

Working Wonders with Words

Language and Power in the Pre-Modern World
between Religion, Magic and Medicine
Scientific Network 2024–2027

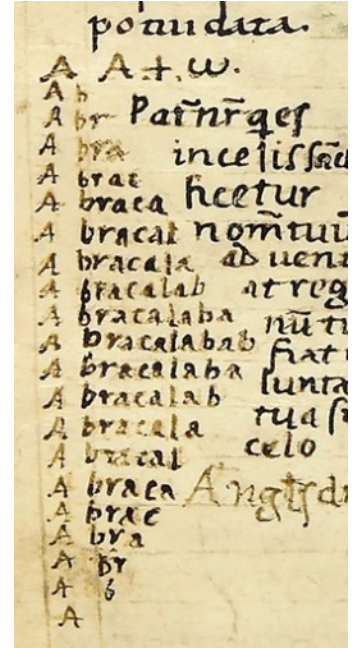


Thematic design and research question

In pre-modern religious, magical, and medical traditions, considerable power is attributed to the *word*. Written and spoken words are used in attempts to heal and cast spells. Language is believed to work miracles. Gods are worshipped with uttering words, and power is wielded in spells and writing. Many cultures know rites in which ritualists use words and characters in an attempt to change reality.

At the intersections of religion, medicine, and magic, the interdisciplinary academic network scrutinizes the cultural paradigms regarding the power of language and writing that underly the word-magical ideas of pre-modern societies. The aim is to examine, according to the sources, how the supernatural effect of words, language, and writing comes about. Which principles of efficacy can be identified as universal or unique?

The field of investigation extends from the earliest testimonies to the early modern period. Furthermore, we understand the reference to current discourses on coping with crises as a central field of activity. As is evident from their current reception in art and culture, some word-magical principles, practiced for millennia, have not lost their power of fascination to this day. The desire to influence supernatural forces seems to be based on anthropological constants, such as wondering about the future, the safeguarding of health and material goods as well as the longing for love and the fear of death.



Schwundschemata, Apuleius, *Herbarius*, Lucca, Biblioteca Statale, Ms. 296, fol. 15v. (Detail)

Form of work and intended results

The object of research is jointly analyzed from the perspective of diverse academic disciplines: Medieval German Studies, Religious Studies, Ancient Oriental Studies, Egyptology, Islamic Studies, Jewish Studies, Christian Liturgical Studies, Ancient Philology (Greek/Latin Studies), and History of Medicine. The aim is to achieve synergy effects and create new theoretical approaches. Methodologically, we strive for material-based research, targeting texts and artifacts that give insight into guiding principles of premodern medicinal and religious practices, such as amulets or roles that form part of the practice themselves or instructive and literary texts that reflect such practices.

The broadly based approach in terms of subject and time allows for eliciting overall anthropological constants: What difficulties did people try to solve with the help of words, language, and writing? How do people imagine the hoped-for effect? Where are the commonalities and differences of word-magical potency regarding diverse religious, magical, and medical traditions?

The analyses developed under this focus will also reflect on modern discourses, practices, and questions that have interested men from early on – since humans began to use language and script to distinguish themselves from other living beings and to exercise power over them.

Workshops: **May 2024**, University of Marburg, „Materialität: magisch wirksame Schrifträger“; **Nov. 2024** University of Basel, "Performativity / Ritual / Formulas / Language"; **Apr. 2025**, University of Leipzig, "Self-Empowerment and Legitimation"; **Nov. 2025**, University of Hamburg, Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies, „Wirkprinzipien“; **Apr. 2026** HAB Wolfenbüttel, "Knowledge / History of Knowledge / Theory / Natural Science / Philosophy of Nature“; **Nov. 2026** University of Greifswald, "Terminology (Magic / Religious practice)" (working titles)



Samaritanisches Heilamulett, Freiburg/Fribourg, Bibel+Orient Museum, VT 2001.1



Zauberschale mit Lilith, Cannes, Musée des explorations du monde, 2008.0.229

Organisation: Prof. Dr. Tina Terrahe (Greifswald), PD Dr. Katja Triplett (Marburg/Leipzig), Dr. Falk Quenstedt (Greifswald)

Gefördert durch

DFG Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft



Wort – Wirkung – Wunder



Medical Humanities

UNIVERSITÄT GREIFSWALD
Wissen lockt. Seit 1456

