

Chapter Title: Introduction

Book Title: *Ritual Boundaries*

Book Subtitle: *Magic and Differentiation in Late Antique Christianity*

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Published by: University of California Press. (2024)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/jj.10782298.5>

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Introduction

At the turn of the fifth century CE, Augustine of Hippo (354–430 CE) delivered a sermon on John 1:34–51, the seventh in his homiletical series on the fourth gospel.¹ In this sermon, the bishop of Hippo directed his ire against a now unknown local blood festival that had apparently piqued the interest of some of his North African congregants.² Augustine responded in kind to this ostensible threat to Christian purity, constructing a complex argument that highlighted through various examples the demonically inspired tactic of blending heathenism with Christianity. Among the examples he noted was the deceptive use of Jesus's name on tied ritual objects or amulets (*ligaturae*), a practice he regarded as a clever and potent form of ritual subterfuge:

For evil spirits contrive certain semblances of honor for themselves that they may in this way deceive [*decipliant*] those who follow Christ. To such an extent, my brothers, that they [i.e., demons] themselves, who seduce [*seducunt*] through tied ritual objects [*ligaturas*], through spells [*praecantationes*], and through the artifices of the enemy, mingle [*misceant*] the name of Christ in their spells; because they are no longer able to seduce Christians so that they may give their poisons, they add some honey so that what is bitter may lie hidden in that which is sweet and may be drunk to ruin. To such an extent that I know that at one time the priest of that Pilleatus used to say, "Even Pilleatus himself is a Christian." Why is this, brothers, except that Christians cannot otherwise be seduced?³

This discussion of amulets utilizes a range of metaphors (e.g., representation, mixture, disguise, and mislabeling) that, taken together, vividly illustrates how demons attempt to draw believers away from their god. From a historical perspective, Augustine's criticisms of this hypothetical group of the deceived also disclose a certain level of knowledge of actual late antique ritual practice; the extant amuletic record from this period provides countless examples of the apotropaic and curative use of Jesus's name.⁴

At the same time, his use of the verb *miscere* (“to mingle”) in this context raises questions of historical significance that evade simple answers. From whose perspective was Jesus’s name mingled? Did the demons/practitioners, the unsuspecting Christians, and Augustine have the same interpretation of the Jesus-incantation interface? In short, would all parties have agreed that a mixture of magical/heathen and Christian elements had taken place? Apparently not. Although Augustine and the deceitful demons/practitioners that he envisioned both seemed to have capitalized on a religious, ritual, or communal difference between the respective worlds of Jesus and incantations—though from diametrically opposing religious postures and motivations—the Christians who acquired such objects did not presumably recognize this difference, at least not in the same way. That these Christians were in Augustine’s mind “deceived” (cf. *decipere*) and “seduced” (cf. *seducere*) by this supposed trick meant that they conceptualized ritual and religious taxonomies *differently* than did he and his wicked counterparts. In fact, while Augustine insists that such believers were now outside the faithful sheepfold, the believers themselves apparently perceived no tension between their amuletic practices and their Christian identities.⁵ According to Augustine, these hypothetical (Christian) people would disagree with his condemnatory assessment, boldly proclaiming, for instance, “I did not lose the sign of Christ.”⁶

Despite its rhetorical framing and clear theological biases, Augustine’s discussion of *ligaturae* reveals an ideological bifurcation centered around the proper boundaries of Christian practice.⁷ In so doing, this anecdote hints at the diverse visions of the limits of Christianity and Christian idiom that existed in late antiquity, especially as it relates to the (textual) objects, rituals, and crises of quotidian life.

Ritual Boundaries investigates the manifold ways in which late antique Mediterranean people—mostly Christians—engaged through their everyday practices with notions of similarity and difference, good and evil, and propriety and impropriety, specifically in relation to religious belonging, ritual practice, and the limits of texts (e.g., between words, images, materials, and gestures; between authoritative traditions). It seeks to accomplish this goal through detailed readings of late antique amulets (of various types and materials) and *grimoires* and, to lesser extents, curse tablets and other kinds of practices and texts associated with healing, exorcism, and cursing. Although the rituals and objects at the center of this study are typically deemed “magical,” this book is *not about magic*, per se; instead, the book uses ostensibly magical objects to reorient how we map the contours of textuality as well as religious assimilation, cooperation, and especially differentiation during late antiquity in so-called “lived religion” more generally.⁸

This latter emphasis on differentiation in late antique “lived religion” (see discussion below) neither operates according to a model of historical inquiry that facilely divides elites from non-elites⁹ nor harks back to a now bygone era in late ancient Mediterranean studies, whereby the writings and perspectives of church

fathers, monks, rabbis, and emperors were privileged to such a high degree that they totally eclipsed the panoply of complexities and contradictions in late antique lived reality. Often oriented around “great thinkers,” this defunct approach to history allowed the voices of a select few to drown out or frame those of Christians from a range of social strata. Indeed, a discrete distinction between elites and non-elites, coupled with a literary source-focused model of (ancient) history, carries serious consequences for our reconstructions of the past, as historians have long noted.

In the opening chapter of *The Cult of the Saints* (1981), Peter Brown demonstrated that the scholarly study of the late antique cult of the saints had, up until that time, been fundamentally shaped by a two-tiered model of religious change, specifically organized around the categories “elites” and “non-elites.”¹⁰ For the likes of Edward Gibbon (1737–94), who wrote under the influence of David Hume (1711–76), this two-tiered model—in its nascent form—resulted in a devaluation of the religion of late antiquity; according to this view, the greatest sin of the late antique elites was their permissive attitude toward “popular” or “vulgar” religion.¹¹

By the early 1980s, the two-tiered model appeared under a different guise. Brown writes the following: “We have developed a romantic nostalgia for what we fondly wish to regard as the immemorial habits of the Mediterranean countryman, by which every ‘popular’ religious practice is viewed as an avatar of classical paganism.”¹² If the “modernism” of Gibbon’s era brought with it contempt for the “popular” or “vulgar” religion of the masses, the “postmodernism” of Brown’s day romanticized that non-elite religiosity. With a two-tiered model still at its center, this newer approach to religious history, in Brown’s estimation, emphasized continuity over change to such a great extent that it obscured unique developments in late antiquity, including especially the rise of the cult of the saints. Brown appropriately noted that developments in late antique religiosity could not be so easily divided according to an elite versus non-elite dichotomy because “they worked slowly and deeply into the lives of Mediterranean men of all classes and levels of culture.”¹³

Despite Brown’s trenchant criticisms, the two-tiered model—and its accompanying distinction between elites and non-elites—has proved to die hard in late antique studies. In fact, I contend that an even newer kind of two-tiered model—likewise accompanied by a “romantic nostalgia” for “non-elite” religion—has had a considerable influence on scholarship in the intervening years since 1981. Although Christian continuity with Jewish, indigenous, pagan, or heathen practices still constitutes a robust field of scholarship (though not necessarily for the same problematic reasons it did in the early 1980s),¹⁴ many scholars of late antiquity now adopt a two-tiered approach to religious boundaries and identities that casts non-elites and elites into positive and negative lights respectively. The late antique Christian masses are said to have enjoyed a great degree of amicability with their non-Christian neighbors, which reflected or resulted in “messy,” “fluid,”

“blurred,” “porous,” or “permeable” boundaries. This generally peaceful posture, so we are told, stands in marked contrast with the suspect predilections of the “orthodox” Christian elites (e.g., Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Hippolytus, John Chrysostom, and Augustine), who were preoccupied with religious and ritual differentiation and establishing clear-cut boundaries between Christians and a host of Others (e.g., Jews, Pagans, heretics, and magicians).¹⁵ This two-tiered understanding of inter-religious interaction—which, to be sure, is in large measure a response to the earlier “great thinkers” models (see above) or conflict-oriented reconstructions (see conclusions) of early Christian history—has not only penetrated the study of early Christian literature; it has also made a deep impact on the fields of Christian (and Jewish) archaeology and art history.¹⁶

Fortunately, a few recent studies have destabilized aspects of this bifurcated view of religious interaction among early followers of Jesus and their neighbors. Geoffrey Smith has argued that some ostensibly “heretical” texts, such as the *Testimony of Truth* (from the Nag Hammadi archive), betray an interest in religious differentiation—even appropriating the genre of the heresy catalogue.¹⁷ In a quite different scheme, Heidi Wendt has reframed *both* early Christian heresiologists, such as Justin Martyr and Irenaeus, *and* their heretical interlocutors (e.g., Marcion and Valentinus) as “freelance religious experts,” vying for social, economic, and ritual capital and attempting to marginalize one another along the way.¹⁸ Finally, a complex view of early Jewish-Christian relations—as reflected in literary sources primarily from the first two centuries CE—has emerged from a 2018 collection of essays dedicated to Joel Marcus.¹⁹ As the editors of this volume—aptly titled *The Ways that Often Parted*²⁰—note, this collection of essays “cumulatively illustrates how a variety of ways not only parted but also intermingled—early and late, intentionally and accidentally, over and over again.”²¹

What emerges from these recent works is a portrait of a competitive world of early Christian intellectual voices—not confined to traditional conceptions of orthodoxy—competing with one another and, more importantly for the concerns of this book, framing and maligning one another through manifold discourses of religious, ritual, and cultural alterity. Yet, although this research has usefully contributed to the study of early Christian differentiation by situating early literary writers within a robust agonistic context, the analytical parameters of these studies (and the sources they discuss) leave views of religious difference among the late antique Christian masses—including Christian ritual specialists and their clients, who cut across the ostensible boundaries between “elites” and “non-elites”—for the most part unaddressed.

Ritual Boundaries attempts to address directly the issues of religious, ritual, and textual difference among such Christians with the help of magical artifacts (e.g., apotropaic, curative, exorcistic, and imprecatory objects), supplemented at times with select patristic and monastic sources that condemn or discuss these ritual materials. This “magical” evidence (see below) is particularly useful for assessing

the issue of differentiation among the Christian masses—again, not confined to some putative category of “non-elites”—in part because these sources provide a direct glance into the quotidian lives of believers and in part because amulets and similar technologies are often presented (erroneously in my view) as one of the premiere examples of cultural, religious, and ritual blending. Consequently, these sources are often held up as an “obvious” domain of late antique social existence in which the desire for ritual and religious difference was unimportant, unknown, or even unimaginable.

Although one cannot necessarily posit a general portrait of conceptions of religious and ritual differentiation among such Christians on the basis of select magical objects and early Christian texts, attention to this evidence undermines two partly overlapping presuppositions in late antique studies that have reinforced many of the claims for blurred boundaries or the lack of concern for difference among these believers: First, that shared symbols, spaces, practices, and the like necessarily imply friendly exchange or a lack of rigidly demarcated boundaries; and second, that taxonomies of Christian symbols, rituals, and social contexts among the Christian masses corresponded in a one-to-one fashion with those articulated in ancient Christian literary sources and, by extension, in modern scholarly studies. The challenging of these presuppositions ultimately supports my contention that the impulse to differentiate, malign, and slander was much more widespread in late antique Christianity than scholars now generally acknowledge. By demonstrating that ritual and religious differentiation and invective infiltrated diverse social strata in late antique lived contexts (see especially chapters 1 and 2), *Ritual Boundaries* further disrupts the hard-and-fast distinction between elite and non-elite religion that Brown began to deconstruct over forty years ago.

But magical objects not only testify in interesting ways to ritual and religious boundaries. They also offer us interesting portraits of other kinds of relationships, for which the metaphor “boundary” and related terms have been used. Indeed, political/geographical metaphors, such as “boundary,” “limit,” and “border,” have provided—and continue to provide—productive analytical frameworks for investigating and understanding the combinations, fusions, and ruptures at the interstices of texts, images, materials, and bodies. As I will illustrate in chapter 3, the magical objects help expand our notions of the relationships—or “boundaries,” if you will—among and between these latter categories in early Christian lived religion.

In so doing, the magical evidence helps us reimagine late antique religious experience and contributes to the study of late antique books, reading practices, and the so-called “New Philology.” The classic works produced by scholars, such as Colin Roberts, William A. Graham, Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier, Harry Gamble, and Roger Bagnall, have usefully detailed ancient reading habits (for instance, silent reading), the important role and prices of codices in early Christianity, and the necessity to move beyond purely textual analyses of manuscripts, to

name just a few important contributions.²² This research has proved to be indispensable for the study of early Christianity and late antiquity more generally by promoting and illustrating an approach to manuscripts and texts that takes into consideration all the features of the object in/on which the words were written.²³

The use of the extant magical record to better understand the history of books and reading is a line of methodological inquiry still in its infancy.²⁴ Nevertheless, this nascent area of research promises to make a considerable impact on the study of textual artifacts and their reception since magical objects engage with domains, such as textuality, materiality, and visuality, in unexpected and creative ways (see chapters 3 and 4). The complex interaction of these domains becomes especially evident when one examines from a synthetic perspective the several recent monographs and collected volumes that have usefully drawn attention to the intersections of ancient magic and ancient scribal culture,²⁵ material culture (and archaeology),²⁶ authoritative traditions,²⁷ and visual culture,²⁸ to name just a few. Although such volumes tend to focus on only one dimension of ancient magical objects, the magical artifacts themselves are typically not confined by our notions of text, material, image, and the like. As we will see in chapter 3, one late antique Christian amulet, P.Oxy. 8.1077, seeks to achieve ritual efficacy by merging verbal, visual, material, and performative dimensions. This amulet and others thus help us gain a better understanding of the text-material-support interface by underscoring the diverse entanglements of texts, on the one hand, and the materials, formats, images, and ritual performances contiguous with them, on the other.

Such combinations can also shed light on the diverse ways people engaged with authoritative traditions, such as the Bible, in late antique lived religion. As I will also highlight in chapter 3, even the Jewish and Christian practitioners who cited the same biblical passage (MT Ps 91:1 = LXX Ps 90:1) reveal different mergers of text, materiality, body, and performance through the ritual and material formats at their disposals. An incantation bowl penetrated the human senses with this sacred tradition differently—and required different kinds of gestural performances to read and write the text—than an amuletic armband or a pendant or a ring. Biblical reception and the religious experiences it engendered were not merely or purely textual phenomena.

Attention to the interface of word and image, in particular, can also yield important insights into historical developments, hermeneutical complexities, and scholarly rubrics associated with well-established authoritative traditions in late antique lived religion. For instance, there has been a recent trend in scholarship to push a triumphal interpretation of the crucifixion of Jesus as a visual symbol to an earlier period of late antiquity.²⁹ An early magical gem now housed in the British Museum (BM 1986,0501.1), whose image has been understood as preserving a triumphal interpretation of the crucified Jesus, has served as a kind of linchpin of this new scholarly position; however, as we will see in chapter 4, scholars have not taken into sufficient consideration contextual developments in both Christianity

and in magical practice during late antiquity when assessing this gem's visual and verbal characteristics. Attention to these developments allows us to reassess the word-image interplay on the gem and, consequently, to recontextualize the gem's presentation of Jesus in dialogue with ancient beliefs about the restless dead.

But this early gem's negative presentation of Jesus's crucifixion was not the end of the story. In fact, an early seventh-century CE exorcistic spell written in Coptic (Brit. Lib. Or. 6796[4], 6796), which gives us the most elaborate late antique presentation of the crucifixion of Jesus through both word and image on a magical artifact, presents Jesus's death in highly triumphal terms. Accordingly, the coordination of the verbal and visual domains on these two late antique magical artifacts reveals two completely different understandings of the crucifixion of Jesus: Jesus's crucifixion as a triumphal death and Jesus's crucifixion as a shameful death. By giving voice to the visual-verbal interplay in these sources, we not only reveal a range of possible interpretations to this foundational Christian myth in late antique lived contexts. In so doing, we also gain insight into historical developments in the magical use of Jesus's death during "late antiquity" and undermine the simple scholarly application of generic terms, such as "(ritual) power": in both cases, the crucifixion of Jesus was certainly perceived to be "ritually powerful"; however, the respective power dynamics in these sources were grounded in diametrically opposite perspectives toward the (untimely) death of Jesus.³⁰

Ritual Boundaries thus seeks to insert the so-called "magical" evidence into diverse scholarly discourses in late antique studies. It is my hope that this book will contribute to a growing body of scholarship that has recognized the importance of this material evidence for our understanding of late antique religion and culture and will, therefore, help move magic out from the margins of late antique studies to a more central position in the field.³¹

TERMINOLOGY

The academic study of late antique religion and magic has been marked by a preoccupation with terminology. Studies abound with detailed discussions of "religion," "magic," "Christianity," "Judaism," and the like. Although I will nuance, rearrange, and mix up many of these and other terms throughout the book, there are several scholarly categories—albeit with overlapping traits—that interact with some of my fundamental concerns and thus warrant extended introductory discussions. As will become evident in these terminological analyses, the continuities, partial overlaps, and, of course, ruptures among and between late antique and scholarly taxonomies are important to highlight and, therefore, represent prominent points of discussion throughout this study. In this sense, *Ritual Boundaries* also addresses the complex and ever-changing boundaries between scholars and the late antique sources they investigate.

Magic

My insistence on the use of the term “magic” in this study might strike some as odd, unnecessary, or even flat-out wrong. After all, what is “magic”? How might we distinguish “magic” from other spheres of ancient social existence (e.g., “religion” and “science”)? To be sure, I certainly appreciate the well-established problems with the term, including the following: imprecision in scholarly usage; outmoded biases against the category (e.g., coercive magic vs. supplicative religion); its theological and colonial vestiges; differences between the English rubric “magic” (or its equivalents in other modern languages) and ancient terminology (e.g., *mageia*); and the considerable overlaps between “magical” rituals and “religious” rituals in late antique social reality.³² But the heuristic utility of “magic” is not necessarily impeded by these problems;³³ nor, more importantly, is it necessarily contingent on new definitions that creatively navigate around such shortcomings.

In this vein, I will not offer any definition of “(late antique) magic.” Instead, the specific parameters of my study require that I reframe the issue of terminology entirely through a set of guiding questions that prioritize taxonomy over against definition: what scholarly *category* can most usefully illuminate the overarching concerns of this particular study? And what is the most useful way to *engage with* that category, again for this particular study? My answers to these two questions are: (1) magic and (2) from a scholarly oriented perspective.³⁴

Specifically, I approach the category magic here primarily as an inherited analytical rubric, which, on account of longstanding scholarly convention, intuitively gathers together certain objects, rituals, and concerns. “Magic” has in fact been the dominant term used to label and frame apotropaic, curative, exorcistic, and imprecatory sources and their primary objectives, as is evident from the titles of the volumes in which most of these textual objects have been published and (re-)edited: for instance, *Papyri Graecae Magicae* (cf. *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation*);³⁵ *Greek and Egyptian Magical Formularies*;³⁶ *Supplementum Magicum*;³⁷ *Ancient Christian Magic*;³⁸ *Amulets and Magic Bowls*;³⁹ *Magic Spells and Formulae*;⁴⁰ *Testi della magia copta*;⁴¹ *Papyri Copticae Magicae*.⁴² Even those who deny the heuristic utility of the term recognize its stubborn persistence in scholarly discourses about the objects and concerns in these collections.⁴³ In short, there is a high level of agreement in scholarship concerning the objects, texts, and concerns that have been classified as “magic.”

The consistency in the scholarly classification of magical items, however, stands in marked contrast to the manifold ways scholars have *defined* magic. Is it an irrational form of pseudoscience (in the tradition of Sir James George Frazer)? Or should we follow Émile Durkheim in thinking about magic as mostly a private action? Is it a replacement or substitute for science in instances in which there is insufficient technological development (as Bronisław Malinowski has argued)? None of these definitions—nor the others that have been offered—have satisfied

scholars because they either restrict the evidence too much or are too general to illuminate many research questions.⁴⁴

This heuristic difference between taxonomy and definition is, of course, applicable to terms other than magic. Brent Nongbri makes a similar observation about religion when he writes, “When I ask my students to define religion, they generally respond with a wide range of conflicting definitions, but they usually can agree on ‘what counts’ as religion and what does not.”⁴⁵ But, rather than this being a problem (as Nongbri seems to suggest), there is much value in this basic agreement, especially for certain scholarly pursuits. Much like Nongbri’s students, I am relatively confident that, if I were to give scholars of antiquity a list of texts, objects, and the like (e.g., amulets, liturgies, legal proceeding, prayers, and medical tracts) and tell them to place these terms into categories, such as religion, magic, science, and law, I would find a considerably high degree of agreement. Yet, if I told those same scholars to define “religion,” “magic,” “science,” or “law,” I would get several completely different responses.

To summarize, there has never been scholarly agreement about the proper *definition* of magic, but scholars tend to agree on how magic fits within a *taxonomy* of late antique phenomena (i.e., which sources and concerns are in the category “magic,” and which are outside it). All inherited theological and cultural biases notwithstanding, this well-established taxonomic tradition in late antique studies apropos of magic can serve as an important point of orientation *for certain research questions*. A scholarly oriented taxonomic approach to magic is especially fruitful for my purposes since my broader argument is that select qualities associated with this rubric *in scholarly imagination* have structured the way that *scholars* have approached the sources deemed magical and their implications for late antique religious history.

Magic—like all our research categories—has a host of contiguous attributes in scholarly usage.⁴⁶ Among the attributes of ancient and late antique magic that reside at the analytical center of this study are its supposedly “syncretistic” (see below), non-normative, and/or boundary-blurring character. Such descriptors are everywhere in scholarly literature and, in some cases, fundamentally structure academic discussions about magic. The assumption that ancient and late antique magical objects (almost) always resisted clear-cut boundaries not only frames the study of (ancient) magic itself—that is, the problem of separating magic from religion, science, and so on—but it also orients the perceived appropriateness or applicability of the scholarly use of magical artifacts to address other kinds of pre-modern boundary demarcation, including the lines between Christians and various religious and ethnic Others.

One of the principal contentions of this book is that the sources behind the scholarly rubric “magic” were often concerned with religious and ritual boundaries and even with what we might call identity. By attending to the specific ways in which some of these objects constructed clear-cut boundaries, we can thus

recalibrate how we talk about late antique religious and ritual boundaries more generally, especially as it relates to so-called lived contexts. In short, I will take this scholarly constructed corpus of “magical” materials, which is often seen as irrelevant for questions of late antique boundary demarcation, religious and ritual differentiation, and notions of text and reading, and I will apply that corpus to those very academic discourses. Magic is precisely the best overarching category for the larger task at hand.

Two qualifications, however, are in order: First, one should *not* get the impression from these introductory words that the assumptions behind the construction of the scholarly corpus of magical objects were *completely* disconnected from the world of late antiquity and its key terminology (e.g., *mageia*). There are in fact important correspondences between the taxonomies of scholars and those operative in the late antique world, including in both the magical and literary records. Beginning in late antiquity, we start to find groupings of ritual practices and practitioners, especially by Christian authors, in ways that align quite closely with our notions of magic (at least in its negative sense).⁴⁷ This is especially evident in the canons of ancient church councils. In addition to an early Coptic version of the *Apostolic Tradition*, which lists a range of ritual experts to be excluded from baptism unless they repent (e.g., magicians, fortune tellers, and those who make amulets), there is a late fourth- or early fifth-century CE Phrygian canon that has been falsely attributed to a single Council of Laodicea.⁴⁸ This canon reads:

Those who are of the priesthood, or of the clergy, ought not be magicians [*magous*], enchanters [*epaoidous*], numerologists [*mathēmatikous*], or astrologers [*astrologous*]; nor ought they make what are called amulets [*phylaktēria*], which are chains for their own souls. Those who wear [amulets], we command to be cast out of the Church.

Such ecclesiastical canons demonstrate that Christians had begun by the late fourth or early fifth century CE to conceptualize illicit ritual activities and their practitioners as a distinctive threat.

We also find that the practice of writing *charaktēres* was common in the various kinds of objects and texts we call “magical” (e.g., the Greek Magical Papyri, amulets, *defixiones* [curse tablets]), but was rarely—if ever—found in other kinds of objects. Ancients seemed at times to be highly aware that this scribal practice was a distinctively ritual phenomenon. For instance, several magical objects, including P.Haun. III 51 (= *Suppl. Mag.* 23), a fifth-century CE Greek amulet for healing that I will discuss in chapter 3, not only inscribes *charaktēres*, but also invokes these *charaktēres* by name. We read, “Holy inscription and mighty *charaktēres*, chase away the fever with shivering from Kalē, who wears this *phylakterion*.” The high authority that ritual practitioners invested in this scribal practice was not lost on the Christian critics of ancient amulets. Thus, Augustine writes the following:

Among superstitious things is whatever has been instituted by men concerning the making and worshipping of idols, or concerning the worshipping of any creature or any

part of any creature as though it were God. Of the same type are things instituted concerning consultations and pacts involving prognostications with demons who have been placated . . . These are the endeavors of the magic arts [*magicarum artium*] . . . Here also belong all the amulets . . . whether these involve incantations [*praecantationibus*], or certain secret signs called “characters” [*characteres*].⁴⁹

In other words, both ancient practitioners and those who criticized them attest to the ritual significance of this scribal practice for the range of objects, texts, and practices we call “magical.”

But, of course, most late antique practitioners did not consider their rituals to be magical in any way, shape, or form.⁵⁰ This manifest disjuncture between long-standing scholarly convention, on the one hand, and native understandings in the late antique artifacts themselves, on the other, can *occasionally* interfere with analysis. This *occasional* interference leads us to our second qualification: although magic remains the overarching category for the book as a whole (for the reasons specified above), the research questions that inform individual discussions in the chapters at times require a different way of classifying the sources. As we will see in chapter 1, it is helpful to recast certain “magical” objects as “religious” to facilitate their comparison with select monastic and patristic sources that have similar approaches to illicit or harmful ritual. Although both ostensibly magical and religious materials slander certain rituals as evil, illicit, or harmful, the scholarly bifurcation of the sources into the categories “magic” and “religion” has often given the impression that the negative presentations of ritual in these respective sources are fundamentally dissimilar: practical anti-magical rituals versus theological/ideological condemnation of magic. By placing the magical objects under the same category as patristic sources (in this case, “religion”), we can dissociate them from a purely pragmatic framework and thus better contextualize their rhetorically, culturally, and theologically sensitive strategies for combatting rituals considered wicked.

As I hope to illustrate throughout this study, the heuristic utility of analytical categories such as magic for the study of the late antique world is ultimately contingent on their explanatory power *for specific scholarly pursuits*.⁵¹ In my estimation, therefore, our taxonomies must remain flexible and open to adjustment, reconfiguration, and even deconstruction, thereby allowing us to balance our driving research aims, among other things, with the scholarly presuppositions and traditions operative in each instance.

Amulet

As noted above, *Ritual Boundaries* will draw from the published corpora of late antique amulets, which, given their additional magical designation, have been largely ignored in the study of late antique boundary demarcation.⁵² Accordingly, the cross-cultural anthropological term “amulet” appears in this study as a rubric to discuss a range of ancient and late antique ritual practices and objects (see below)

and, occasionally, to translate native words, such as *amuletum*, *ligatura*, *periapton/periamma*, and *phylaktērion* (*phylaktēria* [plural]).⁵³ Much like magic, the noun amulet has recently been subjected to considerable scrutiny in late antique studies. Since I have predicated my approach to magic—and, by extension, amulets—on a relatively high degree of scholarly agreement, it is important to engage critically with the growing scholarly trend to reconsider the functions of objects previously designated as amulets.

In their seminal checklist of early Christian amulets and formularies, Theodore de Bruyn and Jitse Dijkstra put forth a series of criteria or characteristics that they used to help identify objects as amulets.⁵⁴ In particular, they assessed the objects based on the presence of the following features:

adjurations or petitions, esoteric words [*voces magicae*] or signs [*charaktēres*], letters or words arranged in shapes, strings of vowels, short narratives that relate events associated with the divine world to the matter at hand [*historiolae*], and phraseology often found in charms and spells.⁵⁵

In addition to these features—the taxonomic complexities of which they duly note—de Bruyn and Dijkstra also highlighted other kinds of characteristics that can be used to help identify an amulet, such as the use of certain biblical traditions (e.g., LXX Ps 90 and the Lord's Prayer) or evidence of rolling or folding.⁵⁶ With these diverse criteria in mind, they divided the relevant manuscripts into three groups that progressively descend in their probability of amuletic design: (1) certain; (2) probable; and (3) possible.⁵⁷ It is worth noting that Dijkstra and de Bruyn did not challenge the amuletic status of any of the objects at the center of my analysis.

More recently, Peter Arzt-Grabner and Kristin De Troyer have provided a more critical approach to this topic, emphasizing the necessary presence of clear “magical” elements (e.g., invocations, *charaktēres*, and *voces magicae*) to justify a “certain” amuletic rating. Consequently, Arzt-Grabner and De Troyer take issue with de Bruyn and Dijkstra's claim that the presence of a relevant biblical passage could, in and of itself, be indicative of amuletic design.⁵⁸ For Arzt-Grabner and De Troyer, such biblical passages could theoretically reflect a range of functions, including:

a short text that somebody wanted to keep and read from time to time, be it as a prayer or just a beautiful poetic text; or it may have been a scribal exercise from a practicing priest or student, or an ornamental piece produced at school, maybe to be used as a gift for a beloved person.⁵⁹

Armed with this more “exclusive” approach, Arzt-Grabner and De Troyer argue that some of the objects that Dijkstra and de Bruyn considered amulets should be reclassified. Although most of the artifacts that they reclassify are not relevant for my purposes, one object whose amuletic status they dispute plays a role in this study: P.Oxy. 8.1077 (cf. chapter 3). Arzt-Grabner and De Troyer argue that there is no “hard evidence” that P.Oxy. 8.1077 was designed to be an amulet.⁶⁰ They

therefore entertain other interpretations for this artifact. Arzt-Grabner and De Troyer ask:

Is it not possible that this sheet of parchment . . . could have been a text about Jesus' healing power, artificially designed in an educational context or as a gift for another person, e.g., someone with medical skills?⁶¹

They continue:

And as the producer put so much effort into the careful display of so many features, some of them unique, we have to ask why he or she did not attach a single certain magical marker, e.g., a magical character or a *vox magica*?⁶²

Although Arzt-Grabner and De Troyer are willing to classify this artifact as “possibly produced as an amulet,” they do not find any clear evidence indicating that it should be classified among the objects that were “certainly” amulets.

To a large degree, my taxonomic approach to the category “magic”—and, consequently, “amulet”—sidesteps Arzt-Grabner and De Troyer's recent challenge to the amuletic status of P.Oxy. 8.1077 and any specific designation one might assign to this artifact moving forward: although some scholars might follow Arzt-Grabner and De Troyer in disputing—on papyrological or other grounds—the claim that P.Oxy. 8.1077 was originally designed to be an amulet, there is no doubt that commentators over the past century have consistently referred to this object as an amulet and placed it in collections devoted to amulets and “magic.”⁶³ And it is precisely this *long-standing* scholarly classificatory tradition that informs my principal use of nomenclature and my guiding research questions. Nevertheless, it is useful to engage with Arzt-Grabner and De Troyer's analysis of P.Oxy. 8.1077 since it raises much larger questions about the functions of manuscripts in antiquity more generally. In particular, their essay is a useful starting point for discussing the possibility that an object might have served multiple functions for a single user.

Arzt-Grabner and De Troyer appropriately note that scholars have often taken a “magical” or “amuletic” function of P.Oxy. 8.1077 (and other objects) for granted. From their perspective, such scholarly assumptions are unwarranted or at least premature because the scribe behind this manuscript has not included any “magical” markers (e.g., *charaktêres* or *voces magicae*). They therefore postulate other possible functions for this artifact (e.g., as an educational aid or a gift). One thing worth noting about their assessment of P.Oxy. 8.1077—as well as that of prior commentators—is the operative assumption that there is only *one answer* to the question of function; an object is *either* an educational device *or* an amulet *or* a gift. Yet, while it is likely that most objects were designed with one *primary* use in mind, it is worth asking if the nature of the late antique evidence compels us to classify and conceptualize manuscripts in such monofunctional terms.

There is strong evidence suggesting that objects often served multiple functions—at least for their users. The late antique literary record is replete with descriptions of situations in which, for instance, gestures and artifacts typically

associated with devotional, liturgical, or educational activities also served on occasion apotropaic or curative functions; whether we think of Saint Antony's gesturing of the cross to thwart "magic" (*mageia*) and "poison" (*pharmakeia*)⁶⁴ or Saint Augustine's praise of the man who sought healing by placing his head on a gospel artifact (see chapter 1),⁶⁵ the extant evidence from late antiquity makes it abundantly clear that objects and practices could serve a range of functions depending on their context.⁶⁶ On a theoretical level, this multiplicity of functions finds resonance with the sociological work on multiple identities by scholars, such as Bernard Lahire, who have demonstrated how individuals can align themselves with different groups depending on the situation and context.⁶⁷ Within this line of scholarship, individuals do not possess a single identity, but activate different "identities" (e.g., religious, civic, and familial) depending on the circumstances at hand.⁶⁸ Manuscripts, objects, and even ritual gestures seemed to have worked in a similar way.⁶⁹

The apotropaic or curative extension of certain practices and objects, in particular, might relate to the penetration of disease and the demonic into multiple areas of early Christian life. In addition to biblical traditions of healing and demonic battle (e.g., the healings and exorcisms of Jesus and his followers)⁷⁰ and metaphorical titles with curative connotations ascribed to Jesus (e.g., *sôtēr* and *iatros* [cf. Mark 2:17]), apotropaic/exorcistic concerns and healing were embedded into the very fabric of early Christian ritual culture. Exorcism, for example, was part of the early rites of baptism,⁷¹ and the liturgy included requests for the healing of the sick.⁷² Furthermore, as the research of David Brakke, David Frankfurter, and Dayna Kalleres (among others) has shown, demonic struggle thoroughly informed virtually every aspect of late antique life, especially in monasteries (where much of the scribal training and activity took place).⁷³

Although late antique manuscripts, objects, and gestures probably functioned in a range of ways in lived practice, my scholarly taxonomic approach to amulets is not arbitrary since most of the objects under consideration in this study seemed to have *primarily* served apotropaic or curative functions. In fact, many of these objects self-identify using terms such as *phylaktērion*. Although P.Oxy. 8.1077 does not include any "magical" symbols like *charaktēres*, there are good reasons to think that it was *primarily* created and used as an amulet. This relatively small artifact (11.1 cm × 6 cm) was not only folded; its text also has a very strong emphasis on healing. For instance, the scribe has modified the Matthean title to read "curative Gospel According to Matthew,"⁷⁴ and he provides a modified citation of Matt 4:23–24, which emphasizes diseases even more than the biblical text does. I consider it more likely that it was *primarily* designed for curative purposes (i.e., an amulet) than for an educational context or as a gift for someone with "medical skills," as Arzt-Grabner and De Troyer have hypothesized. Nevertheless, it is worth stressing that, given the multifunctionality of objects in the late antique world, my analysis does not go forward under the assumption that P.Oxy. 8.1077 or any of the objects

I address were made solely for curative or apotropaic concerns or were used only as amulets. To state the matter a bit differently, we might reasonably assume that a papyrus inscribed with a biblical healing narrative about Jesus, such as P.Oxy. 8.1077, might have had a given function when worn at church; however, it is likely that same object served a totally different function when the carrier was sick or afraid of demonic attack.

Ritual

The word “ritual” also warrants an introductory discussion. Despite the problems scholars have identified with the term “ritual,” I think that this anthropological rubric can be analytically productive.⁷⁵ I use “ritual” in this study in three partly overlapping ways. First, although the term “ritual” could in fact apply to a range of phenomena in the late antique Christian world,⁷⁶ “ritual” is used in the majority of cases in this study as a synonym for “magic” or “magical” and thus in reference to the amulets and handbooks, as well as their texts, practitioners, and clients (with the implicit caveat that such texts, objects, practices, and people also participated in other domains of ancient social existence [see the discussion of magic above]). This usage of the term, which more or less follows scholarly convention in the study of late antique magic, is especially operative when I use phrases such as “ritual practice” and “ritual practitioner.”⁷⁷

Second, “ritual” in this book occasionally takes on a more specific sense, denoting the activities, practices, gestures, or performances at play in the magical objects. This usage stands behind phrases such as “the rituals, texts, objects, and concerns that we call ‘magical.’” This juxtaposition of the term “ritual” with these other rubrics, however, is not meant to imply a discrete distinction between domains, such as texts, beliefs, and rituals; rather, such lists are designed to stress for heuristic purposes the diverse dimensions that make up—or could make up—the categories “magic,” “religion,” and the like. In this way, the specific sense of “ritual” also applies to contexts that could be alternatively characterized as “magical” (improper) or “religious” (proper) depending on the viewer’s perspective. Consequently, the term “ritual” offers a more neutral starting point for my discussion of perceptions of alterity, impropriety, and harm in the quotidian practices slandered in both literary and material sources—evidence I eventually classify together under the larger comparative rubric “religion” (see chapter 1).⁷⁸ In those few instances in which I have decided to translate ancient terms (e.g., *mageia*) in such slanderous texts with the rubric “magic” for brevity’s sake, the reader should understand this rubric to mean “improper ritual practice.”

Finally, the word “ritual” is used in this study to underscore a broader discursive context. This latter sense stands behind the heuristic distinction I make between “ritual boundaries” (see chapter 1), which engages with late antique views and stereotypes of proper and improper practices to deal with sickness, demonic struggle, and interpersonal conflict, and “religious boundaries” (see chapter 2),

which focuses on the perceived boundaries between Christians and non-Christians (especially “Jews”). The reader should not intuit from the structural division between ritual and religion in this book any interest on my part in reifying the (Protestant) ritual-belief binary or the thought-action distinction; nor does this division signal my participation in the myth-ritual debate.⁷⁹ Instead, this division is designed to highlight, through two key examples, how early Christians erected, maintained, and promoted boundaries between themselves and diverse kinds of Others in their everyday lives.

Syncretism

Despite the criticisms leveled against syncretism in the field of religious studies more generally, this category is ubiquitous in scholarly descriptions of the language found on ancient and late antique magical artifacts.⁸⁰ As one scholar has put the matter, “if syncretism is to be found anywhere, it is in the world of ancient magic.”⁸¹ In most cases, the term is merely applied (sometimes in scare quotes) to objects whose thematic content crosses the idealized and well-defined scholarly boundaries between Egypt, Greece, Rome, Judaism, Christianity, paganism, or gnosticism.⁸² Others, however, have attempted to bring more specificity to the phenomenon of syncretism in ancient and late antique magic or situate this rubric within a more robust theoretical and methodological framework.

Carla Sfameni has examined the “extraordinarily complex mixture” of religious elements in select PGM texts and magical gems, arguing that they reflect “a particular kind of syncretism with clear enotheistic [*sic*] tendencies.”⁸³ In particular, Sfameni draws on the work of scholars, such as Françoise Dunand and Pierre Lévêque,⁸⁴ and thus contextualizes the juxtaposition of various divine names (e.g., Iaō Sabaōth, Abrasax, Agathos Daimōn) in the late antique magical texts and objects within a broader henotheism in Roman Egypt, whereby devotion to one god did not necessarily preclude the use of or reverence for other divinities.⁸⁵ These elements, for Sfameni, cannot be separated into their constituent parts because they fit together into a coherent “world system” or “Hellenistic religious syncretism” that is tailored to the practical orientation of the magician’s craft.⁸⁶ From this perspective, therefore, the syncretism behind the magical objects from late antiquity is a sound whole based on the mixture of “elements of different religious traditions in order to reach a specific aim.”⁸⁷

Although Sfameni’s broader claims about (1) a single, coherent “Hellenistic religious syncretism” that (2) found particular expression in a discrete domain of late antiquity (i.e., magic) are unconvincing, her basic contention that objects, which seemingly invoke entities from “different religious traditions,” should not be reflexively understood as a mere hodgepodge of independent elements is well taken.⁸⁸ As I will detail in chapter 2, many Christian magical objects reveal an already existing absorption or assimilation of “foreign” elements into the

practitioner's exclusionary configuration of Christianity and, accordingly, demand that we recalibrate our scholarly usage of categories, such as "Christian" and "Jewish," especially as it relates to late antique lived religion.

David Frankfurter has recently developed, through a series of publications, what I regard to be the most robust approach to and able defense of the category "syncretism" for the study of late antiquity, including for the academic study of the rituals, objects, and concerns we would call magical.⁸⁹ Eschewing the fallacy of "pure" religions that has been one of the problematic hallmarks of syncretism in past usage, Frankfurter rectifies this term as follows:

Syncretism should cover the ongoing process by which a religious tradition—in the form of lore, materiality, authority, and charismatic figures—is indigenized and rendered comprehensible in particular cultural domains.⁹⁰

Central to Frankfurter's understanding of syncretism is the notion of "agency"—a term that is meant to denote the active and creative reinterpretation, reworking, and distribution of cultural elements toward a particular objective.⁹¹ From this perspective, syncretism represents an "ongoing process," whereby one can never say, for instance, "a culture or town 'is Christianized.'"⁹²

This nuanced approach to syncretism can fruitfully highlight the ever-shifting forms of religious traditions, such as Christianity, across time and space. As Frankfurter demonstrates, the late antique ticket oracle that addresses Saint Leontius's god at his Christian shrine in Tripolis is not tantamount to a persistence or "survival" of some "pagan" antecedent but stands as a testament to a particular manifestation of "Christianization" in a local context.⁹³ Such instances of syncretism could function, for example, as a means by which "Christianity gained legitimacy, authority, and quotidian relevance in Egypt."⁹⁴

But, as useful as this general model is for tracing the manifold manifestations of "Christianization" over the *longue durée*, such visions of syncretism and agency have difficulty accounting for the late antique taxonomies operative in specific texts. As a result, this approach can obscure exegesis and, by extension, can even augment historical analysis; the possible connotations, associations, and valences of the diverse religious building blocks in a given text are, by and large, eclipsed by a single analytical rubric.⁹⁵ Accordingly, syncretism in this view *tends* to conflate what I would regard as two discrete modes of agency: the active or intentional application of difference, foreignness, or exoticism to one's ritual text, on the one hand, and the ritual use of an already indigenized or assimilated component that happened to originate in a different cultural or religious context, on the other.⁹⁶ As we will see below, this basic distinction is necessary for understanding the ritual poetics of certain magical texts. Was Iaō Sabaōth, for instance, a "Jewish" or a "Christian" divine name for a given practitioner? Did such a distinction matter for his ritual purposes? In at least some cases, the scholarly mislabeling of such a moniker—or the automatic or general application of an analytical rubric, such as

“syncretism,” to its use—can fundamentally invert the conception of ritual purity that the practitioner was trying to promote.

To be sure, Frankfurter is highly attuned to the instability of ancient notions of “Christianity” and of other categories as well as to how such ideas might conflict with our inherited scholarly taxonomies. Commenting on practices like the so-called “Land of Egypt” oracle, Frankfurter writes the following:

it is only the modern Egyptologist or historian who recognizes the peculiar “Egyptianness” of these materials and tries to disentangle them from their contexts to stand alone as “survivals,” for the texts themselves show no awareness of engaging non-Christian or repudiated religious traditions, nor is there evidence of others’—reformers’—censure of these kinds of interests or texts . . . We must be careful about isolating material as somehow “more Egyptian,” as “survivals,” when there is no evidence that the scribe himself thought he was moving into an archaizing or heathen mode of composition.⁹⁷

Frankfurter’s words against isolating the textual elements in a given text based on origins not only resonate to a degree with Sfameni’s approach (see above), but they also gesture toward a methodological point on Christian magic that Ra’anana Boustán and I noted in another venue (and that I will develop further in chapter 2): unless there are reasons to think otherwise, elements that appear on a Christian magical artifact that seem to us to reflect diverse religious traditions should be treated as part and parcel of a Christian system.⁹⁸ As I will underscore throughout this study, it is precisely this disjuncture between ancient and scholarly taxonomies that has played a fundamental role in promoting the idea that religious and ritual boundaries were only an “elite” concern; the automatic application of a single term—in this case, “syncretism”—to every instance in which a late antique artifact juxtaposes elements that seemingly represent different ancient “religions” can obfuscate—and has obfuscated—these and other taxonomic issues and, consequently, distorts our vision of late antiquity.

Indeed, attention to questions of taxonomy is not merely useful for addressing a few ritual texts. As I also attempt to show in chapters 2 and 3, the portrait gleaned from the taxonomically focused hermeneutic that orients my analysis also provides insight into the fluctuating dynamics of religious and ritual similarity and difference in late antiquity more generally. In so doing, this approach to symbolic reception and its concomitant results undermines a central methodological tenet in late antique studies—namely, that a single artifact juxtaposing elements that originated in different religious communities (necessarily) signals blurred boundaries or even friendly relations between such communities. As we will see, divine and angelic names that originated in “Hebrew” or “Jewish” contexts could form integral parts of magical texts that bolster or construct ritual purity through harsh invective against the “Jews.” At stake in this analysis is nothing short of our basic conception of the boundaries between religious groups in late antiquity, at least in lived contexts.

Given the focus of my study on questions of religious differentiation, as well as the hermeneutical and historical generality intrinsic to the category “syncretism,” I will limit my use of this term to only those situations in which it is clear or likely that the practitioner *intentionally* played on the foreignness or exoticism of religious differences in his texts, without, of course, implying notions of incoherence or “mere mixture.”⁹⁹ By contrast, I will employ the term “assimilation” to refer to those instances in which the word, divine name, or concept used has (mostly) lost its original meaning for the practitioner as a result of its absorption into a new (dominant) cultural context. This distinction follows in part a methodological schema articulated by the historian of Japanese religion Michael Pye (see discussion in chapter 2).¹⁰⁰

Lived Religion

Though emerging out of earlier French sociological research on *la religion vécue*, the first phase of what might be usefully deemed “lived religion” is often identified with the work of Robert Orsi.¹⁰¹ This initial phase of research on lived religion was focused primarily on North American religious traditions, with particular attention to the everyday practices and rituals of ordinary believers.¹⁰² Subsequent work expanded the analytical scope and highlighted, to a greater degree, personal religious experience,¹⁰³ often framed in contrast to the proscriptions about proper religious behavior and belief of “official” religious institutions.¹⁰⁴ More recent scholarship has, for instance, underscored the role of the body and embodiment¹⁰⁵ and the problems associated with defining “religion” within the context of daily habits, rituals, and the like.¹⁰⁶

In *Ritual Boundaries*, I will use the term “lived religion” in two principal ways, neither of which relies on the elite–non-elite binary. On a general level, I will use this term as a shorthand for what we typically deem “religious” as it relates to issues of daily life in late antiquity.¹⁰⁷ In light of the analytical parameters of the book, I will especially attend to quotidian concerns connected with health, demonic attack, and interpersonal conflict. In this general sense, the late antique artifacts, rituals, and concerns scholars deem magical constitute a subspecies of “lived religion.” On a more specific level, I will draw on scholarship that has disaggregated this term to help identify, clarify, and analyze a range of cultural strategies in everyday existence during late antiquity.

My more specific usage of the rubric “lived religion” is based in large part on the research developed by the project, “Lived Ancient Religion” (LAR), funded by the European Research Council (2012–17). The LAR project was explicitly designed to provide a strong theoretical and methodological grounding to this field of study, with particular attention to evidence from the ancient world (which is important for our purposes). In a series of publications, this group, led by Jörg Rüpke, has offered a new approach to the category “lived religion.” They organized the concept around four key overlapping concepts. First, the team highlighted the category “appropriation,” which they defined as the contextual deployment of

existing cultural elements for individual or group aims.¹⁰⁸ Their second concept was “competence,” which referred to specialized or professional knowledge and skills that could be utilized in a wide range of private and public performative contexts.¹⁰⁹ The third term, “situational meaning,” operated from the assumption that “religious meanings” in antiquity were contextual and thus not contingent on ostensible worldviews.¹¹⁰ Finally, the team underscored “mediality,” which focused on “the roles of material culture, embodiment and group-styles in the construction of religious experience.”¹¹¹

Scholars working within and in express dialogue with the LAR project have made considerable progress in the study of ancient religion, especially as it relates to materiality or “mediality.” For instance, Emma-Jayne Graham’s work on hand votives from mid-Republican Italy has synthesized the research of thinkers, such as Bruno Latour on Actor-Network theory and Oliver Harris and Craig Cipolla on “assemblages” (i.e., how sensory/emotive qualities of material objects merge with human bodies, thoughts, and actions), and has accordingly underscored the ways in which people and “things” become “entangled” within various kinds of dependent relationships.¹¹² As Graham notes:

religion [can be studied] as a form of embodied knowledge which is both produced and “felt” through the lived performance of activities and movements that encompass both the human body and the rest of the material world.¹¹³

Although the four dimensions of lived religion that the LAR team has underscored inform various discussions throughout the book, I frontally engage with their approach—and that of their colleagues, such as Emma-Jayne Graham—in chapters 2 and 3, especially attending to the categories “situational meaning” and “mediality.” These respective dimensions help me assess the question of religious identity among the Christian amulets (chapter 2) and illuminate salient features of the religious experiences that some amuletic rituals engendered (chapter 3).

KEY THEMES AND SOURCES

I will engage with a range of themes and draw from multiple sources—including literary texts and various types of material objects. That said, one motif and one artifact play recurring roles in this book.

The Crucifixion of Jesus

Ancient crucifixion and its derivative symbols have recently become quite fashionable topics in early Christian studies and adjacent disciplines. In addition to a sourcebook of extrabiblical evidence for ancient crucifixion,¹¹⁴ the past decade or so has witnessed the publication of sizable monographs devoted to related topics, including the archaeological and literary evidence for ancient

crucifixion¹¹⁵ and perceptions of the cross and crucifixion in antiquity.¹¹⁶ Collectively, these studies have greatly developed the work of earlier pioneers on the subject, such as Martin Hengel¹¹⁷ and Heinz-Wolfgang Kuhn,¹¹⁸ and have thereby complicated the nature of (Roman) crucifixion—Jesus’s and otherwise—as a historical phenomenon and as a subject of ancient (Christian) imagination and reflection.

Ritual Boundaries places considerable emphasis on the theme of the crucifixion of Jesus for two primary reasons. First, the crucifixion of Jesus—and its contiguous symbols—emerges as one of the main biblical themes used in late antique magic. Again, many late antique ritual experts clearly thought that the crucifixion of Jesus was relevant for their rituals. In chapter 4, which is specifically oriented around the theme of the crucifixion, we will engage with what is probably the most extensive reflection on Jesus’s crucifixion in a so-called magical context: Brit. Lib. Or. 6796(4), 6796 (= ACM 132)—a seventh-century CE Coptic spell for exorcism.¹¹⁹ Indeed, the practitioner creatively engages with the crucifixion on multiple levels: he makes reference to a prayer that Jesus is supposed to have said on the cross, a prayer that juxtaposes details from various sections of the canonical gospels, especially the Gospel of Matthew (including the reference in Matthew’s gospel to the dead coming out of their tombs); he details a conversation between the crucified Jesus and a “unicorn” (*papītap nouōt*), whom Jesus ultimately rebukes and casts away; and he incorporates a drawing of the crucifixion scene into this spell, which includes images of the crucified Jesus and the criminals (who are labeled *Gēstas* and *Dēmas* [cf. *Gospel of Nicodemus* (*Gos. Nic.*) 9:5; 10:2]).¹²⁰ As I will argue in chapter 4, the triumphal presentation of Jesus’s crucifixion in Brit. Lib. Or. 6796(4), 6796 stands in marked contrast to the presentation of a magical jasper gem now housed in the British Museum (BM 1986,0501.1), which includes an image of Jesus on the cross in profile. In my estimation, the violent way Jesus is depicted on this gem is best explained in comparison with the broader restless-dead motif, whereby, among other things, those who had died violently (*bi[ai]othanatoi*) were understood as particularly useful to invoke for magical purposes.

But of course not all practitioners fixated on the crucifixion to the degree found in these two objects. In some cases, the crucifixion could be incorporated into a much broader portrait of the life of Jesus. For instance, several amulets reference the crucifixion as part of their engagement with a creed—whether a preexisting creed or an invented creed. Thus, P.Turner 49 (= *Suppl. Mag.* 31) cites a modified version of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, whereas P.Haun. III 51 (= *Suppl. Mag.* 23), a fifth-century CE Greek amulet (see chapter 3), incorporates the crucifixion into an otherwise unknown creed: “†Christ was born, amen. *Christ was crucified, amen.*¹²¹ Christ was buried, amen. Christ arose, amen.” The ritual efficacy associated with the combination of these elements from the life of Jesus was almost

certainly linked in some way to the authority that practitioners—and presumably also their clients—invested in proclamations of the Christian faith within contemporary liturgical contexts.¹²²

This broader usage of the crucifixion simultaneously hints at the second reason for the emphasis on Jesus's death in this study. The centrality of the crucifixion to early Christian life also meant that Jesus's crucifixion, crosses, and the like carried for the faithful a wide range of valences and penetrated diverse social, visual, and performative contexts. It is not surprising, therefore, that the magical use of the crucifixion intersected at times with different types of boundaries, including the conceptual distinctions between words, images, materials, and gestures (chapters 3 and 4) and the symbolic division between Christians and Jews (chapter 2).

Leiden, Ms. AMS 9

One of the most remarkable magical sources that have come down to us is a sixth- to eighth-century CE Coptic codex that addresses healing, exorcism, and various kinds of protection. It is now known as Leiden, Ms. AMS 9 (a.k.a. P.Anastasy 9; see fig. 1).¹²³ This papyrus codex of fifteen folios (14.5 × 22 cm with a thickness of 5.3 cm),¹²⁴ which is complete with an ornamental leather cover, was originally part of the Anastasi collection; however, it is now housed in the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden. Given its scribe's wealth of knowledge about Christian traditions and his fierce defense of a form of Christian normativity (see chapters 1 and 2), I agree with those scholars who have postulated that this object was created by a monk.¹²⁵ The codex consists of a series of texts, which are written in Sahidic Coptic:¹²⁶ the self-titled *Prayer of Saint Gregory*; an anonymous text, which might be usefully titled, "Hear my exorcism";¹²⁷ the *Letter of Abgar to Jesus*; the *Letter of Jesus to Abgar*; the prayer of Judas Cyriacus from the *Finding of the Holy Cross*;¹²⁸ a list of the names of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus; a list of the names of the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste; the gospel incipits; and LXX Ps 90:1–2.

As we will see throughout this study, the practitioner behind this codex was especially concerned with religious and ritual differentiation. He not only sought to differentiate this object—which he at times calls a *phylaktērion*—from the world of harmful rituals; he also tried to distinguish his brand of Christianity from the "Jews"—alternatively labeled as the "People of Israel." On account of its preoccupation with religious and ritual purity and distinction, this Coptic codex will play a major role in my analysis, figuring prominently in the discussions in chapters 1 and 2. It is also worth noting that its penetration into diverse ritual and religious discourses necessitates that I situate it comparatively not only within the category "magic" (see chapter 2), but also within that of "religion," especially in my analysis of harmful ritual in chapter 1 (see discussion of magic above).



FIGURE 1. Coptic magical handbook. Leiden, Ms. AMS 9. Courtesy of the National Museum of Antiquities, Leiden (Netherlands). Creative Commons Use.

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

Ritual Boundaries is divided into four chapters that are organized into two partly overlapping sections. In part I (“The Discursive Boundaries of Rituals and Groups”), I treat the discursive boundaries between good and evil rituals (chapter 1), on the one hand, and those between Christians and Jews, on the other (chapter 2). This section makes one of the principal claims of the book—namely, that late antique Christians from diverse social strata often drew hard-and-fast distinctions between proper and improper rituals and between Christians and religious Others in their quotidian rituals; however, they understood those boundaries in ways that did not always match late antique literary and modern scholarly taxonomies.

Part II (“The Discursive Boundaries of Texts and Traditions”) emphasizes the boundaries operative within the ritual itself and across authoritative traditions. In chapter 3, I examine the interface of words, images, things, and bodies on a collection of magical objects, which range from a set of artifacts from both Christians

and Jews that incorporate MT Ps 91:1 (= LXX Ps 90:1) to a late antique papyrus amulet that seems to prescribe the ritual gesturing of the cross. I trace the ways in which these magical objects would have merged human bodies with material artifacts and sacred text. Chapter 4 addresses the relationship between magic and tradition in quotidian life, investigating two opposing perspectives toward a specific authoritative tradition: the crucifixion of Jesus. One object envisions Jesus's death as the ultimate manifestation of God's power over death itself, while the other numbers the crucified Jesus among the restless dead.

Ritual Boundaries draws from materials I have published in other venues: chapter 1 is a modified version of an article from *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* (2019); chapter 2 significantly develops and expands ideas I have published both independently and with Ra'anan Boustan;¹²⁹ and chapter 4 draws on some of my conclusions from an article published in *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* (2015). Although some of the materials found in this book were published previously in different contexts, the overall portrait painted in the chapters of *Ritual Boundaries* addresses a consistent theme that is fundamental to our reconstructions of late antiquity; this book unearths a late antique world, in which the drawing, managing, policing, and reimagining of boundaries between and among groups, rituals, traditions, texts, objects, and even bodies was at the forefront of quotidian religion. What emerges from the following pages is a religious landscape oriented around everyday concerns that is both familiar and foreign to our sensitivities—sometimes expected, sometimes exotic, sometimes disturbing.