

This is the first page only. On how to acquire the full article please click this link.

Another view of the Pergamon divination kit

Richard Gordon

It is very welcome that A. Mastrocinque (above) has re-opened the dossier relating to the Pergamon *Zaubergerät*, first published by R. Wünsch almost a century ago.¹ The discovery in 1977 of a very similar 'triangle' in the Maison du Cerf at Apamea seemed to confirm Wünsch's account of the kit as the equipment required to perform a type of divination very similar to that described in Hilarius' confession relating to the séance of A.D. 371.² My remarks are not directly concerned with the possible theurgic background of the Pergamon kit, though I admit I am rather sceptical of it.³ I wish rather to take the opportunity to reconsider the kit as a whole, in the light of the find from Apamea.

The problem is easily outlined. Rhetorically, Wünsch's commentary leads up to a kind of revelation, the disclosure of the true sense of the kit as whole. In the last major section of his account, Wünsch discussed each object in turn, noting the use of similar objects in diverse magical contexts.⁴ For his interpretation the crucial apparatus was the inscribed disc, which has 24 fields in the three outer circles, that is, the number of letters in the Greek alphabet. That implied an alphabet-oracle, and it was then easy to point to Ammianus' already famous report. It is his story of the 'wizard at work' that caught the imagination of his readers, the story of the polished stones used as protective amulets, the ring hung from the nail over the circular disc, which was moved by the handle to create words or sentences from the signs inscribed on its surface. But if one looks closely at the disc, it is very difficult (indeed, in my view impossible) to credit that it could have served as an alphabet-oracle or anything similar. If so, does the disc belong to the triangular support at all? Can the other appliances be understood differently from the way Wünsch suggested? My argument is that we might read much of his own commentary as undercutting the final disclosure that depends so heavily on Hilarius, and that we should revert to his own initial conception of an *ensemble*, a group of instruments with a variety of ritual uses. Indeed, there are reasons for thinking that the individual items were not conceived as a group, but rather assembled over time from various sources as a collection. I incline to understand the *ensemble* as not so much a 'kit' as a rag-bag collection.

The function of the disc

For Wünsch, the key item was the circular disc (fig. 1). My question is: how convincing is the belief that it could have been used to yield an alphabet-oracle or something similar? There is no mystery about Hilarius' disc: it carried the letters of the Greek alphabet at measured intervals round the rim.⁵ Everyone present was able to watch the ring spelling out ΘΕΟ-. The doubt arose about who was intended. But the Pergamon disc is quite different, and Wünsch

-
- 1 I am grateful to Attilio Mastrocinque for asking me to look through his original essay and thereby renewing my interest in the *Zaubergerät*, which long ago I had given up as impenetrable; and to the editor for forcing me to shorten an almost equally impenetrable manuscript. I also thank I. Trabert (Antikensammlung, Berlin) for sending me photographs of the kit taken by I. Geske and J. Tietz-Glawog. *PGM* refers to *Papyri Graecae Magicae*, K. Preisendanz and A. Henrichs (edd.) (2nd edn., Stuttgart 1973-74); *PDM* refers to the translations of the Demotic papyri by J. Johnson in H. D. Betz (ed.), *The Greek magical papyri in translation* (2nd edn., Chicago 1992).
 - 2 G. Donnay, "Instrument divinatoire d'époque romaine," in J.-C. Balty (ed.), *Apamée de Syrie: Actes du colloque 1980* (Brussels 1984) 203-9 (I thank M. Martens [Instituut voor het Archeologisch Patrimonium, Tienen] for obtaining me a copy of this article). Hilarius: Amm. Marc. 29.1.28-32.
 - 3 I very much doubt whether the disc can represent the cosmography of the Myth of Er even in a modified manner, and there is no other evidence for alphabet-oracles invoking Hekate.
 - 4 R. Wünsch, *Antikes Zaubergerät aus Pergamon* (JdAI Ergh. 6, 1905) 38-48.
 - 5 Amm. Marc. 29.1.30: *Cuius in ambitu rotunditatis in extremo, elementorum XXIV scriptiles formae incisae perite, diiungebantur spatiis examine dimensis.*