts of ‘magic’ and ‘religion’ is presupposed either, nor has any threefold evolutionary model of *magic–religion–science* been employed like in older anthropological accounts such as Frazer 1951, for example. Nevertheless, we should be aware of the fact that our notion of magic is inevitably biased when applied to different cultures. This problem should not be tackled by merely avoiding the term, but with constant and conscious reflection of our use of it in relation to the manuscript sources we study. On magic and religion as one continuum, see

* The research for this article was funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation). The research was conducted at the Sonderforschungsbereich 950 ‘Manuskriptkulturen in Asien, Afrika und Europa’ within the scope of the Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures (CSMC) at Universität Hamburg.

‘Magic’ thus also serves as a metalinguistic category that covers practices that practitioners may not have labelled as ‘magic’ or one of its various cognates. What is more, we will also subsume divinatory practices under this term – these are discussed by Farouk Yahya in this section, for instance – with a broader understanding of magic, since there appears to be a phenomenological overlap between divination and magical practices.³

As unsatisfactory as this heuristic definition (or even ‘non-definition’) of magic seems to be at first sight, the study of manuscripts and their ‘magical agency’ may also advance our understanding of the phenomena we call magic. Although these may not all be described by a single definition, they usually share a kind of ‘family resemblance’ even across cultures, i.e. they exhibit at least some features of a broader list of prototypical characteristics of magic, such as *coerciveness, manipulation, control, analogy, sympathy, symbolism, performance, privacy* and *secrecy*.⁴ Generally speaking, practices that might be called ‘magic’ in an academic discourse are often based on a worldview of the practices’ participants that involves causal relationships between a microcosm and macrocosm. These are embedded into theological, angelological, demonological, cosmological, astronomical and astrological beliefs and often involve a ritual component.⁵ A comparable notion of magic was expressed by Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa of Nettesheim (1486–1535), the Renaissance polymath and presumed practitioner of magic, when he was discussing ‘natural magic’ in his work *De occulta philosophia* (‘Of Occult Philosophy’):

Seeing there is a threefold world, elementary, celestial, and intellectual, and every inferior is governed by its superior and receiveth the influence of the virtues thereof [...], wise

men conceive it no way irrational that it should be possible for us [...] to enjoy not only these virtues, which are already in the more excellent kind of things, but also besides these, to draw new virtues from above. Hence they seek after the virtues of the elementary world, [...] then of the celestial world in the rays [...], joining the celestial virtues [sic!] to the former; moreover they corroborate and confirm all these with the powers of divers intelligencies through the sacred ceremonies of religion. [...]

Magic is a faculty of wonderful virtue, full of most high mysteries, containing the most profound contemplation of most secret things, together with the nature, power, quality, substance, and virtues thereof, as also the knowledge of whole nature, and it doth instruct us concerning the differing, and agreement of things amongst themselves, whence it produceth its wonderful effects [...].⁶

Although this is only one example of how practitioners of magic and theorists understand these practices, it comprises what might be representative for many concepts of magic: a connection between the human realm and that of non-human powers such as angels, demons and gods, their interdependencies and the possibility to influence both realms in magical practices. What, then, is the role of manuscripts in this ‘web’ of magic? And what may the assumed efficacy of magical manuscripts like amulets or other written artefacts be based on? Can manuscripts be attributed a special status as opposed to other non-inscribed objects in magical practices? Material and content layers meet in manuscripts. To be able to understand them as ‘magical agents’, it may therefore be worthwhile to regard manuscripts – their materiality as well as their contents – as being shaped by four key factors: their *production, use, setting* and *patterns*.⁷ Each of these aspects

Versnel 1991, 185–187, for example. Also see Cornelius Berthold’s article in this volume for a discussion on the relationship between magical and religious practices and the apotropaic use of miniature Qur’ans.

³ The cohesiveness of these two domains, which is also comparable to the relationship between magic and religion, is reflected in the titles of secondary literature, like Ann Jeffers (1996), *Magic and Divination in Ancient Palestine and Syria*, Charles Burnett (2001), *Magic and Divination in the Middle Ages*, Emilie Savage-Smith (ed.) (2004), *Magic and Divination in Early Islam* or Helen R. Jacobus et al. (eds) (2013), *Studies on Magic and Divination in the Biblical World*.

⁴ On magic and the Wittgensteinian concept of family resemblance, see Versnel 1991, 185–187 and Otto and Stausberg 2013, 8–10. The latter two authors also provide a comprehensive list of such features.

⁵ See Rebiger 2010, 35.

⁶ Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa of Nettesheim, *De occulta philosophia*, first book, chapters 1 and 2, cited in Tyson 1993, 3 and 5. The text of the English edition in Tyson 1993 is based on the slightly modernised first English translation of *De occulta philosophia*, published as *Three Books of Occult Philosophy Written by Henry Cornelius Agrippa of Nettesheim, Counsellor to Charles the Fifth, Emperor of Germany and Iudge of the Prerogative Court. Translated out of the Latin into the English Tongue, by J. F.* (London: Printed by R. W. for Gregory Moule, 1651). The identity of the translator, J. F., is controversial: although he was identified as James Freake in the past, more recently the initials have been interpreted as standing for John French; cf. Tyson 1993, xl. Regarding the cited passages, also see Leirich 2003, 43 and 63.

⁷ The use of *manuscript* here refers to the definition established in Lorusso et al. 2015, 1: ‘A manuscript is an artefact planned and realised to provide surfaces on which visible signs are applied by hand; it is portable, self-

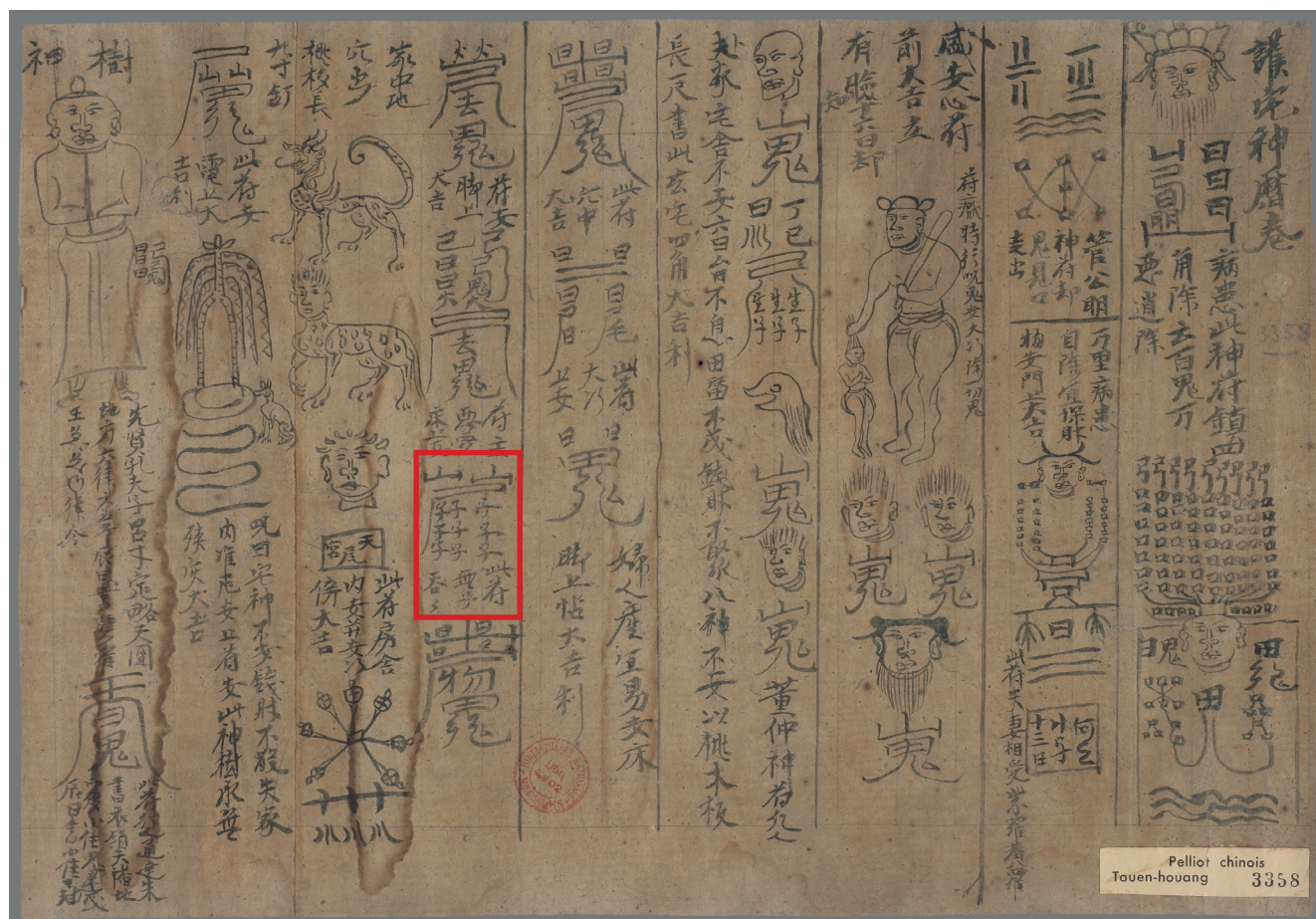


Fig. 2a: Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Pelliot chinois 3358; paper; 26.2 × 37.8 cm. A talisman to be swallowed to prevent barrenness is highlighted.

– which are usually interwoven – can contribute to the magical agency that is ascribed to manuscripts.

3. Setting and cultural patterns

The setting of magical manuscripts relates to spatial and temporal aspects of their production and use. In addition to that, their social and economic settings are of equal importance, just like their cultural patterns. In this case, the general cultural patterns include the prevalence of ideas of a magical worldview similar to those of Agrippa's above: that the world is full of invisible connections and dependencies, and is governed by the power of 'supernatural' entities like angels or demons, which can be influenced and used to alter the course of the world to one's own advantage, but which, conversely, influence human fates of their own accord. The social dimension comes into play when we ask why people use magical manuscripts: the artefacts are believed to protect

contained, and unique'. See Wimmer et al. 2015 on the role of *production, use, setting and patterns* with regard to manuscripts.

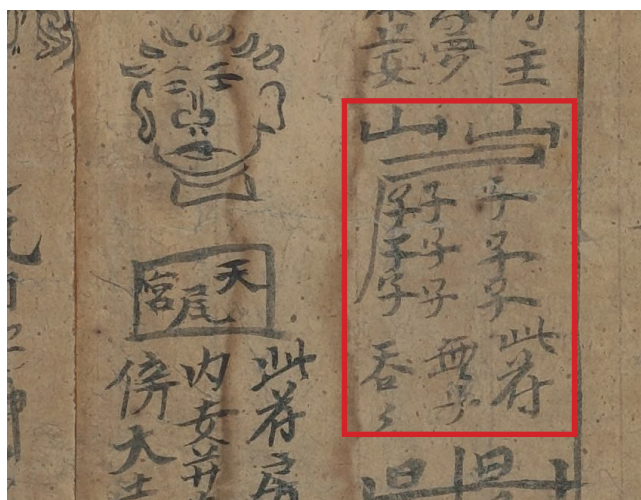


Fig. 2b: Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Pelliot chinois 3358; detail. The highlighted talisman has to be swallowed and is said to prevent barrenness. It contains the word *zi* ('child') nine times and the character for 'mountain' twice at the top. Printed in its original size.

people from illness or cure them and are used to harm one's enemies or win someone's heart. Magical practices and the use of manuscripts with magical efficacy are one way (among others) of coping with the *daily* circumstances that life entails. They also provide a way of coping with

exceptional circumstances in some cases. And finally, an economic context for magical manuscripts would apply to cases where magic is run like a business, a ‘part-time’ or ‘full-time’ professional magician serving the needs of his clients by making personal amulets in return for a fee.

4. Production

Most non-manuscript amulets involve a certain amount of human craftsmanship, which makes them artefacts and contributes to their agency in one way or another. This human contribution can be an act as simple as drilling a hole in a gemstone for a ribbon to hang it round one’s neck. The production of amulets and the constitution of their magical agency can involve extensive procedures that are elaborate, including the step of consecrating the amulet, for instance. This is even more so for amulets that are manuscripts, i.e. artefacts that contain visual signs, be it images, symbols or writing. Sometimes, instructions for preparing amulets require the practice to take place at a specific location and specific time or demand dietary or sexual asceticism on the part of the magician-scribe. The production of amulets or the study of multiple-text manuscripts containing magical recipes, instructions and formulas can have the character of a ritual, and thus a ritualistic attitude or mindset⁸ on the scribe’s or user’s part may be regarded as a presupposition for the practice to be successful. Daoist *fu* amulets are an example of the highly ritualised preparation of magic manuscripts.⁹ After making preparatory offerings and meditating, the complex process involves reciting a magic formula (*zhou*), breathing techniques when writing the *fu*, gestures and specific techniques of writing. Only if these elements are performed well will the amulet be efficacious.¹⁰ Fig. 2a shows a scroll found in Dunhuang and labelled a ‘divine almanac for the protection of the house on a scroll’.¹¹ It contains a collection of talisman models to be copied on amulets. The purpose of the *fu* is given for each model, usually accompanied by some short instructions. The complex rituals that may be part of the preparation of such *fu* are not described in this manuscript, though.

The process of writing on a writing surface is what distinguishes written amulets from non-textual amulets on the one hand and from spoken magic on the other. In the theory and practice of magic, two currents seem to co-exist and sometimes even compete with each other: some magical actions are primarily based on oral performances of spoken words. These words can be in plain human language, but they could just as well comprise utterances that are not intelligible to the practitioner, e.g. because they are esoteric – in an angelic language, say, or they constitute powerful names. This is the case with *nomina barbara* (‘foreign or strange names’) or *voces magicae* (‘magic words’) and well-known magic formulas like *abracadabra* in the Greco-Roman Mediterranean context, and with Indian mantras and the use of pseudo-Sanskrit formulas in Daoist incantations.¹² However, other magical practices rely on writing by hand in a wider sense. Agrippa of Nettesheim, who was mentioned previously, emphasised the importance of writing in magic practices:

And whatsoever is in the mind, in voice, in word, in oration, and in speech, the whole and all of this is in writing also. And as nothing which is conceived in the mind is not expressed by voice, so nothing which is expressed is not also written. And therefore Magicians command that in every work, there be imprecations and inscriptions made.¹³

The act of writing itself may be charged with inherent power. While spoken charms and spells are ephemeral, a written artefact not only conserves the verbal (and non-verbal) contents written on it, it even creates a state that virtually resembles the constant recitation or actualisation of its contents. This is also true of Tibetan prayer wheels, for instance, which exist in various forms and sizes, from moderately sized handheld wheels to larger stationary ones (see Fig. 3). Their cylindrical bodies contain handwritten or printed mantras and by spinning the cylinder a practitioner may collect Karma, i.e. gain merit for the afterlife.¹⁴ While a prayer wheel has to be spun actively for it to have any

⁸ Cf. Rebiger 2010, 35.

⁹ On *fu*, see Despeux 2000, Drexler 1994, Mollier 2003 and Bokenkamp 2008.

¹⁰ See Drexler 1994, 11–14.

¹¹ Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Pelliot chinois 3358. See Mollier 2003, 421–422 on this manuscript. I would also like to thank Thies Staack, Hamburg, for further information on the manuscript.

¹² On *nomina barbara* and *voces magicae*, see Tardieu et al. 2013, Versnel 2001, Frankfurter 1994, 199–205, and the ‘Glossary of *Voces Magicae*’ compiled by Brashear 1995, 3576–6303 for the *Greek Magical Papyri*. See Burchett 2008 on mantras as ‘magical’ language. On pseudo-Sanskrit in Daoist ritual texts, see Drexler 1994, 13 and Capitanio 2011, 530–531.

¹³ Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa of Nettesheim, *De occulta philosophia*, first book, chapter 73, in Tyson 1993, 221; also see Lehrich 2003, 142.

¹⁴ On prayer wheels, see Brox 2018 and Hunter 1985.



Fig. 3a: Hamburg, Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures, inv. no. 1/2016; metal, brass, paper; height 34.5 cm, diameter 15.0 cm. A Tibetan prayer wheel. The brass cylinder and lid are decorated with embossed Tibetan characters of the popular Tibetan mantra *Oṃ maṇi padme hūṃ* and with Buddhist symbols of the Eight Auspicious Signs, *Ashtamangala*, comprising the endless knot and the lotus flower, for example.¹⁵ The cylinder and lid are tinted in silver and gold.

positive effect, one can profit from the efficacy of written amulets passively just by wearing them close to one's body, so the belief goes.

This aspect of agency in manuscripts – not only those that are said to be magical – is an inherent potency of the act of writing itself. The quote from Agrippa of Nettesheim describes speech and writing in magic as being equal in terms of their applicability and utility. However, a practitioner may even acknowledge that manuscripts are superior to spoken magic inasmuch as they feature this continuation



Fig. 3b: Hamburg, Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures, inv. no. 1/2016; detail. A bundle of rolled paper strips stored inside the prayer wheel shown in Fig. 3a. Each strip is approx. 72.5 cm long and 5.5 cm high and is imprinted with the same six blocks of text five lines long. Each line of the stamp contains the mantra *Oṃ maṇi padme hūṃ*.

of their magical efficacy or agency and inasmuch as they allow the use of visual signs other than conventional writing representing human language, but visual signs that cannot be expressed in speech. These are figurative and abstract drawings, for example, as well as diagrams or magical signs like *charaktères*.¹⁶

Writing or applying visual signs in magical practices does not only involve the production of manuscripts *stricto sensu*, i.e. inscribed objects that are portable; images and signs may also be inscribed on immobile writing surfaces or in the air or sand. A prominent example of this is a magical circle: in preparation for a magical ritual, a circular diagram is drawn on the ground, often containing magical symbols and efficacious names.¹⁷ The practitioner stands inside the circle during the ritual. Many European handbooks on magic contain depictions of such circles as instructive models or templates, which are then supposed to be reproduced during

¹⁵ I would like to thank Bidur Bhattarai, Hamburg, for providing me with this information.

¹⁶ For more on *charaktères*, see below.

¹⁷ On the theory and practice of magical circles, see Kieckhefer 1998, 170–185, for example.



Fig. 4: Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm 849, fol. 21r; approx. 21.0 × 14.6 cm. Magic circle for obtaining a boat. Printed in its original size.



Fig. 5: Copenhagen, The David Collection, inv. no. 36/1995; engraved brass, Syria, c.1200, 11.1 cm in diameter. An Islamic medical bowl for protective and curative purposes. Printed in its original size.

the actual ritual.¹⁸ Fig. 4 provides an example of a circle from a fifteenth-century Latin manuscript on ‘ritual magic’, i.e. magic involving the summoning of demons and spirits of the dead.

The experiment aims to obtain a magical boat that will carry the magician wherever he wants.¹⁹ The instructions that accompany the depiction describe the beginning of the ritual in a rather brief way:

[...] and carry yourself [21^v] a rib of a dead man or woman, which you have to sharpen first. And make with it on the ground these figures with the names and everything else that is contained in this circle. And here it appears: [depiction of magical circle]. When this is done, you shall enter at the designated place and turn yourself around the circle and fumigate it with the marrow/heart of a dead person, as it was said. And that’s all. When this is done, you will hear voices

in the air and fumes will emerge. When you hear the voices, say this conjuration towards the west, as it is written [...]²⁰

The ritual then proceeds with several lengthy conjurations. What is interesting in our context is the writing instrument used to draw the circle: a human rib, which also has to be specially prepared by sharpening it. The place where the magician is meant to stand is shown in the centre in the model of the circle, in what looks like a crescent, where it says: *Hic magister cum suis sociis*, ‘Here [is] the master with his companions’. Kieckhefer has interpreted the crescent as a schematic representation of the boat.²¹ Furthermore, in the lower part of the circle, the word *occidens* (‘west’) indicates how the circle has to be orientated on the ground. Magical circles, drawn by hand before or during the ritual by the practitioners, serve as a means of protection for the

¹⁸ Also see Marco Heiles’ paper in this section concerning a German manuscript containing several circular diagrams.

¹⁹ Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm 849, fols 21^r–23^r. For more details of this manuscript, including an edition of the Latin text, see Kieckhefer 1998.

²⁰ Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm 849, fols 21^r–21^v; edition of the Latin text in Kieckhefer 1998, 216; translation by the author, who would like to thank Jochen Vennebusch, Hamburg, for his assistance with it.

²¹ Kieckhefer 1998, 216, footnote c. See Kohs 2017 for an example from a Hebrew manuscript that features magical circles with schematic depictions of a boat that is to be conjured up.



Fig. 6: Universitätsbibliothek Leipzig, Ms Voller 1102, vol. 1. Detail from fol. 131r. Depiction of a medieval initiation rite for Jewish boys.



Fig. 7: Bibliothèque nationale de France, Latin 16744, fol. 81r. A historiated initial at the beginning of the Book of Ezekiel in a Latin Bible (second half of the 12th c.). The banderole or scroll contains the second half-line of Ezekiel 3:1: *comede volumen istud, et vades loquere ad filios Israel* ('eat this scroll and go and speak to the House of Israel'). Printed in its original size.

a focal point, attracting and concentrating the supernatural forces and powers the magician wants to utilise.²²

5. Use

When it comes to the *use* of magical manuscripts, probably the most typical and prominent phenomenon is wearing amulets on the human body. Basically all the papers in this section attest these practices for their respective manuscripts.²³ This is also the most obvious manifestation of the pattern of contact magic, i.e. that the efficacy of the amuletic manuscript influences the bearer through direct contact. Magical recipes can also indicate specific parts of the body where an amulet would need to be placed. While tying an amulet to one's wrist or arm is a generic way of using it, placing such a manuscript on or near other parts of the body may be necessary in healing magic intended for specific organs. As a general pattern, a spatial proximity between the manuscripts and what they are supposed to influence is established by the users. One case where this pattern of proximity and contact is implemented to the utmost is magical practices that involve the ingestion or

magician and his companions, as they establish a barrier against harmful demonic forces. At the same time, they are

²² See Kieckhefer 1998, 175–176.

²³ See Berthold's paper on miniature Qur'ans and Kienitz' article on letters from Heaven in this volume, both of whom address this issue. The presumable use of manuscripts and prints described here in the papers by Farouk, Heiles and Schaefer also involves proximity to the human body.



Fig. 8: Cologne, Papyrus Collection, Inv. T. 35. Egypt, 6th–7th century CE, 10.0 × 7.7 cm. Lead *defixio* containing curses in Coptic. Printed in its original size.

incorporation of manuscripts, remains of a manuscript or a liquid in which writing has been dissolved or that had contact with writing. Practices of this kind can be found in many cultures.²⁴ In Tibet, for example, a custom called *za yig* ('edible letters') involves the ingestion of manuscripts containing magical formulas for various apotropaic and curative purposes.²⁵ In Daoist *fu* healing rituals, the patient may drink the ashes of a burnt talisman mixed with water.²⁶ In Fig. 2b, a model for making such a talisman is highlighted. The talisman contains the word *zi* ('child') nine times and is supposedly effective against childlessness, as indicated by the short text underneath: 'This *fu* is to be swallowed in case of barrenness'.

Phenomenologically related to the aforementioned practices is the drinking of water or other kinds of fluid that are believed to have absorbed the curative and apotropaic powers of texts and signs inscribed in vessels through contact with these inscriptions. Islamic medical bowls such

as the one shown in Fig. 5 are an example of this.²⁷ The text inscribed inside the bowl features excerpts from the Qur'an on childbirth and formulas to prevent colic. The depictions of a serpent, a scorpion and a dog on it were supposed to provide relief to a person who had been bitten by these animals. A feature of many Islamic magic artefacts, magical squares (at the top left and right of the picture) and the so-called 'seven seals' (on the left-hand side) are part of this bowl's content as well.²⁸

A rather different ritual that also involved the ingestion of handwriting is known from the medieval Jewry of Ashkenaz, i.e. the German lands.²⁹ Young Jewish boys who were beginning their Torah studies for the first time and simultaneously learning to read had to pass an initiation rite that was also supposed to improve their ability to remember the text of the Torah. The alphabet was written forwards and backwards on a writing slate and several biblical verses were added. The teacher recited the alphabet and the child repeated it after him. Honey was then put on the slate and the child had to lick it off. After that, the child was given a cake with honey and a hard-boiled egg that had already been peeled. Biblical verses had been written on the cake and the egg. One of the verses inscribed was Ezekiel 3:3: 'He said to me, "Mortal, feed your stomach and fill your belly with this scroll that I give you". I ate it, and it tasted sweet as honey to me'. A depiction of this ritual can be found in the famous *Leipzig Mahzor*, a synagogal prayer book for the High Feasts (see Fig. 6).³⁰

²⁷ Copenhagen, The David Collection, inv. no. 36/1995. For more details about this bowl, see <<https://www.davidmus.dk/islamic-art/medical-science/item/1612?culture=en-us>> Giunta 2018 has identified all in all 20 bowls of this type, which feature depictions of a serpent, a scorpion and a rabid dog, see Giunta 2018, 171–175 and 199–204. For a detailed description of two specimen from the Aron collection see Giunta 2018, 19–36. See also Langer 2013, 21–25 notes 8–11. An identical bowl is owned by the Museum für Islamische Kunst, Berlin, Inv. Nr. I. 1992.7. On Islamic medical bowls in general, see Giunta 2018 and Langer 2013.

²⁸ See the papers by Cornelius Berthold and Karl R. Schaefer in this volume as well.

²⁹ The ritual is recorded in three different versions: in paragraph 296 of *Sefer ha-roqeah* ('Book of the Perfumer') by Eleazar ben Judah ben Kalonymus (c.1176–1238), *editio princeps*, Fano, 1505; in *Sefer ha-asufot* ('Book of Collections') in the manuscript London, Jews College, 134 (Montefiore 115), fol. 67^r; and in the manuscript Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Hamburg, Cod. hebr. 17, fols 81^r–82^v. See Marcus 1996 on the ritual, esp. 25–31, and Kogman-Appel 2012, 98–108.

³⁰ Universitätsbibliothek Leipzig, Vollers 1102, vol. 1, fol. 131^r. For more on this illumination and its symbolism, see Kogman-Appel 2012, 98–108 and Marcus 1996, 81–82.

²⁴ For other examples than the ones that follow, see Kühne-Wespi 2019, Hindley 2019 and Wilkens 2019.

²⁵ See Garrett 2009.

²⁶ See Strickmann 2002, 123–193 and Despeux 2000, 535.



Fig. 9: Übersee-Museum Bremen, inv. no. A11130. A Batak apotropaic belt made from plates of bone. Top: front view; bottom: rear view.



Fig. 10: Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, B16023; ceramic, diameter 16.5 cm. An ancient magic bowl from Nippur, Iraq that was supposed to provide protection against various demons. Printed in its original size.

On the left of the image, we can see the teacher holding a child and a gilded writing slate. All the children shown are holding cakes and eggs. On the right, the conclusion of the ritual is depicted, when the boys are taken to a river that symbolises the Torah as a spring or stream that is constantly flowing. To refer to this ritual and its context as ‘magical’ would be misleading, of course. However, like other initiation rites,³¹ it is phenomenologically related to practices that one is

³¹ On Islamic initiation rites from West Africa that are comparable to the Jewish ritual described, see Mommersteeg 2012, 39–40 and Brigaglia 2018, 81; also cf. Wilkens 2019, 375.

likely to call magical. Finally, it should be mentioned that the verses from Ezekiel 3:1–3 have had their impact on Christian manuscript illumination, too (see Fig. 7 for an example).³²

6. Materiality

The most basic source of the magical agency of an inanimate material entity is its own materiality. In many cultures, gemstones are assigned various apotropaic or curative capacities, for example. Different metals are also believed to possess

³² On the metaphor of eating scripture in Ezekiel 3, see Marcus 1996, 53–59.



Fig. 11: Cambridge University Library, Or.1080.6.19, fol. 1b; paper, 18.4 × 8.2 cm. Late mediaeval Jewish amulet from the Cairo Genizah. Printed in its original size.

certain powers – iron, for instance, was often used to ward off demons.³³ The range of materials that are used for amuletic objects is practically infinite. Likewise, a variety of materials

were used for magical manuscripts in different cultures, especially for amulets.³⁴ First and foremost, the standard – or at least commonest – writing material of a respective manuscript culture often seems to have been suitable for producing amulets as well. In these cases, the material would not have been intended to contribute to an amulet's efficacy, one may argue. However, there are ample examples where specific writing materials seem to have been chosen deliberately. One such case is curse tablets from the ancient Mediterranean region.³⁵ These were called *defixiones* in Latin or *katadesmoi* in Greek, both terms relating to the meaning of 'binding' or 'banning' and also designating the magical procedure as a whole. The tablets were typically made from thin sheets of lead (as shown in Fig. 8)³⁶. Among other places, they were deposited in cemeteries so that the ghosts of the dead would help the curses and bindings described in their texts to take effect. Sometimes, a tablet was additionally pierced with a needle.

The use of lead for these tablets has been explained by Fritz Graf, who refers to ancient sources:

Another characteristic feature is the reference to the special nature of lead: the metal is 'cold.' Moreover, it has other properties exploited by sorcerers; lead is considered 'without luster,' 'without value,' or 'useless,' in the same way that the words and acts of all those whose names will be engraved on the tablet will be useless.³⁷

However, Graf submits that a number of such binding spells have survived on papyrus, especially in Egypt's dry climate. It may be the case that perishable materials were used for *defixiones* in other regions of the Mediterranean as well.³⁸

We have already encountered the use of human bones as writing instruments in instructions for a magical ritual.

³⁴ For an exemplary case study, see Rebigier 2017 on writing materials in ancient and mediaeval Jewish magic.

³⁵ On the phenomenon of ancient curse tablets, see Gager 1992, Graf 1997, 118–174 and Kropp 2015. On recent research on curse tablets, see Riess 2018, 211–284, for example.

³⁶ Cologne, Papyrus Collection, Inv. T. 35 (previously Inv. T. 10). On this tablet and its text, see Kurth, Thissen and Weber 1980, 109–112 and cf. the reviews by Vittmann 1982, 126–127 and van der Vliet 1998, 119 on the shortcomings of this edition. See Meyer and Smith 1999, 202–203 for an English translation of the tablet's inscription, albeit one based on the aforementioned deficient edition.

³⁷ Graf 1997, 132–133; see 276–277, notes 48 and 49 for the references to the source texts.

³⁸ See Graf 1997, 133.

³³ For more on the Islamic context, see Schienerl 1980, for example. As for the Jewish context, see Naveh and Shaked 1985, 121, note 23 and Trachtenberg 1939, 160, 174 and 313, note 14.

However, while instruction texts do not necessarily tell us anything about the actual practices, there are cases where human bones have been used as writing surfaces.³⁹ Animal bones were probably employed more often as material for apotropaic manuscripts or as divinatory devices. Fig. 9 shows an apotropaic belt once used by the Batak people of Sumatra. These inscribed bone artefacts have not been studied very much yet.⁴⁰

7. Content

Finally, the assumed efficacy of a magical manuscript such as a written amulet may be directly based on its content. The texts found in amulets may contain performative speech acts like ‘I adjure you, o demon, to ...’. In a similar way to an imperial edict, for example, such performative language creates a new state of reality by being written down or enunciated.⁴¹ Likewise, descriptions of the desired effects of an amulet or assurances of its efficacy in its text might be used to yield these very effects in the same way as self-fulfilling prophecies. The specific contribution that manuscripts make in terms of adjurations, spells, curses and petitions is their transformation to a state of permanence, as already mentioned. Amulets do not have to be read, but they are supposed to unfold their power by their mere existence.

Non-textual contents like images may also contribute to the magical efficacy of manuscripts, of course. The kinds of relations between texts and images can be diverse.⁴² Images may have instructive and illustrative functions, as above in the depiction of a magic circle in a handbook on ritual magic (Fig. 4). Images may also be attributed direct and inherent efficacy. This is the case if the magical circle just mentioned is drawn on the ground using a human rib in the ritual. Babylonian incantation bowls from late antiquity are an example of figurative depictions of demons that were presumed to be efficacious. These bowls were supposed to be placed in the corners of a house, buried under the

doorstep or deposited in cemeteries. In a number of the bowls, the texts for binding and repelling demons are accompanied by an image of a demon shackled by its hands or feet.⁴³ Fig. 10 shows one such example.

The rather brief text on the inside of the bowl is written in Jewish-Babylonian Aramaic script and is also in the same language. It contains a formula to exorcise or bind various demons: ‘exorcised and sealed are the Demon and the Devil and the Satan and the Curse-spirit and the evil Liliths which appear by night and appear by day’.⁴⁴ The name of the possessed patient is mentioned as well: Tardi, daughter of Oni. The figure in the centre of the bowl bears the typical features of such depictions: its feet are shackled and its hair is long and wild, almost appearing like horns – thus the figure can be identified as a female demon.⁴⁵ Such depictions may support or enforce the binding and exorcising that is mentioned by the texts. Perhaps the binding is even accomplished by the images themselves.

Magical signs, which are often named *charaktêres*, are content that is neither conventional, readable writing nor figural images.⁴⁶ These signs are occasionally labelled ‘pseudo-script’. However, the practitioners tend to regard them as esoteric scripts whose ‘letters’ contain hidden meanings, or as representations of the powers of supernatural beings that can be utilised. Sometimes they are even addressed in a way that depicts *charaktêres* as being virtually identical to these supernatural beings. This is expressed in a late mediaeval Jewish amulet from the Cairo Genizah, for example (see Fig. 11):

And you, praised symbols, angels and *qetirayyā*, (I) request of you, [save] Saʿīda daughter of Sitt al-Ahl from all pain, affliction and suffe[r]ing in her bo[dy] ... Amen, Amen, Amen Selah Hallelujah.⁴⁷

³⁹ A peculiar case of human skulls inscribed with magical texts in Aramaic is described in Levene 2006 and Rebiger 2017, 346–347.

⁴⁰ I would like to thank Roberta Zollo, Hamburg, for drawing my attention to these written artefacts. For the first comprehensive account on written artefacts of the Toba Batak in general, see van der Putten and Zollo 2020, on inscribed bones in particular 82–84 and passim. On magical and divinatory Batak manuscripts, see also Sibeth 1991, 100–114 and 10–19 and Sibeth 2000, 40–44.

⁴¹ On speech acts and the performativity of language, see Searle 1969 and Austin 1975, among others.

⁴² On combinations of images and texts in magic manuscripts, see Kiyanrad, Theis and Willer (eds) 2018, Camille 1998 and Kohs 2017, among others.

⁴³ On incantation bowls in general, see Naveh and Shaked 1985 and 1993 and Shaked et al. 2013. Regarding their iconography and figurative depictions, see Viložny 2015a, 2015b and 2017 and Hunter 1998.

⁴⁴ See the edition and translation in Montgomery 1913, 201–202.

⁴⁵ See Viložny 2017, 324.

⁴⁶ *Charaktêr*, Greek for ‘(engraved) letter or sign’. There are different forms of magical signs or *charaktêres*, the most prominent being what in German is termed *Brillenbuchstaben*. These consist of strokes, curves and small circles, reminiscent of spectacles (‘Brille’ in German). *Charaktêres* and other magical signs have a long history going back to antiquity and can be found in various manuscript cultures; see Gordon 2011 and 2014, and Frankfurter 1994, 205–211.

⁴⁷ Cambridge University Library, Or. 1080.6.19, fol. 1b 16–20; translation in Naveh and Shaked 1993, 241. The cited text can be found in the last few lines of this amulet. The magical signs addressed here are found right beneath the middle of the amulet sheet and are characteristic *Brillenbuchstaben*.

The expression *qetirayyā* probably comes from the Greek word *charaktêres*, but experienced some misconceptions during its transmission.⁴⁸ On a few occasions, it is made explicit by the magical recipes that signs of this type do not have any representation in speech, i.e. they cannot be expressed in terms of human language. This is the case in this Greek magical papyrus, for instance:

Taking a golden or silver lamella, engrave with an adamant stone the unutterable characters given below. [...] And say, 'I call on you the greatest god in the heaven, strong lord, mighty IAŌ OYŌ IŌ AIŌ OYŌ, who exist. Perfect for me, lord, the great, lord, unutterable magical sign, so that I may have it and remain free of danger and unconquered and undefeated, I, NN.'⁴⁹

These uses of magical signs or *charaktêres* raise the question of whether they can actually be regarded as proper signs. If they are not referential, but their 'meaning' is constituted by their inherent agency or efficacy, then they may not be signs at all in a general sense. Their lack of conventional referential meaning makes them resemble the aforementioned *voces magicae* in a way.⁵⁰

8. Patterns of magical agency?

Up to this point, we have seen several examples of features or aspects that contribute to the magical efficacy of manuscripts like textual amulets – at least in the view of the practitioners, who attribute a certain intrinsic power to these manuscripts. In order to frame their efficacy and the status such manuscripts have in their users' eyes, the concept of *agency* may prove useful. The view that objects can be endowed with agency has become quite widespread in the last few decades. Seen from this perspective, manuscripts, like humans, could be regarded as agents with a certain degree of independence from other agents. They would then have a 'socioculturally

mediated capacity to act' by themselves.⁵¹ The amount of scholarly literature on the concept (or rather, concepts) of agency is vast. Instead of completely adopting a specific theoretical framework of agency, such as Bruno Latour's Actor–Network Theory⁵² or the late Alfred Gell's theory on 'Art and Agency',⁵³ this paper will highlight some general aspects of agency or ideas about it that could reasonably be applied to magical manuscripts.⁵⁴ Notably, neither Gell nor Latour seem to have taken books or written material into consideration, let alone manuscripts.⁵⁵

Agency can be theorised with different levels of complexity. Following Latour's line of thinking, for instance, the simplest definition would be this one:

1. Agency is constituted by making a difference.⁵⁶

In this case, agency lies in the very presence of an agent. Active behaviour is not a necessary condition of an agent, let alone thoughtful behaviour. In an understanding of agency this general, inanimate things and artefacts like manuscripts or even abstract entities such as concepts, ideas or knowledge can all possess agency.⁵⁷

In a next step, agency could be defined as

2. the direct and active causal influence that an agent has on an object.

⁵¹ This is the basic definition of *agency* in Ahearn 2001, 112.

⁵² Latour 2005, for example.

⁵³ Gell 1998.

⁵⁴ For another illuminating account on the agency of magical artefacts see Gordon 2015.

⁵⁵ Cf. the paper by Boutcher 2013 on the application of Gell's theory to 'literary art' and books.

⁵⁶ Cf. Latour 2005, 71: 'By contrast, if we stick to our decision to start from the controversies about actors and agencies, then *any thing* that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference is an actor—or, if it has no figuration yet, an actant. Thus, the questions to ask about any agent are simply the following: Does it make a difference in the course of some other agent's action or not? Is there some trial that allows someone to detect this difference?'

⁵⁷ As Latour has also stated explicitly (2008, 155), 'As a more general descriptive rule, every time you want to know what a nonhuman does, simply imagine what other humans or other nonhumans would have to do were this character not present'. For the sake of terminological clarity, we should point out that *agent* thus denotes a semiotic role that can be attributed to entities like humans, things, concepts, etc. Strictly speaking, the term *object* should only be used in relation to agency to denote a role in which an entity is subject to an (other) agent's agency, whereas *thing* (and *artefact*) could be used for inanimate material entities.

⁴⁸ See Naveh and Shaked 1993, 242 and Naveh and Shaked 1985, 216–217.

⁴⁹ Leiden, Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, J 395, pp. 23–25 (inv. nos. AMS 76 vel 12 and AMS 76 vel 13) = PGM XIII, 1001–1025; translation by Morton Smith in Betz 1996, 194. For an edition of this papyrus, also see Daniel 1991, XXIV–XXVII and 31–81.

⁵⁰ Cf. Gordon 2011, 27: '*Charaktêres* were thus pure graphemes, graphic signifiers which had to resemble orthodox script in order to convey the notion that they constituted a language, but at the same time had to be strange enough to resist recuperation. As such, at least in theory, they are actually the complement or converse of *voces magicae* [or *nomina barbara*], which are pure voice, phonetic signifiers that likewise resist semantic recuperation'.

Agency is thus basically linked to the concept of cause and effect, although it should not and cannot be reduced to this aspect alone. However, agents and the objects of their agency do not exist as isolated pairs, but are part of – and integrated in – larger ‘networks’ of agency, with a multitude of entities being actors or objects of agency. Seen this way, agency can be defined as

3. the relations between various agents (persons, things, etc.), courses of action and their effects.⁵⁸

It is not a single agent that is responsible for a certain effect, but essentially the interaction and collaboration of different agents whose agency is part of what Enfield and Kockelman 2017 have called *distributed agency*. An entity can be an agent and object at the same time within this fundamental distribution of agency. Besides that, an entity that is an object which is subject to another entity’s agency can also be an agent affecting the latter entity as its object. Such ‘reciprocity’ of agency is not an exception, but normal to a certain degree. The constitution of agency can often be understood as a semiotic process. To say that something or someone ‘has agency’ thus actually means that entities are attributed agency, and in particular flexibility and accountability, by other agents through instrumental and inferential practices.⁵⁹

Magical manuscripts with their efficacy seem to be a characteristic case for all three conceptual levels of agency, including distributed agency. With their specific materiality, content and visual design that are attributed magical efficacy, they actively contribute to cultural interpretations of reality. At the same time, this materiality and content is inevitably shaped by other actors or agents in practices of production and use in a setting that involves non-human ‘supernatural’ entities and powers such as angels, demons or gods besides involving human agents. The magical agency of manuscripts is thus constituted by the relationship, interaction and influence between the manuscript and all these other agents. Interestingly, all directions of influence or effect may be attested in magical manuscripts like amulets: manuscripts

that are magical agents may influence humans (e.g. by way of curses) as well as non-human entities (e.g. by means of petitions or adjurations). Humans can endow manuscripts with efficacy (e.g. by using specific production techniques), and supernatural beings can be the source of a manuscript’s efficacy (e.g. when their powerful names are written on an amulet).

Are manuscripts used in magical practices fundamentally different from other magical objects, then? Although many things can be attributed an agent status, the agency that can be connected with manuscripts may be of another kind – either in quality or degree – than the agency of non-manuscript objects, not least because of the additional semiotic layer provided in a manuscript by the visual signs it contains. This layer, regardless of whether it is constituted by writing, symbols or images, delimits the boundaries of the material artefact with the textual and performative dimensions of human language. However, it is not necessarily the case that magical manuscripts are always read or are even readable. The mere knowledge or assumption that what is contained in them will have a certain effect is enough to establish the status of an efficacious agent. In many magical manuscripts, the interplay of different agents in the web of agencies is tangible in a remarkable way, with the manuscripts oscillating between being objects of other agents’ agency (as artefacts) and being agents themselves, considered to eminently impact the fate of other agents.

The distributed agency connected with or present in magical manuscripts is shaped and defined by patterns – patterns like those directly connected to manuscripts in the sense of Wimmer et al. 2015 as well as more general communicative, cultural and cognitive patterns delimiting the phenomena of magical practices. In this paper, we have already seen various features and aspects connected with manuscripts that may contribute to their magical agency. Practically none of the magical manuscripts only include *one* feature or *all* of those that are possible; it is the combination of features that defines a pattern, and the kinds of patterns of magical agency are manifold. Consequently, there is no such thing as *the* magical manuscript per se, and a manuscript does not have to be defined as magical or not magical either. To avoid such a dichotomy, Otto and Stausberg, in applying the concept of family resemblance, have proposed not saying that a practice is ‘magic’, but speaking of different ‘patterns of magicity’ that can be observed in different practices.⁶⁰ Likewise, we may speak of

⁵⁸ Enfield 2017, 7.

⁵⁹ Cf. Kockelmann 2017b, 33–34. In the framework of Alfred Gell, for example, agents are attributed agency through the inferential process of *abduction*. In this case, Gell builds upon a concept first introduced by Charles Sanders Peirce and later expanded upon by Umberto Eco. Abduction comprises the detection of possible patterns by an agent who then acts upon the supposition that the pattern he supposes is true. See Gell 1998, 13–16.

⁶⁰ See Otto and Stausberg 2013, 10–12.

different patterns of magical agency that a manuscript can exhibit or fulfil. Patterns may have parallels or overlap in their respective features. However, a similarity in form as is partly the case for Babylonian incantation bowls and Islamic medical bowls would not necessarily indicate a similarity in terms of other features, e.g. in their use or contents. Although many different patterns of magical agency may be found in

different manuscript cultures, patterns of magical agency seem to exist for manuscripts that are more or less universal, such as wearing an amulet on one's body so it can have an apotropaic or curative effect. These universal patterns of magical manuscripts and their agencies will be explored in greater depth in future research.

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Fig. 12: Minneapolis, Minneapolis Institute of Art, The Christina N. and Swan J. Turnblad Memorial Fund, acc. no. 2014.44.1; ink on wood; height 67.3 cm, width 33.2 cm. This Nigerian *allo kafi gida* ('home protection board') contains protective texts and the stylised drawing of a camel. It was used to ward off evil and attract good luck. On this board see <<https://collections.artsmia.org/art/119282/writing-board-hausa>>, for more on such boards, see Lema 2019.

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