

# ‘She who changes’ (*Amibousa*): a re-examination of the triangular table from Pergamon

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In 1899, A. Conze director of the German excavations at Pergamon, briefly reported the discovery of a cache of 9 very unusual artifacts he described as “Zauberapparat”.<sup>1</sup> Regrettably enough, however, he failed to provide any details regarding the circumstances, location or even the date of the find. R. Wünsch, the first to publish a commentary (1905) on the collection, used letter-form analysis to offer approximate dates for the objects, mostly within the 3rd c. A.D.<sup>2</sup> The artifacts themselves, which are now in the Berlin Antikensammlung,<sup>3</sup> included a 4-sided bronze nail; two bronze rings with *charakteres* engraved on the bronze bevel; two rectangular bronze *lamellae* inscribed with *charakteres* modelled on stone-masons’ monograms *vel sim.*, three smoothed black river stones with identical inscriptions; a bronze convex disk, the surface of which is divided into sectors containing varying numbers of *charakteres* and Greek vowels; and a bronze table, consisting of an equilateral triangular base with a post projecting from the center. Affixed to the other end of the post is a small, unadorned disk.<sup>4</sup>

The table has excited the most scholarly attention of all of these objects largely on account of its decoration (figs. 1a-b and Table 1). In each of the triangle’s corners is a depiction of a goddess, labelled above with an epithet (‘Διώνη’, ‘Φοιβή’, and ‘Νυχίη’) and below with the participle ‘ἀμ(ε)ιβουσα.’ Based on these labels, the figures’ attire (*chiton* and girdle), and the accessories they carry (key, torches, whip, serpent, and sword), the goddesses have been identified as the three aspects of triple Hekate.<sup>5</sup> Magical *charakteres* and an invocation to the goddess, formed predominantly of *voces magicae* and vowel permutations, fill the table’s remaining space. Most scholars have interpreted the Pergamon table as the tool of a practicing magician who might have employed it in rites of personal divination. This paper will investigate the hypothesis that the table might best be understood within the context of Neoplatonic theurgy, and will argue for the table’s use as a base for Hekatic statue animation.

A surprising aspect of the scholarship concerning the Pergamon table is its paucity. In the 110 or so years since the collection’s discovery, only three distinct explanations have been proposed. The first, by Wünsch in his original commentary, considers the collection a *Zaubergerät* owned by a practicing magician and designed for a specific rite: alphabet divination by way of a suspended ring. Using as his template the detailed account of divination by means of a tripod, disk and ring described by Ammianus Marcellinus,<sup>6</sup> Wünsch imag-

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1 Conze and Schuchhardt 1899, 199-200 no. 63. Conze was evidently so uninterested in the cache that he gives an inaccurate list of the objects found (there were two rings, not one), and – no doubt out of embarrassment – claims that only 9 objects, not 10 were found (see n.3 below).

2 Wünsch 1905, 20.

3 The objects are scattered between the Altes Museum, Neues Museum and Pergamon Museum. The inventory numbers are Misc. 8612,1-9 (the table itself is 8612,1). The cache as found contained 10 items, all of which were drawn by E. Pernice. One of the *lamellae*, however, never arrived in Berlin, having been stolen or mislaid, so there are only 9 Museum inventory numbers.

4 For images and discussion of these other objects, see particularly Wünsch 1905, 10-17; Vierniseil 1978, 37-43; Gordon 2002, 188-96; Mastrocinque 2002, 174-76.

5 Wünsch 1905, 22; cf. Petersen 1880, 140.

6 Amm. Marc. 29.129-32. This view is also adopted, *inter alios*, by Vierniseil (1978, 41-42) and © *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 25 (2012)