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Magical Medicine and "Analogical Thinking"

This paper argues that magico-religious healers made conscious use of magical metaphor, or "analogical thinking" as Tambiah calls it, to reassure patients that their medicines were endowed with the virtues of powerful gods and animals, while they themselves had a different understanding of how the therapies worked. Such a possibility is suggested by PGM 12.401-444 (Preisendanz), which states that scribes gave code names to "the plants and other things they use" (*tas botanas kai ta al[l]a hois echrnto [sc. hoi hierogrammateis]*, 403), to prevent laymen from harming themselves by mispracticing magic. It is striking that in every one of the 37 cases the code name denotes a substance derived from a human, animal, or god (e.g., Hestia's blood, 427; hawk's blood, 438) - precisely the sort of ingredient considered the hallmark of "irrational" magical remedies - whereas only six of the ingredients the priests actually used were of that sort, the rest being mineral and botanical (the latter is indeed emphasized in the line quoted). Animal substances are associated with magical medicine because they do not usually have a noticeable biochemical effect on the body. Their therapeutic value is assumed to be primarily emotional or spiritual, and to arise from the ritual metaphors in which they play a part (their divine equivalents having, of course, an even greater symbolic value). By contrast, in Hippocratic and other traditions viewed as (proto-)scientific, we expect few such substances, and a reliance instead on botanical pharmaceuticals, as these may have a significant biochemical effect on the body. The Papyrus passage, however, suggests that magico-religious healers had an understanding of the therapeutic value of magical analogical thinking that is similar to our own and, secondly, that their pharmacopia may not have been radically different from that of "rational" healers.

Dioscorides's *On Pharmacy* provides evidence for this last point. The text we have includes synonyms for the medicinal plants - later additions to the text that provide us with plant identities in more than a dozen languages, dialects, and systems of nomenclature. It is worth noting that when synonyms refer to animal or divine substances as alternate names for plants, it is often magicians, priests, or other quasi-religious figures (such as the Pythagoreans) who are listed as the source. The following are examples of alternate names for various plants: "man's blood" (3.127), "hair of a dog's head" (3.67), "blood of an eye" (2.209; cf. "blood from an eye" used of tamarisk gall at PGM 12.421).

The regularity with which magico-religious healers gave the names of animal substances (and their divine counterparts) as synonyms for botanical ones suggests that they had a conscious understanding of the therapeutic value to their patients of magical analogical thinking, as well as an awareness of the harm that could come to them if they used botanical substances without the requisite expertise. This paper does not suggest that magico-religious healers were utter rationalists who thought that the divine played no part in healing; they may well have believed, for instance, that the gods empowered them and the medicines they employed. But the evidence cited makes it apparent that their understanding of both magical practice and practical botany had a stronger rational foundation than that for which they are generally credited.