

Andrew T. Wilburn, *Materia Magica: The Archaeology of Magic in Roman Egypt, Cyprus, and Spain: New Texts from Ancient Cultures*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013. Pp. xvi + 342. ISBN 978-0-472-11779-6. Hardcover, \$80.00.

- [1] Text-critics of the New Testament are repeatedly confronted with the term ‘magic’, with amulets, talismans, spells, charms, incantations and so on; and judgments like ‘used as an amulet’ or ‘from a magical background’ often disqualify archaeological objects as not being useful for NT exegesis and textual criticism. But, of course, there is also the tendency to take such objects, in most cases fragments/manuscripts, seriously (e.g., cf. T.S. de Bruyne, “Papyri, Parchments, Ostraca, and Tablets Written with Biblical Texts in Greek and Used as Amulets”, in: *Early Christian Manuscripts: Examples of Applied Method and Approach* [ed. T.J. Kraus and T. Nicklas; Texts and Editions for New Testament Study 5; Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2010], 145-189, and idem/J.H.F. Dijkstra, “Greek Amulets and Formularies from Egypt Containing Christian Elements”, *BASP* 48 [2011] 163-216).
- [2] Consequently, the book under review is of relevance for textual criticism because Andrew T. Wilburn’s case studies help to shed light on the phenomenon ‘magic’ in a threefold way: the term itself is defined critically, certain categories for archaeological objects are proposed, and specific focus is set on three different locations in the Roman Empire in order to outline practices there (Karanis/Egypt, Amathous/Cyprus, and Empúries/Spain). The book thus outlines a generally applicable background for magical practices and practitioners in the Roman Empire and for the setting of early Christianity and its writings.
- [3] The book started as a seminar paper on “curious bones from the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology at the University of Michigan” (vii). It comes with a foreword (vii-ix), a list of abbreviations (xiii-xvi), a bibliography (287-326), an index of names, places, and topics (327-342), two appendices (273-286), and eighteen pages of images, drawings, maps, and photographs (between 272 and 273). The core part of the book consists of an introduction (1-11) and six main chapters which cover pages 12 to 272.
- [4] In his introduction “Cursing on the Via Appia, Rome” Wilburn writes about excavations along the Via Appia with certain interest in a lead tablet (*DT* no. 155, *CT* no. 13, plate 2). With the help of its description, its texts, and its images he highlights specific issues: first, the tablet tells a story that is not complete without the other lead tablets, other archaeological objects found with it, and the place where it was unearthed. That is usually the case when archaeological artefacts are offered on the antiquities market and nothing else is known about them. Second, excavations were not always done in a scientific way. Much of the data about objects available at the time of their discovery is lost due to the facts that they were never systematically recorded and/or that they simply got lost. But magical texts are not only texts themselves: they play a role in rituals and in practices and actions, i.e., they are “grounded in both the incantation and physical actions” (8). That is why Wilburn describes his aim as follows (8): “This book will focus on this intersection of physicality, materiality, and magic, and will employ archaeology to illuminate the central role that artefacts and their contexts played in ancient ritual practice.” And this consistently leads to “The Scope of the Book” (9-11): Wilburn looks at three geographically and culturally separated locations in the Roman Empire

(Karanis/Egypt, Amathous/Cyprus, and Empúries/Spain) in order to draw overall conclusions from their individual evidence *and* to enlarge our knowledge “of local forms of magical practice” (9), something which he unfolds in more detail later on (“Mediterranean Magic and Local Magic,” 51-53).

- [5] Chapter one (“Finding Magic in the Archaeological Record”) lays the foundation for what is to follow in the next chapters. After a very – and too – brief survey of scholarly work on the phenomenon of ‘magic’ Wilburn provides a working definition (15): “1. Magic was firmly grounded in ritual actions, including spoken or written words and the manipulation of objects. These rituals typically are performed with the expectation of a particular result. 2. Magic may draw on religious traditions for both efficacy and exoticism. 3. Magic is frequently a private or personal activity, although certain practices might be undertaken in the public sphere.” This descriptive definition is sound but the issue of ideology – magic being regarded as a manifestation of primitive religion and the polarity between orthodox and heretic, i.e., magic, practices – falls short. (See J.N. Bremmer, “The birth of the term ‘magic’,” *ZPE* 126 [1999] 1-12, who is cited in the bibliography and offers intriguing facts.) Especially in Christian theology it is still a problem that everything determined as ‘magic’ is simultaneously branded as syncretistic, primitive, naïve, or despicable in some scholarly publications. On the other side there is pure tradition, orthodoxy, and idealized Christian practice. Of course, we know today that reality did not distinguish between good or bad, true or false, and right and wrong that easily and that history is always written by the winning side.

Be that as it may, Wilburn distinctly cites major authors, makes use of the *Papiri Graecae Magicae* (*PGM*), ponders about the indefinability of magical practice in the Roman Empire due to the massive total amount of published tablets alone and the diversity of practices attested, and – to some extent laboriously and long-windedly – presents his “object-centered approach” (15), i.e., the investigation into an object and its biography.

- [6] In chapter two (“Materia Magica,” 54-94) Wilburn develops categories or classes of magical material: 1) inscribed objects (65-74), 2) images and figurines (74-83), 3) plants, animals, and natural ingredients (83-90), and 4) household objects, repurposed for magical use (90-93). All in all, he focuses on the practitioners’ perspectives and actions, speculates about the potential reconstruction of rituals, and concludes that his categories work for the whole Mediterranean and not only for the three test sites. Interesting and useful is his distinction between outsiders (poets, historians, and philosophers), those who wrote about magic, and insiders, those “who were actively engaged in ritual practices that we can identify as magic” (57).

- [7] Chapter three is about “Identifying the Remains of Magic in the Village of Karanis” (94-168), so to speak the first geographical test-case or archaeological site. Of course, Greek and Demotic magical papyri are utilized to draw a picture of ritual activity and practices in Karanis in the Egyptian Fayum oasis. Here Wilburn narrows the focus on specific and individual events and people (for instance, a certain Gemellus [*P.Mich.* VI 422-425], Kellis in the Dakleh oasis, and Karanis itself). A history of excavations at Karanis and some striking findings there relevant to the book’s topic, above all a fever amulet (*P.Mich.* XVIII 768 = *P.Mich.inv.* 5302a), an ostrakon (*O.Mich.* II 903 = *O.Mich.inv.* 9883), a mud figurine, and painted bones, are all proofs of Wilburn’s skill to demonstrate how we can benefit from a meticulous contextual analysis of such

objects and their settings. Rather short and vague is Wilburn's treatment of (il)literacy and gender in relation to magical practices (165-166), though it is not the core issue of the book and thus there should not be expected more from a book that focusses on three geographical test-cases and definitions and categories of magic.

- [8] Chapter four is similarly structured although its headline promises a slightly different perspective ("Practitioners and Craft at Amathous, Cyprus," 169-218); and rightly so. For Amathous we lack magical papyri which we can relate to what is expressed and proved by texts on other materials and objects. Again Wilburn singles out specific items and demonstrates what we can learn from them when they are contextualized (above all, [curse] tablets). In general, there the practitioners at Amathous almost turn into flesh and blood, their and the tablets' social context becomes more concrete than ever.
- [9] Chapter five is the third test-case: Empúries on the eastern coast of Spain is the last geographical region under discussion ("Three Curses from Empúries and Their Social Implications," 219-253). Again tablets form the centre of interest. Some tablets demonstrate that there was a kind of interaction with the dead and (slight) resistance to Roman rule (in Spain).
- [10] Chapter six offers a(nother) summary of the previous studies in the volume ("The Archaeology of Magic," 254-272). Wilburn's reflections on method, dangers and pitfalls, the importance of archaeology, the relevance of local contexts in relation to the Mediterranean as a whole, and his turning back to the starting point of the book, the Via Appia, round off what the author developed, demonstrated, and designed as a framework for studying the phenomenon 'magic'.
- [11] The black-and-white plates are nice little helpers to visualize what Wilburn has been talking about throughout his brilliant book: a map with Karanis, Amathous, and Empúries, line drawings and photographs of tablets, painted bones, archaeological plans (reconstructions of Karanis), a papyrus, an ostrakon, a wall-painting, rolled lead sheets on suspension cord, selenite tablets, urns etc.
- [12] As a kind of bonus Wilburn offers two appendices, one about "The Excavations at Karanis" (275-283), its history, and its digging layers, and another with a detailed list of "Bones from Karanis Areas 262 and 265" (284-286).
- [13] Andrew T. Wilburn is to be thanked for taking over the demanding task of working in detail on magical objects from three geographically and culturally different archaeological sites. He draws attention to materials and objects that many scholars working on the phenomenon of 'magic' overlook or even ignore as not relevant evidence. It is to be hoped that this book will be another step towards an unideological and unbiased understanding and treatment of magical objects; these are unique archaeological artefacts and must be cherished as such. A marvellous book with individual meticulous studies of fascinating objects!

Thomas J. Kraus
Neumarkt i.d.OPf./Germany