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The Magic of Words in Incantations Against “Nezhit”¹

Abstract

This study examines several incantations against the disease known as “nezhit”, focusing on the pronunciation of sacred words as a primary method of healing the sick. The connection between these incantations and prayers against this disease, found mainly in various medieval books of both liturgical and apocryphal nature, is also explored.

Keywords: nezhit, incantation, magic, folklore

The definition of the concept of “nezhit”² is in order. According to Bulgarian

¹ The author expresses gratitude for the financial support of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences within the framework of the research cooperation agreement between BAS and the ZRS SAZU Institute of Slovenian Literature and Literary Studies.

² For a more detailed discussion on etymology, see Тодорова 2024: 24 – 25. See also the Online Dictionary of the Bulgarian Language [online] <https://ibl.bas.bg/rbe/lang/bg/%D0%BD%D0%B5%D0%B6%D0%B8%D1%82/> [seen 21.02.2025]. In addition to the magical incantations presented in this study, the volume on “Collections of Folk tales, Science and Literature” (СБНУКН 1891: 97) includes a honey-based remedy against “nezhit”, recorded by Ginchov from the Tarnovo region under the title “Healing nezhit with honey”. The text first defines what “nezhit” is: “Nizhit (nezhit) is the name given to the disease that appears on the gums around the teeth, causing sores on the gums, loosening of the teeth, and, if not treated in time, leading to the deterioration of the teeth and leaving the person toothless. In some cases, it even damages the jaws”. [„Нижитъ (нежитъ) наричатъ тая болестъ, която се появява на вѣнциитѣ около зѣбитѣ, отъ която се разранѣйтъ вѣнциитѣ, разклацатъ се зѣбитѣ и, ако не се излѣкува съ време, разваля на челоувѣка зѣбитѣ и го оставя безъ зѣби, а на нѣкои имъ поврѣжда и челюститѣ“]. Next, the method of treating “nezhit” is described: “Nezhit is treated with honey in the following way: old honey, aged for at least a year, is used. It is heated until it thickens, and with clean cotton, a small amount of the hot honey is taken and applied to the affected gums twice a day – morning and evening. After application, the honey is left on the gums to cleanse them. Some also mix a small amount of ammonium

folk beliefs, “nezhit” is a disease of the gums that leads to tooth loosening and loss, jaw damage, redness, pain, swelling, burning, and bleeding of the gums. In medieval Christian literature, dental diseases include ailments affecting the head, often characterized by severe headaches. However, the symptoms of “nezhit” are also interpreted as signs of mental illnesses, as descriptions of demons “warring in the head” appear in the sources as well: these symptoms are commonly associated with possession by evil forces in accordance with Christian beliefs. Tsonkova identifies parallels in descriptive features between the “nezhit” and various ancient, Jewish, and Slavic female demons responsible for diseases: Lilith, Gilu, Abizu, Antaura (Tsonkova 2012: 421 – 423)³.

Healing practices against “nezhit” are found both in oral incantations and written sources containing apocryphal prayers. They are mainly found in manuscripts of a liturgical nature and in apocryphal collections from the 13th to 19th centuries. A significant aspect of protective material objects is the presence of spells against “nezhit” inscribed on lead amulets worn by individuals. According to K. Popkonstantinov (Попконстантинов 2009: 341 – 345; Попконстантинов 2012: 101 – 112; Попконстантинов 2014: 288 – 302), such amulets have been discovered among epigraphic monuments in medieval cities and fortresses, such as in Pliska, Preslav, Pernik, Krän (Kazanlāk region), Pet Mogili (Shumen region), the Pakuiul lui Soare fortress and others. Apocryphal prayers against “nezhit” documented in manuscripts also serve as a source for spreading these practices within Slavic literatures. While conducting an archaeographic review of medieval written manuscripts, Levshina (Левшина 2016: 152 – 153) records the preserved entries of “nezhit” in 46 Slavic-Russian manuscripts from the 13th to the 19th centuries, containing a total of 152 prayers. She notes the first appearance of these prayers in a 13th-century manuscript. This 13th-century manuscript is preserved in the Russian State Library under the shelf mark Grig. 35 and contains five prayers against “nezhit” on folios 16b to 20. A second earliest recorded source for prayers against “nezhit” is a 14th-century manuscript, kept in the Russian National Library under the shelf mark Q.п.І.24, with six prayers against “nezhit” on folios 25b to 27. The disease and its treatment are also mentioned in so-called *dieteticon*s, which contain calendar-based medical prescriptions introduced to Bulgaria through Byzantine literature (Тодорова 2024b: 123 – 130).

Verbal magic⁴ operates through oral or written sound patterns, relying on their

chloride (sal ammoniac) into the honey”. [„нежитятъ го цѣрьжатъ съ мѣдъ, по слѣдния начинъ: нагѣрватъ старъ мѣдъ, който е пристоялъ поне една година, сгроцияватъ го, и съ чистъ памукъ зематъ отъ горещия мѣдъ и паръжатъ волнитѣ вѣнци по два пѣтя прѣвъ дня – сутрина и вечеръ. И, като ги обмазватъ, оставятъ ги съ меда да ги чисти. Нѣкои смѣсватъ въ меда и по-малко нишадъръ“.]

³ More specifically, for the connection between Antaura and “nezhit”, see Попконстантинов 2012: 101 – 112.

⁴ The theoretical concepts of verbal magic and disease in Bulgarian folk culture are developed by Georgiev (Георгиев 1982: 54 – 70; Георгиев 2007a; Георгиев 2007b; Георгиев 2013: 7 – 64).

supernatural power and effect. Verbal spells are almost the sole primary source used in pagan, Christian and early modern Bulgarian magical practices. I share Mladenov's opinion (Младенов 1980: 97) that incantations constitute a healing magical ritual that directly influences natural forces and phenomena and is not meant to be understood by people. If it were, its healing power would be lost. As noted by Georgiev, "incantations are short folkloric magical texts intended to heal or protect a person from a disease" (Георгиев 2016: 440). Similarly, Todorova-Pirgova (Тодорова-Пиргова 2003: 67) identifies five variations of ritual speech, to which incantations belong, based on their linguistic elements and communicative function: monologic formulas (either extended or condensed), ritual dialogues, ritual sounds and onomatopoeia, ritual silence, and mixed forms. Studies on this topic have been conducted by Shniter (ШНИТЕР 2001: 12), as well as Toporkov (Топорков 2005: 12 – 23) and Agapkina (Агапкина 2010: 9 – 15), and therefore will not be explored in depth here. Incantations are aimed at preserving health, protecting against the devil and natural forces, and serving to attract success and good fortune (Tsonkova 2014: 73).

A state-of-the-art on the topic is provided by Schniter (ШНИТЕР 2001: 12), Toporkov (Топорков 2005: 12 – 23) and Agapkina (Агапкина 2010: 9 – 15), and, therefore, will not be addressed here.

This study aims at describing the functionalities of the "magic" of sacred words in the healing of the sick through incantations against the disease "nezhit". In addition, an examination of possible links between these incantations, lead amulets inscribed with spells, and prayers against this disease found in liturgical books and apocryphal collections (13th – 19th century), is presented.

Some of the incantations against the disease "nezhit" were collected and included as early as the late 19th and the early 20th century. They are included in the so-called "Collections of Folk Tales, Science, and Literature", a Bulgarian periodic scholarly publication, which circulated during the period of 1889 to 2002⁵.

The first incantation against "nezhit"⁶ comes from the Sofia region and was recorded by Boyadzhiev in Bulgarian language⁷:

⁵Originally conceived as an ethnographic publication, the "Collections of Folk Tales, Science, and Literature" (СБНУНК) initially had an encyclopaedic character. Until volumes 16 – 17 (1900), it was divided into three sections: a scholarly section, a literary section, and a folklore section (including beliefs, customs, tales, songs, incantations, recorded in the respective dialect). The scholarly section published materials from all fields of science, while the literary section primarily featured fiction and literary criticism. After volumes 16 – 17, the scholarly section was reorganized into distinct categories – historical-philological and folklore studies, state sciences and natural sciences. From volume 27 onward, the collection took on a distinctly folklore-ethnographic focus. The founder and chief editor until 1902 was Prof. Dr. Ivan Shishmanov, with additional editorial contributions by Atanas Iliev (until 1893) and Dimitar Matov (until 1896). After 1902, the publication was managed by a committee.

⁶СБНУНК 1894: 89.

⁷All incantations are recorded in Bulgarian.

<p>„Червелниче, опалниче, Не черви са, не бружи са, Като курва на пазар, – Дребна риба едеше, Рейно вино пиеше; До ште Нона басмарка, Газем ште та погледна, С пета ште та притапка, Та штат болезни повена, Повена и посана; Като цвете откаснато, Като сено откосено, Като риба утровена, Та штат са болезни разне, Като сестри по маже, Като брате по делба, та штат ути ф пусто горе, Ф пусто горе талелейско, Дека петел не пеие, дека моми оро не играат, Там има и да пииш, И да едеш. У таа Мариина нема Ни да едеш, ни да пиеш, Че је миром миросана, Кжрстом, кжрстосана, Богу предадена, с темиан прекадена, Куманене, дамене, Дванаесе пръастоле. Това до лъак да доде. Да олекне, да облагне, като майчино пресно млеко“.</p>	<p>“Little Worm, Little Fire, You are neither worms nor bugs, Like a whore at the market – Eating small fish, drinking Rhine wine. But now, Nona the Charmer, As soon as I look at your ass, Will press you down with her heel, And the sickness shall fade, Shall fade and vanish. Like a plucked flower, Like freshly cut hay, Like a poisoned fish, So shall the sickness disperse, Like sisters divided by men, Like brothers parting over an inheritance. It shall leave for the empty forest, The empty, desolate Talelei forest, Where no rooster crows, Where no folk dance. There, you may drink, There, you may eat. But here, in this Mary’s place, You shall neither eat nor drink, that she is anointed with oil, Crossed with the holy cross, Given to God, Incensed with frankincense. <i>Kumanene, damene</i>⁸, Twelve sacred thrones. This will lead to healing, Let relief come, let healing come, Like a mother’s fresh milk”.</p>
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This incantation is performed when someone suffers from gum pain. The afflicted person lies on the ground in such a way, that the affected jaw is positioned upward, and the healer (*bayačka*) steps on it with her heel. As noted by Georgiev (Георгиев 2016: 441), in this incantation, eating and drinking symbolize a prosperous life. The healer confronts the disease, subduing it with her gaze and heel, banishing it to a desolate place (a popular *topos*), where it will be unable to eat or drink, ensuring the patient’s protection. Regarding this incantation, Shniter (Шнитер 2001: 43) highlights the role of the intermediary – the healer – who acts as a ritual figure (“Nona the Charmer”).

The second incantation was recorded by Stanchev, a teacher from the Kotel re-

⁸ Most likely, the Christian saints-healers Cosmas and Damian are meant.

gion⁹. According to the recorded ritual, the healer (*bayačka*) prepares the following ceremonial objects: three dried cow dung pieces, an axe, a green bowl filled with spring water, and a black cloth. She instructs the sick person to place their head on their knees, covers them with the black cloth, takes the axe¹⁰ and with its blade begins to mimic chopping at the afflicted areas while reciting the following:

<p>„Гржгнжл и низитьо и низитницжтж, тжтжну и тжтжницжтж, тж сж тржгнжли пу пжтиштж и пу друмиштж, когу де срешнжли, когу де стигнжли, тж му влезли в глжватж, тж ву влезли в устатж, тж му влезли в зжбити, тж му влезли ф чульжстити, тж гу нж пустельж пуложили, тж си пишти динья, нуштья. Утгуварьж Бужа Маикж Бугуродицж: „ої ви ваїзи, бужи ангьжли, ку мж пувикжїти бабж Пондьювж бжснжтаркжтж, дж гу сиче с брадвжтж, дж гу кжди с гувежду лжїно, дж гу испжди из чульжстити й, дж иди ф пугу гори тилїлеїску, дету кукувицж ни кукувж, дету хухлувицж ни хухлувж, дету пжун пїра не ржстржсьж, дету черквж ни клепи, там дж свьатувж, там дж вечувж“.</p>	<p>“He set off and left <i>nezhit-man</i> and <i>nezhit-woman</i>, and, <i>rumble-man</i> and <i>rumble-woman</i> and they went on their way, both on the roads and on the paths. Wherever they met someone, wherever they reached, they entered his head, they entered his mouth, they entered his teeth, they entered his jaw, and they laid him down in the bed, he spent both day and night there. The Divine Mother, the Holy Virgin, said: “Oh, you angels, go to my servant and call upon the old woman <i>baba Pondjuva basnatarkata</i>, the wise one, to strike him with an axe, to burning a beef shit, to expel him from his jaws, to take him into the empty wilderness, where the cuckoos do not sing, where the owls do not hoot, where a peacock no shakes its feathers, where no church bells ring, there, to belong to the world, there, he will endure forever”.</p>
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According to the classification of Todorova-Pirgova, this represents a monologic expanded formula. This opinion is also shared by Shniter (Шнитер 2001: 41). Nikolov (Николов 2022: 161 – 162) also mentions a similar incantation, but for a headache (“opal”), recorded in 1900 in the Osenets village, Razgrad region, and published by Todorova-Pirgova. The demon enters the human body and causes suffering. The magician tries to expel it from the human body using conjuration. The ritual objects are almost identical: three pieces of dried ox dung and three stems of the herb “*vrbalitsa*” to “burn” the patient. The incantation, repeated three times, goes as follows:

⁹ СБНУНК 1897: 101 – 102.

¹⁰ Regarding the use of sharp cutting tools (axe, knife) in the expulsion of “*nezhit*”, see: Петканова 2001: 70 – 71; Агапкина 2010: 144 – 145; Todorova 2023: 1 – 13; Тодорова 2024: 17 – 19.

<p>„Излази, Врбаличе, из глава, из очи, из нос; из зъби, из уста, из език; из ръце, из крака, из стомах. Как е Великден убав ден, така и човеко да е убав. Помогни му да се излекува! А ти иди у писти гори! Тамо ще убаво намериш. Тамо гори високи, тамо ливади големи, Тамо вода студена. до насита ще пиеш, Жив ще живееш. Остави <i>Иван</i> и си иди!</p>	<p>“Go out, <i>Vrbaliche</i>, out of the head, out of the eyes, out of the nose; out of the teeth, out of the mouth, out of the tongue; out of the hands, out of the feet, out of the stomach. As Easter is a beautiful day, so may the person be beautiful. Help him to heal! And you go to the wild forests! There you will find beauty. There are high mountains, there are vast meadows, There is cold water. You will drink your fill, You will live long. Leave <i>Ivan</i> and go!”</p>
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The connection between “headache” and “nezhit” is particularly evident in Bulgarian written apocryphal prayers¹¹, which have their Byzantine parallels. The oldest known works of white magic today are the Assyrian spells from the 7th century BC, written on clay tablets with cuneiform writing. Assyrian prayers and spells were disseminated across Palestine, Egypt and Asia Minor, where they were adapted to the respective environment. During the early Christian era, they were Christianized, on the basis of already existing Byzantine adaptation (Попконстантинов 2012: 108 – 111; Miltenov 2022: 20 – 22; Тодорова 2024: 16). This connection between the “nezhit” and a headache is also visible in an incantation for swollen gums and headache for a 14-year-old girl from the Ralitsa village, Targovishte region, performed by a 70-year-old healer from the Daoutlar village (now Davidovo), who, seeing that it is a “nezhit”, cuts marks on a short-peeled twig, while uttering unclear incantations. In the end, he makes a cloth heart amulet, in which he sews a paper scroll with a prayer against “nezhit” and

¹¹ The study of these prayers began in the second half of the 19th century with Buslaev (Буслаев 1861: 115 – 116). Research conducted in the late 19th, early 20th century by Almazov (Алмазов 1900; Алмазов 1901) and Porfir'ev (Порфирьев 1891) described and published a core collection of the prayers against “nezhit” known at that time. Additionally, in the early 20th century, numerous texts were published in manuscript catalogs, primarily by Sprostranov (Спространов 1900) and Tsonev (Цонев 1910; Цонев 1923). When the prayers against “nezhit” are discussed, they are generally classified as apocryphal literature, as they were included in the Index of Forbidden Books established by the Nicene Council in 325 AD (see Петканова 2001: 62; Левшина 2022: 86). A detailed review dedicated to the discussion of the generic nature of these prayers is reflected in the works of Maria Schniter (Шнитер 2001: 24 – 25) and Danko Georgiev (Георгиев 2016b: 231 – 236).

the name of the sick person (Овчаров 2006: 195; Николов 2022: 162).

The repetitiveness of the utterance aims to imbue the action with magic. Characteristic of this type of prayer is the dialogue. This version, which includes a dialogue between “nezhit” and the Holy Virgin/Jesus Christ, is known from numerous Slavic medieval manuscript sources. Both in this incantation and in the apocryphal prayers, the illness “enters” the head, mouth and jaws. According to Nikolov (Николов 2022: 161), this incantation represents a “free paraphrase of the first and second of the five prayers against “nezhit” from the TSIAM №438¹². It should be noted that most apocryphal prayers are in dialogue form, conducted between the illness and a Christian figure. Some of them are also found on lead tablets, dated to the 9th to 11th centuries (Тодорова 2024: 9 – 36). The sending of “nezhit” to the forest or the desolate mountain shows the clear division of the world into two: tamed and wild, clean and unclean, familiar and foreign. This division is characteristic of the traditional and medieval worldview¹³. According to Petkanova (Петканова 2001: 64), incantations and apocryphal prayers overlap on this topos.

In another incantation against “nezhit”, the illness is driven far into the “Til-leles’ forest, Talalei forest, Galilean forest” [*Гора Тилелейска*]. It is described by Todorova-Pirgova in her study “Bajane and Magic” (2003). The material originates from the Barziya village, Mihaylovgrad region, 1983, and is recorded by Todorova. The healer performs the following steps consecutively. A white feather¹⁴ from an old duck is taken. The healer holds it in her right hand and gently waves it simultaneously with the recital of the verbal text from right to left in front of the sick person’s face. The text is repeated three times. At the end, the feather is thrown over the sick person’s head, and they leave without turning back, throwing a gift (usually iron coins) at the healer’s door as they exit. The incantation can also be performed outside, in which case the gift is left near a stone, but still on the ground. The incantation sounds as follows:

¹² Prayer-book – composite manuscript, dated between the second half of the 18th and the third quarter of the 19th century, is kept in the Church-Historical and Archives Institute at the Bulgarian Patriarchate.

¹³ There is another incantation, where the illness (“nephela” – when a person feels dizzy and falls) is also sent to the desolate forests (for more information, see Тодорова-Пиргова 2003: 442, n. 627).

¹⁴ The bird feather is one of the main objects used by the fortune teller in the ritual. It is used to restore the sick human body (Георгиев 2007: 199).

<p>„Айде, Нежо, със мене! Каним те с руйно вино, и с желта бъклица, и с бела погача. Там да те водим в гора Галилейска. Там има златна трапеза, Златни лужици, златни паници. Тамо е место за тебе. Тамо, дето кукавица не кука И мандра не се сече. Там да седиш, Там да си къща праиш“.</p>	<p>“Come, <i>Nezho</i>, with me! We invite you with strong wine, and with a yellow jug, and with a white loaf of bread. There, we will lead you to the Galilean forest. There is a golden table, Golden spoons, golden bowls. There is a place for you. There, where the cuckoo does not sing And the dairy is not cut. There, you will sit, There, you will make a house”.</p>
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“Nezho” is used as a direct address to the disease, a tactic often used in oral tradition to soften the impact and appease the disease. The illness must also be taken far away, into dark forests, and is lured with wedding gifts: wine and bread, as well as golden offerings. In ancient times, wine was considered an elixir of life and a drink of immortality. Bread, on the other hand, is the food of life. In Christianity, wine and bread are known as symbols of the body and blood of Christ. No parallel of this is found in the apocryphal prayers.

The third incantation is titled “For [Against] *Nezhit*” and has the note: “When a tooth hurts”. The informant is Gmitra Tochina, 68 years old¹⁵. The incantation is from Chiporovtsi, recorded by Tenev. The ritual actions are as follows: the healer makes the sign of the cross and takes a coal from the hearth with her right hand, moving it over the painful tooth from the outside while uttering the following, repeating it three times:

<p>„ – Куде си пошал, нежиту? – Пошал сам іу (името му). „ – Какво че правиш тамо? – Че му праим ижу, че му носим воду, че га раним. „ – Ти тамо работу немаш, іот нега мирно да седиш, с нек да се не закачуети, както ти іе напраил, іон іе Богу дар іотнел, іон іе іу цѣркву іодил, іон іе с миро миросан, іон іе с крѣсто крѣстосан, іон іе с китку порусен,</p>	<p>“– Where have you gone, <i>Nezhit</i>? – I have gone here (his name). – What are you doing there? – I will make a house for him, I will bring him water, I will feed him. – You have no business there, stay away from him, do not touch him, as he has been made, He brought a gift to God, he has gone to the church, he has been anointed with oil, he has been signed with the cross, he has been blessed with a wreath,</p>
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¹⁵ СБНУНК 1900: 260.

<p>ион је с тамњан покаден, ион је с рисово месо заранен, та је зјл ко рис.</p> <p>Отговаря и ужъ нежитът: „ – Че се предадемо, че се повжрнемо, юемкнуче, иоблегнуче, побегнуче, ко вакло иагне на зелену траву, ко кокошка на полок, ко дете мжненко на сиску”.</p> <p>Врачката е напълно увѣрена, че съ тѣзи думи нежитът ѝ отговаря.</p>	<p>he has been burned with incense, he has been cured with meat, and he is as strong as a lion.</p> <p>Nezhit seems to be answering her: – We surrender, we return, we soften, we bend, we flee, like a lamb on green grass, like a hen in the nest, like a little child on the breast.”</p> <p>The healer is completely convinced that these words are the illness’s response to her.</p>
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The repetitiveness of the utterance is aimed at giving the action a magical quality. There is again a dialogue. So far, I have not found a parallel in the apocryphal prayers.

This illness is not only found in Bulgarian folk beliefs (Христова 2001: 65). Among the Serbs, “nezhit” is a spirit that inhabits the human body; among the Russians, it is encountered as runny nose (Раденковић 2007: 703; Георгиева 2013: 269), it is known among the Czechs, the Slovenians and other Slavic peoples (Раденковић 2007: 706; Агапкина 2010: 789 – 792).

Radenković (Раденковић 2007: 706) and Агапкина (Агапкина 2010: 791)¹⁶ also provide a Slavic incantation against “nezhit”, in which the Virgin Mary asks the evil spirit where it is going, and it responds that it is going to the human body to break the bones, eat the flesh, and drink the blood:

<p>Devica Marija na cerkvenem pragu kleči ta hudi urak mino gre, device Marija pravi hudi urak: – Kam ti greš? – Jaz grem tja v tega NN vse kosti mu bom zdrobil, vse meso mu bom snedel, vso kri mu bom izpil. – Ne hodi tota v tega NN, Pojdi na visoko planino...</p>	<p>The Virgin Mary kneels on the church threshold, the evil spirit passes by, the Virgin Mary speaks to the evil spirit: – Where are you going? – I am going to NN, I will crush all his bones, I will eat all his flesh, I will drink all his blood. – Do not go to NN, Go to the high mountain...</p>
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This incantation corresponds to a considerable number of South Slavonic apocryphal prayers from the 13th to 19th centuries, included in collections both of liturgical nature and in apocryphal anthologies (Тодорова 2024: 9 – 15).

In conclusion, there is a certain indirect connection between some incantations and the apocryphal prayers, written both on lead plates and in later Christian

¹⁶ See Zablatnik 1982: 21.

manuscripts, such as through various motifs, plots, names of Christian saints, which, according to the available data continues even into the 20th century.

Nevertheless, the plot in the incantation is constructed in a different way. Unlike the apocryphal prayers, which use apparent gospel references, the biblical text in the incantation is present indirectly. However, by indicating the location where the illness – evil is driven away, the incantations show a parallel with the apocryphal prayers. The magical effect of the utterance in incantations is often achieved by using verbs mainly in the future or imperative tense, which unify them with the presence of a specific desirable modality. Onomatopoeias, repetitions, and parallelisms are also common techniques used to create the magic of the word. The same text, aimed at driving away the illness, can be read aloud, copied, and carried as an amulet. However, sound remains one of the main methods of healing both in incantations and in the reading of prayers to expel the illness.

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