
ISABEL GRIMM-STADELMANN, *Untersuchungen zur Iatromagie in der byzantinischen Zeit. Zur Tradierung gräkoägyptischer und spätantiker iatromagischer Motive (Byzantinisches Archiv – Series Medica 1)*. Berlin: De Gruyter 2020. xii + 675 pp. – ISBN 978-3-11-061292-9

- PETROS BOURAS-VALLIANATOS, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (pbourasval@phs.uoa.gr)

I would like to begin this review with sincere apologies for my delay in preparing it. This substantial volume undertakes the ambitious task of examining how Greco-Egyptian medical magic (*Iatromagie*) was transmitted, transformed, and re-contextualised within Byzantine medical literature, most notably in the work of the sixth-century physician Alexander of Tralles, and how his treatise, in turn, shaped later medical approaches, especially the Byzantine medical recipe books known as the *iatrosophia*. As the author makes clear from the outset (p. 4), the book does not aim to provide an Egyptological analysis of primary sources; rather, it offers a rigorous *motivgeschichtliche* (motif-historical) study focused on Byzantine textual reception.

GRIMM-STADELMANN (GS) offers a meticulous investigation of a crucial portion of a long-standing scholarly *desideratum*: the role of alternative or complementary medical techniques within everyday Byzantine therapeutic practice. Her work significantly advances our understanding of this neglected domain, bringing to light a vital dimension of Byzantine therapeutics and enabling future research to incorporate evidence from magical medicine more systematically into the broader ecology of medieval healing. It should also be emphasised that this volume inaugurates the new series *Byzantinisches Archiv – Series Medica* (published by De Gruyter as a sub-series of the well-established *Byzantinisches Archiv*), which effectively addresses a notable gap in specialised studies on Byzantine medicine.

The book is divided into five chapters. The first, brief one outlines the textual corpus under examination, articulates the central research questions, and sets out the methodological framework. It raises a series of incisive inquiries: How did medical-magic motifs migrate across linguistic, cultural, and intellectual boundaries? In what ways did Byzantine medical authors navigate the tension between ‘rational’, Galenic therapeutics and the enduring appeal of magical or sympathetic remedies? And to what extent did

broader cultural, religious, and social developments shape the articulation of these healing practices? Particular attention is given to the rise of Christianity in the first centuries CE and its impact on perceptions and receptions of magical medicine.

A further dimension, one that I find especially compelling and that deserves deeper exploration in light of other developments in Byzantine medicine, is the ethical-medical orientation of individual authors and how such ethical stances may have influenced their openness to (or rejection of) medical-magic practices alongside more mainstream approaches, such as humoral pathology. GS convincingly demonstrates (pp. 7–8) that Alexander of Tralles' medical-ethical framework is grounded in the principle of *alētheia* ('truth'), which he elevates to a position of absolute priority and even uses as a basis for his occasional critiques of Galenic therapeutics. It is on these grounds that Alexander justifies, for instance, the inclusion of amulets, endorsing them not out of theoretical inclination but on the strength of his own *peira* ('clinical experience').

The second chapter establishes the cultural-historical and medical-historical (*kulturgeschichtlich-medizinhistorischer*) framework of GS's study. In defining *Iatromagie*, GS explains that such magical healing practices typically rely on emotionally charged or psychologically driven effects, often grounded in 'irrational' notions of sympathetic relationships. These stand in contrast to humoral healing methods, whose scientifically oriented approaches emerged from sustained processes of observation, experimentation, and etiological reasoning (pp. 22–23). Nevertheless, GS rightly emphasises that the boundary between magic and medicine was frequently rather fluid.

The subsequent discussion of the ancient Egyptian background, incantations, ritual spells, and mythological paradigms is essential for understanding how these kinds of practices were later transmitted into the Greco-Roman and Late Antique Egyptian environments. GS characterises this phenomenon as a form of symbiosis between medicine and magic, in which medical knowledge consistently intertwined with magical motifs expressed through religious-cultic rituals. This dynamic, especially prominent in ancient Near Eastern cultures, significantly shaped prevailing conceptions of medicine, producing an interaction between practical-medical and ritual-psychological forms of therapy.

GS then provides preliminary observations on the incorporation of medical-magic techniques, such as incantations, ritual recitations resembling ex-

orcisms, amulets, the use of unusual pharmacological substances (including various animal excrements), and the ritual gathering of plants, into the works of Byzantine medical authors. She makes a convincing central argument: that Byzantine physicians tended to employ these practices as 'psychologically motivated' complementary therapies, integrated alongside more conventional medical approaches. The chapter also offers a highly valuable preliminary survey of the diverse traditions of magical medicine that shaped Byzantine authors. It gives focused discussions of the Greek Magical Papyri, Hermetic writings, the *Kyranides*, the *Testament of Solomon*, as well as influential proponents of sympathetic remedies such as Bolos of Mendes, Didymos, and Apollonios of Tyana. GS rightly assigns particular weight to the intersection of pagan and Christian traditions, especially in Egypt, where mythological and ritual motifs fused with emerging Judeo-Christian currents. This fusion produced a deeply syncretic, hybrid cultural environment that had a lasting impact on ritual-magical approaches to healing. The practical expression of these magical beliefs and rituals, documented in both pictorial and textual evidence, vividly demonstrates this syncretic evolution. The abundant corpus of surviving magical amulets is especially revealing: these objects display, in countless variations, the Christian reworking of pagan iconography and the persistent coexistence of both traditions in word and image.

Chapter 3 examines the reception of medical-magic motifs within Byzantine medical literature. GS assigns particular weight to the sixth-century physician Alexander of Tralles, presenting him as a key figure who legitimised medical-magic approaches alongside a fundamentally Galenic, humoral understanding of disease and therapy. The author conducts a close reading of several passages in which Alexander discusses *physika* or 'natural remedies', noting that he consistently designates them as such in specific sections of his treatise. GS rightly justifies her focus on Alexander: the range and density of magical therapeutic alternatives found in his work are unparalleled in both contemporary and later practical medical literature. According to GS, this distinctiveness stems from Alexander's individualised medical-ethical orientation and his markedly reformed conception of the doctor–patient relationship, both of which constitute unique phenomena within Byzantine medicine. Indeed, Alexander did not hesitate to recommend the use of amulets, even when he could not fully explain their underlying mechanism. His willingness to prioritise therapeutic efficacy over theoretically grounded approaches makes him an especially revealing case.

GS also turns to another crucial source, the sixth-century medical encyclopaedist Aetios of Amida. In contrast to Alexander, Aetios refrains from endorsing medical-magic ‘complementary’ therapy. Instead, he incorporates such elements only marginally, drawing primarily on Christian *iatromagica*, viz. brief saintly invocations, biblical *historiolae* with exorcistic overtones, and similar formulae. This juxtaposition further sharpens the distinctiveness of Alexander’s position within the Byzantine medical tradition.

The next chapter, the longest in the volume, extending to nearly 300 pages, is unquestionably the most original and intellectually substantial. Here, GS undertakes a systematic historical analysis of each medical-magic healing motif found in the works of Alexander of Tralles, providing extensive commentary on their origins and their later reception in Byzantine medical literature, particularly within the *iatrosophia*. She deserves special commendation for supplying numerous German translations of Greek and Byzantine passages that have never before been rendered into any modern language. The chapter is organised in an *a capite ad calcem* structure, progressing from ailments of the head down to disorders of the genitourinary system. The level of detail is remarkable. One illustrative example appears on pp. 390–394, where GS examines Alexander’s frequent recommendation of canine excrement as a therapeutic agent for colic, digestive disturbances, angina, and certain respiratory conditions. She begins by tracing the Egyptian background of such prescriptions, discussing recipes employing animal faeces and explaining the symbolic associations of specific animals with particular deities, especially in contexts where the demon believed to cause the illness is compelled to depart from the patient’s body. She then identifies parallels in Aetios of Amida, Marcellus of Bordeaux, and the medical-magic handbook *Kyranides*. Finally, she demonstrates the continuity of these remedies by citing examples from fourteenth- and fifteenth-century anonymous Byzantine recipe collections.

In her epilogue (Chapter 5), the author argues convincingly that Alexander of Tralles’s deployment of medical-magic approaches alongside Galenic humoral medicine should not be dismissed as mere superstition. Rather, it represents a deliberate strategy aimed at achieving a more holistic therapeutic framework, one grounded in empirical experience and shaped in part by the competitive pressures of daily medical practice. This conclusion is particularly significant: it encourages us to view Alexander not as an outlier but as a revealing lens through which to understand the practical medical realities of his time across the wider Mediterranean world.

One might have expected some engagement with the rich corpus of surviving Byzantine material culture, amulets, magical gems, inscribed *lamellae*, and related objects, that bears directly on these practices, or with a broader contextualisation of medical-magic approaches within the wider medical marketplace, including Syriac, Jewish, and early Arabic traditions. These, however, are suggestions for future research rather than deficiencies of the current work.

The study is rounded out by an extensive 55-page index. GS's monograph opens an important new avenue for understanding 'alternative' therapeutic practices in Byzantium and the medieval world more generally, demonstrating that Galenic medicine was far from the exclusive protagonist in premodern healing. Instead, the therapeutic landscape was far more complex and entangled than previously assumed. This book will undoubtedly become a standard reference for future work on Byzantine medicine, the transmission of ancient scientific knowledge, and the intricate interplay between humoral/Galenic therapeutics and medical-magic practice. Its extensive bibliography, meticulous notes, and systematic approach make it an indispensable resource also for scholars of premodern magical traditions and cultural history.

Keywords

history of medicine; healing and magic