

# THE MAGIC OF PLOTINUS' GNOSTIC DISCIPLES IN THE CONTEXT OF PLOTINUS' SCHOOL OF PHILOSOPHY

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**Abstract:** This paper aims at providing valuable insight into a topic which has not yet been sufficiently studied: the magical and exorcistic practices of those disciples of Plotinus whom in *Ennead II 9* [33] he criticizes for interpreting Plato in a dualistic or 'Gnostic' fashion.

In chapter 14 of *Ennead II 9* [33] Plotinus fiercely criticizes the philosophical assumptions on which the magic practiced by his 'Gnostic' disciples was based, but does not refuse magic in itself. In chapter 10 of his *Life of Plotinus* Porphyry relates that Plotinus was not alien to that sort of magical practice which the *Chaldean Oracles* call 'theurgy', which includes evocation rituals of demons or lesser deities, whose assistance the theurgist can rely on for a variety of purposes, from curing diseases to helping him to obtain the *unio mystica* with the supreme God. The paper will try to explain the way in which Plotinus' concept of magic, which he describes in *Ennead IV 4* (28) 40-44, differs from his disciples'. The final section of the paper will be focused on pointing out the profound similarities between the magic of Plotinus' 'Gnostic' disciples and the magical and exorcistic rituals described in the *Greek Magical Papyri*.

## 0. Plotinus, *Ennead II 9* [33]: Some introductory remarks

This paper will focus on chapter 14 of Plotinus, *Ennead II 9* [33], which Porphyry entitled *Against the Gnostics*.<sup>1</sup> In this chapter Plotinus criticizes the views of his 'Gnostic'<sup>2</sup> disciples on magic and exorcism.<sup>3</sup> Before dealing with chapter 14 in

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<sup>1</sup> Porphyry, *Vita Plotini* 16.11; here and hereinafter cited according to Henry P. and H.-R. Schwyzer (eds), *Plotini Opera*, vol. 1 (Leiden, 1951).

<sup>2</sup> With regard to the reason why we put the word 'Gnostic' between commas when we refer it to Plotinus' Gnostic disciples see below. See also Spanu, N., *Plotinus, Ennead II 9 [33] 'Against the Gnostics' – a Commentary* (Studia Patristica supplementary Series 1; Leiden-Paris-Walpole, Ma., 2012).

<sup>3</sup> In this paper we will not attempt to give a univocal definition of terms like 'magic', 'theurgy' and 'exorcism' but we will understand their meaning on the basis of the context in which they are used. We have been prompted to make this decision by the fact that in Plotinus the term 'magic' (γοητεία) can have different meanings according to its context. For example, in *Ennead II 9* [33]

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detail it is necessary to briefly describe the general content of *Ennead II 9* [33] as well as the exegetical approach that will be applied in this paper. *Ennead II 9* [33] is made up of 18 chapters, in which Plotinus criticizes some of his own disciples, whom he calls 'friends',<sup>4</sup> both for championing views which in some respects are close to what is generally described as Gnosticism and for introducing interpretations of Platonic concepts of which he disapproves.

In *Ennead II 9* [33] Plotinus never labels his disciples as 'Gnostics' nor does he consider them as a separate group inside his own school, which, as Porphyry testifies in his *Life of Plotinus* 16 1-10, was also attended by Christians and by 'heretics come from the ancient philosophy' (αἰρετικοὶ δὲ ἐκ τῆς παλαιᾶς φιλοσοφίας ἀνηγγμένοι).<sup>5</sup> Porphyry's case is different, because he probably labelled his own fellow-students as 'Gnostics' in order to separate them from himself and the rest of Plotinus' disciples, in line with his own political program aiming at distinguishing the true followers of the classical tradition from those who, according to him, had irremediably deviated from it, just as the Christians and the Gnostics.

Plotinus treats his 'Gnostic' disciples like philosophical interlocutors who happened to embrace the views he disapproves of before becoming his friends (οἱ τοῦτω τῷ λόγῳ ἐντυχόντες πρότερον ἢ ἡμῶν φίλοι γενέσθαι).<sup>6</sup> Plotinus does not reject his interlocutors' thought as a whole, because he explicitly admits that this is in part grounded both on the teachings of the Greeks<sup>7</sup> (ἃ καλῶς λέγουσι παρ' ἐκείνων λαβόντας) and on Plato's doctrines (ὄλως γὰρ τὰ μὲν αὐτοῖς παρὰ τοῦ Πλάτωνος εἴληπται),<sup>8</sup> which for him represent the most certain manifestation of the truth.<sup>9</sup> In addition, Plotinus fully agrees with his interlocutors on considering the absolute knowledge or *gnosis* as the ultimate goal of the philosopher;<sup>10</sup> however, he disagrees with them on the method that must be followed to obtain it, which for his interlocutors entails a radical depreciation of the sensible world<sup>11</sup> and of the physical body;<sup>12</sup> he also holds a position different from theirs with regard to some aspects of the content of this *gnosis*, which for Plotinus cannot consist, for example,

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14, where Plotinus is criticizing his disciples' concept of magic, this term has a marked negative connotation; on the contrary, in *Ennead IV 4* (28) 40 1-10, where Plotinus describes 'magic' (γοητεία) as that force which exploits the natural sympathy existing among things in order to perform magical effects, the word has a positive meaning; with regard to this see also below.

<sup>4</sup> Plotinus, *Ennead II 9*. [33] 10. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Porphyry, *Vita Plotini*, 16.1-10.

<sup>6</sup> Plotinus, *Ennead II 9*. [33] 10.3-4.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 6.38; 55.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 6.10-11; 12-34; 17. 1-4.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 6.6-10; 25-27; 35-55.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 8.5; 13.10; 16.48-55.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 6.59.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 18.1-3.

in establishing a radical and unbridgeable separation between the sensible and the intelligible world.<sup>13</sup>

Plotinus and his interlocutors refer to the same conceptual background, deeply rooted in the classical tradition, and aim at the same goal, that is, the attainment of *gnosis*, but interpret both their classical heritage and the ultimate objective of their philosophical investigation in a different way. For Plotinus, Plato's teachings show that body and soul, sensible and intelligible world and God and cosmos, although ontologically different, are also profoundly interrelated, so that true *gnosis* is that which teaches to reconnect what is inferior to what is superior, the sensible beauty to its archetypal eternal model and the creation to the Creator, by understanding the former as nothing but an image of the latter, from which it derives its being, beauty and truth. On the contrary, for Plotinus' 'Gnostic' disciples Plato teaches to disparage the material world and the sensible body, in order to discover what lies behind them, namely the eternal and immaterial divine plenitude or *pleroma*, whose attainment coincides with the knowledge of the true reality compared with the false and deceptive existence of the material world.

We could say that the debate between Plotinus and his interlocutors shows that we are dealing here not only with two different kinds of 'Platonism' but also with two different types of 'Gnosticism'. The disciples think that Plato advocates a dualistic metaphysics, while Plotinus thinks that his own 'henology' or doctrine of the One constitutes the culmination of the teachings of the Platonic *Dialogues*; the disciples believe that the true *gnosis* arises when man understands his otherness to the sensible and material world, while Plotinus thinks that the true *gnosis* is achieved when the sensible world is understood as the visible manifestation of the spiritual dimension.

We cannot exclude the possibility that Plotinus' criticism prompted his disciples to re-think some of their theses. In chapter 12 of *Ennead II 9* [33], for example, Plotinus, after reporting his disciples' thesis that the 'dark matter' existed before being illuminated by the Soul/Sophia<sup>14</sup> (ἡ γὰρ ψυχὴ ἢ νεύσασα ἤδη ὄν τὸ σκότος, φασίν, εἶδε καὶ κατέλαμψε), points out that his interlocutors were unable to explain to him where this pre-existent 'dark matter' came from (πόθεν οὖν τοῦτο;). Plotinus adds that, probably in order to overcome this difficulty and at the same time defend their thesis of the Soul/Sophia downwards inclination from the pleromatic world, the interlocutors developed a new theory, according to which Sophia/Soul created the dark matter in the very moment in which it inclined downwards (εἰ δ' αὐτὴν φήσουσι ποιῆσαι νεύσασαν).<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 16.1-14.

<sup>14</sup> In *Ennead II 9* [33] 10 21 Plotinus says that for some of his 'Gnostic' disciples the Soul was identical with Sophia, the last aeon of the Valentinian *pleroma*, which also plays a fundamental role in Sethian Gnosticism.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 12.39-44; see also Spanu, *Plotinus* (n. 2), 177-179.

This appears to be a considerable shift in the disciples' thought, which shows that in Plotinus' school of philosophy philosophical doctrines arose after heated debates between Plotinus and his 'Gnostic' and non-Gnostic disciples on the one hand, and between the disciples themselves on the other hand. With regard to this last aspect, in his *Life of Plotinus* 18 8-23<sup>16</sup> Porphyry remembers that he had to be confuted three times by his fellow-student Amelius before embracing Plotinus' concept of the Intellect, and, as a consequence, Plotinus's exegesis of *Timaeus* 39E 7-9, on which the discussion about the Intellect was based. We can suppose that something similar happened during the debate between Plotinus and his 'Gnostic' pupils.

For these reasons, we think that the adjective 'Gnostic', regarded as an attribute that irremediably separates the 'Gnostic' disciples from Plotinus and the rest of his pupils, is not fully appropriate to Plotinus' interlocutors; actually, these are not less 'Gnostic' than 'Platonic', because in their case both labels are conflated into one. In order to stress this fact, a possible solution could be to write the adjective 'Gnostic' between commas when it refers to the disciples with whom Plotinus debates in *Ennead II 9* [33]; but, of course, other solutions are possible.<sup>17</sup>

To summarize, in *Ennead II 9* [33] Plotinus wants to refute the views that the disciples had learnt from their previous masters and in which, to Plotinus' astonishment (οὐκ οἶδ' ὅπως ἐπ' αὐτοῦ μένουσι), they still firmly believed when they joined his school of philosophy.<sup>18</sup> Plotinus thinks that these views, which are close to what is generally defined as Gnosticism, are useless 'additions' (προσθήκαι) to the truth as taught by Plato and the Greeks. These additions are duly reported by Plotinus in *Ennead II 9* [33] chapter 6 and are the following: The introduction of generations and absolute destructions; the contempt for this universe; the censure of the Soul for its relation with body; the censure of the governor of this universe; the identification of the Soul with the Demiurge; the identification of the Soul of the All with the individual souls, by giving the former the same passions as the latter.<sup>19</sup>

Another goal of Plotinus' treatise was to criticize both the disciples' interpretations of general Platonic ideas (like the relationship soul-body) and their exegeses of passages from some Platonic *Dialogues*, such as *Phaedrus* 246C (on the Soul's fall)<sup>20</sup> and *Timaeus* 39E 7-9 (on the Intellect).<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus*, 18.8-23.

<sup>17</sup> Such as 'disciples with double allegiance', that is, faithful both to Plato and Plotinus and to their previous, probably Gnostic, masters.

<sup>18</sup> Plotinus, *Ennead II 9*. [33] 10.5.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* 6.55-61.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* 4.1-4.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* 6.15-27.

## 1. The views of Plotinus's 'Gnostic' disciples on magic and exorcism

Let us now focus our attention on the 'Gnostic' disciples' views on magic and exorcism. These are summarily described by Plotinus in chapter 14 of *Ennead II 9* [33]. Plotinus reports that his disciples 'write incantations' (ἐπαιοιδᾶς γράφωσιν) that they direct not only to the Soul (οὐ μόνον πρὸς ψυχήν) but also to the higher hypostases, namely the Intellect and the One (τὰ ἐπάνω).<sup>22</sup> Plotinus denies that 'sorceries' (γοητείας), 'spells' (θέλξεις) and 'charms' (πείσεις) are capable of binding (ἄγεσθαι) the higher hypostases through magic 'words' (λόγω) or that 'chants' (μέλη), 'sounds' (ἤχους), 'exhalations' (προσπνεύσεις) and 'hissing sounds of voice' (σιγμοὺς τῆς φωνῆς) can accomplish such a task.<sup>23</sup>

After this brief description of the magical apparatus used by his disciples, Plotinus asks: 'But if [they] do not want to say this, how [are] the incorporeal beings [bound] by sounds?'<sup>24</sup> This question by Plotinus is particularly relevant, because it shows that his disciples found it impossible to explain how purely spiritual beings like the hypostases can be bound by 'words' or 'sounds', which are mere functions of the physical body. Plotinus shows that the disciples' radical dualistic metaphysics is incompatible with their concept of magic as a power that is able to bind even the higher hypostases. In Plotinus' eyes, this concept of magic takes away from the higher hypostases that very holiness that the disciples claim to attribute to them by radically separating them from the material world, because it makes the higher hypostases subject to the influence of the material dimension, of which the physical body of the magician is part.<sup>25</sup>

After dealing briefly with the disciples' concept of magic, Plotinus' discusses their views on exorcism. According to the disciples, diseases are caused by the presence of an evil demon inside the patient, who can be cured only by driving the demon out of him by having recourse to a specific magical word (λόγω).<sup>26</sup> Plotinus points out that, although the disciples' claim to being able to achieve such a result would make a standing impression on the masses, who are prone to believe in the power of magicians, the same effect would not be exerted on true philosophers, who could never be convinced that diseases are caused by evil demons; in fact, they know that the body falls ill because of 'stress' (καμάτοις), 'excess' (πλησμοναῖς), 'deficiency' (ἐνδείαις), 'sepsis' (σήψεσι) and 'changes which have [their] origin either outside or inside [the body].'<sup>27</sup> Plotinus specifies that the natural origin of

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 14.2-3.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 14.4-8.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 14.8-9: εἰ δὲ μὴ βούλονται τοῦτο λέγειν, ἀλλὰ πῶς φωναῖς τὰ ἀσώματα;

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 14.9-10.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 14.13-15.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 14.15-20: ὅλωσ μεταβολαῖς ἢ ἔξωθεν τὴν ἀρχὴν ἢ ἔνδοθεν λαβούσαις.

diseases is demonstrated by their cures, such as 'evacuation' (γαστρὸς γὰρ ῥύεισις), 'medicines' (φαρμάκου δοθέντος), 'blood removal' (αἵματος ἀφηρημένου) and 'diet' (ἔνδεια).<sup>28</sup>

Even these remarks by Plotinus seem to be meant to show the contradiction between the disciples' metaphysical dualism and their belief in magical and exorcistical practises. If, as the disciples affirm, it is true that the material world is radically separated from the spiritual one, it will be contradictory to explain phenomena that happen in the former by making reference to the action of beings that, like the daemons, belong to the latter.

## 2. Plotinus' concept of magic

In *Ennead II 9* [33] 14 Plotinus confines himself to criticizing his disciple's concept of magic, but does not describe his own idea of it. He had already done so in the *Ennead IV 4* [28] 40-44,<sup>29</sup> which is the twenty-eighth in chronological order, while *Ennead II 9* is the thirty-third. It is then necessary to briefly discuss chapters 40-44 of *Ennead IV 4*, in order to better understand the difference between Plotinus' concept of magic and that of his disciples. Plotinus believes that through 'certain forms' (τοῖς σχήμασι) or 'by assuming certain postures' (σχηματίζοντες) it is possible to acquire some magical 'powers' (δυνάμεις);<sup>30</sup> the same effect is obtained by having recourse to 'sung enchantments' (ἐπωδαῖς τῷ μέλει), 'a certain sound' (τῇ τοιᾷδε ἤχῃ) and a certain 'posture' (τῷ σχήματι).<sup>31</sup> Plotinus also admits

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 14.21-23.

<sup>29</sup> Plotinus, *Ennead IV 4*. [28] 40-44; here and hereinafter cited after Henry, P., H.-R. Schwyzer (eds), *Plotini Opera*, vol. 2 (Leiden, 1959); on Plotinus and magic see Dodds, E. R., *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley, 1951), 283-311; Id., "Theurgy and its Relationship to Neoplatonism," in: *Journal of Roman Studies* 37 (1947) 55-69; Merlan, Ph., "Plotinus and Magic," in: *Isis* 44 n. 4 (1953) 341-348; Armstrong, A. H., "Was Plotinus a Magician?" in: *Phronesis* 1 n.1 (1955) 73-79; Dillon, J., "The Magical Power of Names in Origen and Later Platonism," in: Id., *The Golden Chain – Studies in the Development of Platonism and Christianity* (Variorum Collected Studies Series; Burlington, USA-Singapore-Sydney, 1990), n. XXIII, pp. 203-216; Edwards, M. J., "Two Episodes in Porphyry's Life of Plotinus," in: *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 40 (1991) 456-464; Brisson, L., "Plotin et la magie," in: Id. et al. (eds), *Porphyre, La Vie de Plotin*, vol. 2 (Paris, 1992), 465-475; Finamore, J. F., "Plotinus and Iamblichus on Magic and Theurgy," in: *Dionysius* 17 (1999) 83-94; Shaw, G., "Eros and Arithmos: Pythagorean theurgy in Iamblichus and Plotinus," in: *Ancient Philosophy* 19 (1999) 121-143; Mazur, Z., "Unio Magica, part I: On the Magical Origins of Plotinus' Mysticism," in: *Dionysius* 21 (2003) 23-52; id., "Unio Magica, part II: Plotinus, Theurgy, and the Question of Ritual," in: *Dionysius* 22 (2004) 29-56; Helleman, W. E., "Plotinus and Magic," in: *The International Journal of the Platonic Tradition* 4 (2010) 114-146.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 40.14-15.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 40.20-21.

that the daemons that are closer to the material dimension can ‘be enchanted’ by (θέλγεσθαι) and ‘be subject’ to (κατακούειν) the magician’s power.<sup>32</sup> Finally, in *Ennead IV 3* [27] 11 1-10 Plotinus makes mention of that theurgical rite by which a god can be induced to take up his residence in a statue or temple.<sup>33</sup>

In addition to this information, two episodes of Porphyry’s *Life of Plotinus* are also worthy of mention, because they are relevant for our topic. Porphyry reports that, in order to show his superiority over Plotinus, Olympius, a fellow-student of his at Ammonius Saccas’ school of philosophy,<sup>34</sup> used his magical art to turn the evil influence of the stars against Plotinus. However, Olympius was forced to desist from continuing his evil spell when this started to rebound on him as a result of the force of Plotinus’ soul, which was so powerful that not only rendered Plotinus immune to evil spells, but also made them rebound on those who had cast them.<sup>35</sup> A second interesting episode is when Plotinus allowed an Egyptian priest who had come to Rome, to perform the evocation ritual of his own guardian daemon,<sup>36</sup> but, Porphyry reports, instead of a normal guardian daemon a god far superior to all daemons appeared.<sup>37</sup> The Egyptian priest was so astonished that he exclaimed: ‘Blessed are you, whose daemon is a god who has nothing to do with [daemons] of inferior kind.’<sup>38</sup>

This information is all the more striking, because it shows that Plotinus believed in magic, although scholars do not agree with each other on whether he practised it or not.<sup>39</sup> Why does he then criticize his disciples, if he shared with them the same belief in magic? The answer to this question was already clear in *Ennead II 9* [33] 14, where Plotinus does not criticize his disciples for practising magic, but for believing that the power of magicians can extend itself beyond the Soul and have an influence on the two superior hypostases, namely the Intellect and the One.<sup>40</sup> In

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. 43.11-15.

<sup>33</sup> Plotinus, *Ennead IV 3*. [27] 11.1-10. On the animation of statues see also *Asclepius*, 24, 135, in: *La rivelazione segreta di Ermete Trismegisto*, vol. 2, ed. Scarpi, P. (Milan, 2011); *XVII [sine titulo]*, 239, in: *La rivelazione segreta di Ermete Trismegisto*, vol. 1, ed. Scarpi, P. (Milan, 2009).

<sup>34</sup> Porphyry, *Vita Plotini*, 10.1-2.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 3-13.

<sup>36</sup> On theurgical invocation of gods see, for example, *Oracles chaldaïques*, ed. des Places, É. (Paris, 1971), 133, 142, 143, 144, 145, 146, 148, 150 (on the barbarian names of the gods), 211; 225 (on the δοχεύς or ‘medium’ through whom the god used to speak to the theurgists), 220-221 (on the power of the theurgist to bind the gods, even against their will).

<sup>37</sup> Porphyry, *Vita Plotini* 10.15-22.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. 22-24: μακάριος εἶ θεὸν ἔχων τὸν δαίμονα καὶ οὐ τοῦ ὑφειμένου γένους τὸν συνόντα.

<sup>39</sup> The first position is defended by Philip Merlan; see id., “Plotinus and Magic” (n. 29), 341; the opposite view is defended by Hilary Armstrong, see id., “Was Plotinus a Magician?” (n. 29), 73-79 and E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (n. 29), 285.

<sup>40</sup> The idea that superior beings like the gods can be forced to act according to the will of the men who invoke them did seriously trouble Porphyry in his *Letter to Anebo*: see *Porfirio. Lettera ad Anebo*, ed. Sodano, A. R. (Naples, 1958), 2. 8a; 8c (on threats to the gods). Iamblichus answers

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*Ennead IV 4* (28) chapter 40 Plotinus had shown that even with regard to the Soul, it is not the rational part of it that can be subject to charms, but only the irrational part; he says: 'Neither the faculty of free choice nor reason are enchanted by the [magical] music, but the irrational soul [...]';<sup>41</sup> in chapter 43 he adds that the virtuous man:

[...] with [his rational] soul is insensitive to magic, neither would his reason be affected [by magic] nor would [reason] change opinion [as a result of a magical influence]. But he would be affected in proportion to that irrational part of the universe [that lies] in him; but this, rather [than him], would be affected.<sup>42</sup>

The personality of this type of man, says Plotinus in chapter 44, is so unified by virtue of its constant self-contemplation, that is immune to the effects of magic;<sup>43</sup> this can work only on the man who obeys to the irrational part of his own soul, which constantly projects him into what is other than himself, that is, into the objects of sense-perception.<sup>44</sup>

Therefore, magic can have no effect on the true philosopher; however, how does Plotinus explain the power that magic exerts on the irrational part of man's soul? In order to do so, Plotinus re-interprets the ancient Stoic idea of the universal sympathy and applies it to magic. He says that magic works on the basis of the principle of Love and Strife that runs the universe, according to which similar things are attracted to each other, while different things repel each other. For Plotinus the universe constitutes 'the first magician and enchanter' (ὁ γόνος ὁ πρῶτος καὶ φαρμακεὺς οὗτός ἐστιν); the magician does nothing else but to exploit the sympathetic nature of the universe.<sup>45</sup>

The magician knows what part of the universe is naturally attracted to or repelled by another, and he simply directs this natural attraction or repulsion where he wants to by having recourse to his magical artifices.<sup>46</sup> According to Plotinus, the principle of Love and Strife also regulates the relationship between the religious man and the stars to which he addresses his entreaties. Plotinus thinks that neither do the stars consciously listen to the prayers addressed to them nor do they voluntarily grant what they are asked for, but, when they grant something to the petitioner,

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Porphyry's question by pointing out that the gods cannot be 'forced' to act in one way or another by the entreaties addressed to them; on the contrary, these act only on the one who makes them, by purifying his mind and making it able to participate in the power of the gods; see *Jamblique. Les mystères d'Égypte*, ed. des Places, É. (Paris, 1966), I, 12.

<sup>41</sup> Plotinus, *Ennead IV 4*. [28] 40.23-24.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* 43.2-5.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* 44.1-4; 16-24; 33-37.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* 44.5-16; 25-32.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* 40.1-14.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* 40.16-20.



they do so unintentionally, as a natural response to the stimulus exerted on them by the prayer, in the same sense in which if one end of a string under tension is touched, the resulting vibration will be transmitted to the opposite end of it.<sup>47</sup>

### 3. The relationship between the magic of Plotinus' disciples and the *Greek Magical Papyri*

Before ending this paper, we will briefly discuss some points of contact between the kind of magic practised by Plotinus' 'Gnostic' disciples and that described in the *Greek Magical Papyri*, because there are considerable points of contact between these two types of magic that deserve our attention. H.D. Betz, who has published an English translation of the *Greek Magical Papyri*,<sup>48</sup> points out:

The extant texts are mainly from the second century B.C. to the fifth century A.D.<sup>49</sup> [...] The Greek magical papyri are [...] original documents and primary sources. Their discovery is as important for Greco-Roman religion as is the discovery of the Qumran texts for Judaism or the Nag-Hammadi library for Gnosticism<sup>50</sup> [...] Since the material comes from Greco-Roman Egypt, it reflects an amazingly broad religious and cultural pluralism [...] <sup>51</sup> most of the texts are mixtures of several religions – Egyptian, Greek, Jewish, to name the most important [...] <sup>52</sup> it is quite clear that the magicians who wrote and used the Greek papyri were Hellenistic in outlook. Hellenization, however, also includes the egyptianizing of Greek religious traditions.<sup>53</sup>

Because of the limits allocated to this paper, we will now concentrate on what seem to be the most evident similarities between the magic of the *Greek Magical Papyri* and that of Plotinus' disciples, hoping that these few remarks will prompt further academic research on this fascinating topic.

As we have seen above, in *Ennead II 9* [33] 14 Plotinus accuses his disciples of directing their enchantments to the higher hypostases, which for him are immune

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid. 41-42.

<sup>48</sup> Betz, H. D. (ed.), *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation – including the Demotic Spells*, vol. 1, second edition (Chicago, 1992). See also Henrichs, A., K. Preisendanz, *Papyri Graecae magicae. Die griechischen Zauberpapyri*, vol. 1-2, second edition (Stuttgart, 1973-1974).

<sup>49</sup> Betz, "Introduction to the Greek Magical Papyri," in: Id., *The Greek Magical Papyri* (n. 48), xli. With regard to the history of the discovery of the *Greek magical Papyri* see *ibid.* xlii-xliv. Most of the magical papyri were found in Egypt by the diplomat Jean d'Anastasi (1780?-1857) and brought by him to Europe, where they were bought by various libraries; see *ibid.*, xlii.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. xlii.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. xlv.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. xlv.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. xvi.

to the influence of magic. The same approach is followed by some of the magicians of the *Greek Magical Papyri*, who either try to bind to their will the supreme God by the force of their enchantments or, at best, to win His favour by their entreaties.

A fine example of the first attitude is *PGM*<sup>54</sup> II 50-55, where the magician threatens the highest God to torture Him unless he sends a 'daimon of prophecy' who is capable of answering the magician's questions. During his charm, the magician makes use of *voces magicae*, that is, magical words made up of combinations of vowels and consonants that are mostly unintelligible to us:

**In another [text] I have found the following:** If then, he does not hearken to this method, wrap up the figure in the same piece of cloth, and throw it into the furnace of a bathhouse on the fifth day, saying after the invocation: "ABRI and ABRO EXANTIABIL, God of gods, king of kings, now force a friendly daimon of prophecy to come to me, lest I apply worse tortures to you, the things written on the strips of papyrus."<sup>55</sup> (Tr.: J. Dillon – E.N. O'Neil)

The second approach can be found in *PGM* I 164-166:

And this is spoken next: "Hither to me, King, [I call you] God of Gods, mighty, boundless, undefiled, indescribable, firmly established Aion / Be inseparable from me from this day forth through all the time of my life."<sup>56</sup> (Tr.: E.N. O'Neil)

*PGM* IV 1170-1180 tries to win the supreme God's favour by extolling Him as the universal creator:

**Formula:** "I praise you, the one and blessed of the eons and / father of the world, with cosmic prayers. Come to me, you who filled the whole universe with air, who hung up the fire from the [heavenly] water and separated the earth from the water. Pay attention, form, spirit, / earth and sea, to a word from the one who is wise concerning divine Necessity, and accept my words as fiery darts, because I am a man, the most beautiful creature of the god in heaven, made out of spirit, /

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<sup>54</sup> *PGM* is the acronym of *Papyri Graecae Magicae*.

<sup>55</sup> *PGM* II 50-55, 14, in: Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri* (n. 48); see also *PGM* III 537-538, 32; *PGM* IV 871-877, 55; *PGM* LVII 1-13, 284-285; *PGM* CXXII 55 [II, 30], 317.

<sup>56</sup> *PGM* I 164-166, 7, in: Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri* (n. 48). Invocations to the supreme God can also be found in other *Greek magical Papyri*; see *PGM* I 213-222, 8; *PGM* III 550-558, 32-33; *PGM* IV 435-460, 46; 640-655, 50-51; 960-974, 57; 985-1036, 57-58; 2785-2870, 90-92 (Hekate/Selene as the supreme God); *PGM* V 99-156, 103; 460-487, 109-110 (invocation to the supreme Intellect); *PGM* VII 880-889, 141-142 (Selene as supreme God); 961-968, 143; *PGM* XIII 64-91, 174; 139-147, 175-176; 150-161, 176; 270-276, 180; 444-471, 184; 619-620, 187; 742-746, 189-190; 760-794, 190-191; 981, 194; 1020-1025, 194; *PGM* XXI 1-29, 259; *PGM* LVIII 1-14, 285; *PGM* LXII 25, 293; *PGM* LXXI 1-8, 298; *PGM* CV 5, 310.

Nicola Spanu, "The Magic of Plotinus' Gnostic Disciples in the Context of Plotinus' School of Philosophy," in: *Journal for Late Antique Religion and Culture* 7 (2013) 1-14; ISSN: 1754-517X; Website: <http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/clarc/jlarc>

dew, and earth. Heaven, be opened; accept my words. Listen, Helios, father of the world; I call upon you with your name [...]”<sup>57</sup> (Tr.: W.C. Grese)

*PGM XIII* 843-845 contains a remarkable invocation to the supreme God:

I call on you, eternal and unbegotten, who are one, who alone hold together the whole creation of all things, whom none understands, whom the gods worship, / whose name not even the gods can utter.<sup>58</sup> (Tr.: Morton Smith)

Among the most striking features of the *Greek magical Papyri* are the *voces magicae*, that is, mostly unintelligible combination of vowels and consonants that were regarded by magicians as immensely powerful, because they coincided with the names of the gods or of the supreme God and were thus able to express in human sounds their incomprehensible essences;<sup>59</sup> by pronouncing the *voces magicae* in the right way, it was then possible to control the divine entity whose essence they manifested. We have seen above<sup>60</sup> that, according to Plotinus, during their magical rites his disciples pronounced some words that in their opinion could bind the superior hypostases and cast out demons. We cannot exclude that the magical words Plotinus’ disciples made use of<sup>61</sup> were identical or similar to the *voces magicae* of the *Greek magical Papyri*. This conclusion is based on the fact that the disciples, just as the magicians of the papyri, believed that the power of these words was not confined to the irrational part of the soul, as in Plotinus’ conception, but extended also to the Soul in its entirety and to the superior hypostases. With regard to the immense power attributed to these *voces magicae*, *PGM IV* 355-360 is indicative:

[...] because I adjure you by the name that causes fear and trembling, the name at whose sound the earth opens, the name at whose terrifying sound the daimons are terrified, the name at whose sound rivers and rocks burst asunder.<sup>62</sup> (Tr.: E.N. O’Neil)

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<sup>57</sup> *PGM IV* 1170-1180, 61, in: Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri* (n. 48); see also *ibid.* 1180-1226, 61.

<sup>58</sup> *PGM XIII* 843-845, 191.

<sup>59</sup> On the names of the gods used in theurgical invocations see Iamblichus, *Mystère d’Égypte*, 7.4-5 (ed. des Places; n. 40).

<sup>60</sup> See above pp. 4-5.

<sup>61</sup> Plotinus, *Ennead II* 9. [33] 14.5.

<sup>62</sup> *PGM IV* 355-360, 45; see also *PGM IV* 604-616, 50; 881-896, 55; 1019-1021, 58; 1180-1226, 61; *PGM VII* 560-577, 134; *PGM XII* 153-160, 159; 201-211, 161; 238-270, 162-163; *PGM XIII* 255-343, 179-181; 634-640, 187-188 (the magician asks God to protect him from bad fate); 740-769, 189-190; *PGM XXI* 1-29, 259.

We must point out that according to Irenaeus, the proclamation of *voces magicae* played a fundamental role in Marcus the Gnostic's ritual of consecration of the cup, by which he induced Charis, one of the beings 'superior to all things', to drop her own blood into the cup in order to let those who drank from it participate in her power.<sup>63</sup>

*Voces magicae*, in the form of combinations of vowels, consonants or of vowels and consonants, also appear in Gnostic literature, such as *The Books of JEU*,<sup>64</sup> the *Pistis Sophia*,<sup>65</sup> *The Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth*,<sup>66</sup> *The Gospel of the Egyptians*,<sup>67</sup> *The Trimorphic Protennoia*,<sup>68</sup> *Allogenes*,<sup>69</sup> *Zostrianos*<sup>70</sup> and, especially, *Marsanes*.<sup>71</sup> With regard to the function of these *voces magicae* as they appear in *Zostrianos*, J.D. Turner points out:

Sometimes they are enigmatic abbreviations for articulate utterances, sometimes they have nearly the character of Hindu mantras, as in the chanting of string of vowels in semi-numerical groupings, where the emphasis seems to lie on the rhythm, sonority and repetitiveness of the verbal performance, possibly in a communal setting.<sup>72</sup>

In *Ennead II 9* [33] 14 Plotinus also says that his disciples performed what he calls 'hissing sounds of voice' (σιγμοὺς τῆς φωνῆς);<sup>73</sup> these 'hissing sounds of voice' can be compared with the 'long hissing sound' (σύρισον μακρὸν συριγμόν) that *PGM IV 561* instructs the magician to make before pronouncing the *voces magicae*.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> *Sancti Irenaei episcopi Lugdunensis libri quinque adversus haereses*, vol. 1, ed. Harvey, W. W. (Cambridge, 1857), 1.7.2.

<sup>64</sup> *The Books of JEU and the Untitled Text in the Bruce Codex*, ed. Schmidt, C., V. MacDermot (Nag-Hammadi Studies XIII; Leiden, 1978).

<sup>65</sup> *Pistis Sophia*, ed. Schmidt, C., V. MacDermot (Nag-Hammadi Studies IX; Leiden, 1978), I 10,18; I 62,1-15; IV 136,1-25; IV 137,15-25; IV 142.

<sup>66</sup> *The Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth* (VI 6), 56, 10-20; 61, 5-15, in: Robinson, J. M. (ed.), *The Nag-Hammadi Library in English* second edition (Leiden, 1984).

<sup>67</sup> *The Gospel of the Egyptians* (III 2 – IV 2), 44,1-5; 60,5; III 49,5; 66,10-20; 67,15-20, in: Robinson, Nag-Hammadi Library (n. 66).

<sup>68</sup> *The Trimorphic Protennoia* (XIII 1), 38,25-30, in: Robinson, Nag-Hammadi Library (n. 66).

<sup>69</sup> *Allogenes* (XI 3), 53,35, in: Robinson, Nag-Hammadi Library (n. 66).

<sup>70</sup> *Zostrianos* (VIII 1), 52,15-20; 118,20; 127,1-5, in: Robinson, Nag-Hammadi Library (n. 66).

<sup>71</sup> *Marsanes* (X 1), 26,1-12; 27,1-20; 28,1-25; 31,20-25, in: Robinson, *Nag-Hammadi Library* (n. 66).

<sup>72</sup> Turner, J. D., "Mythology and Ritual practice," 74, in: *Zostrien (NH VIII,1)*, ed. Barry, C., W.-P. Funk, P.-H. Poirier, J. D. Turner, *Bibliothèque copte de Nag Hammadi 24* (Québec, Canada - Leuven, 2000).

<sup>73</sup> Plotinus, *Ennead II 9*. [33] 14.7.

<sup>74</sup> *PGM IV 561,49*; see also *PGM XIII*, 289-296,180.

With regard to the use of magical ‘sounds’ (ἤχους) by Plotinus’ disciples,<sup>75</sup> we point out that in Plotinus’ general description of magic in *Ennead IV 4* magical ‘sounds’ (τὰ τοιάδε ἤχη) are among the tools the magician can have recourse to in order to direct the natural attraction and repulsion of things.<sup>76</sup> Of magical sounds also speaks explicitly *PGM XIII 600-607*, which, in addition, makes reference to ‘hissing sounds of voice’ that the magician has to emit during the ritual of invocation of the supreme God:

Then clap three times, TAK TAK TAK, go “pop, pop, pop” for a long time; hiss a great hiss, that is, one of some length. (εἶτα κρότησον γ’ / ‘τακ τακ τακ’, πόππυσον μακρὸν ποππυσμόν, // σύρισον μέγαν, τουτέστιν ἐπὶ μῆκος, συριγμόν) “Come to me, lord, faultless who pollute no place, joyful, unflawed, for I call on you, King of kings, Tyrant of tyrants, most glorious of the glorious, daimon of daimons, most warlike of the warlike, most holy of the holy. Come to me, willing, joyful, unflawed.”<sup>77</sup> (Tr.: Morton Smith)

A trace of ritual ‘exhalations’ (προσπνεύσεις)<sup>78</sup> could probably be found in *PGM XIII 935-945*, which, after listing a series of *voces magicae*, instructs the magician in this way:

[...] (Breathe out, in. Fill up) (πνεῦσον ἔξω, ἔσω. διαπλήρωσον); “EI AI OAI” (pushing more, bellow-howling.) “Come to me, god of gods, AEOEI EI IAO AE OIOTK” (Pull in, fill up, / shutting your eyes. Bellow as much as you can, then sighing, give out [what air remains] in a hiss.) (ἔπειτα σ/τενάξας συριγμῶ ἀνταπόδος)<sup>79</sup> (Tr.: Morton Smith)

We could compare the magical ‘chants’ (μέλη)<sup>80</sup> sung by Plotinus’ disciples and mentioned by him also in *Ennead IV 4*<sup>81</sup> with the poems used by the magicians of the *Greek Magical Papyri* to invoke gods or daemons. A fine example of them can be found in *PGM II 1-5*:

O Phoibos, helper through your oracles,  
Come joyous, Leto’s son, who works afar,  
Averterer, hither come, hither, come hither.  
Fortell, give prophecies amid night’s hour.<sup>82</sup> (Tr.: J. Dillon – E. N. O’Neil)

<sup>75</sup> Plotinus, *Ennead II 9*. [33] 14.6.

<sup>76</sup> Plotinus, *Ennead IV 4*. (28) 40.20.

<sup>77</sup> *PGM XIII 600-607*, 187; see also *PGM IV 88-93*, 39.

<sup>78</sup> Plotinus, *Ennead II 9*. [33] 14. 6.

<sup>79</sup> *PGM XIII 935-945*, 193; see also *PGM XIII 45-52*, 173.

<sup>80</sup> Plotinus, *Ennead II 9*. [33] 14.6; on the use of music in theurgic rites see Iamblichus, *Mystère d’Égypte*. 3.9.

<sup>81</sup> Plotinus, *Ennead IV 4*. (28) 40.20.

<sup>82</sup> *PGM II. 1-5*, 12. The magical hymns of the *Greek Magical Papyri* can be found in Henrichs, Preisendanz, *Papyri Graecae magicae*, vol. 2 (1974), 237-266.

Finally, with regard to exorcism, we can refer to *PGM IV* 1227-1264. This text is interesting because in it the exorcist does not invoke Greek or Egyptian gods, but divine entities or prophets belonging to the Judeo-Christian tradition, such as the 'God' of 'Abraham', 'Isaac' and 'Jacob', a certain 'Jesus Chrestos' (a probable alternative rendering of the words 'Jesus Christ'), the 'Holy Spirit' and 'the son of the Father'; in addition, it also mentions 'Iao Sabaoth', a divine entity who features in many Gnostic texts.<sup>83</sup>

Texts like the exorcism mentioned above show the level of syncretism reached by practitioners of magic in the Hellenistic era; these were willing to include into their own system the God of the Christians, whose power in their eyes could well be exploited for exorcistical purposes.

If then we want to shed light on the relationship between Plotinus and his 'Gnostic' disciples, it will be to this late antique multicultural environment that we will have to look, where people of different ethnic origin, and, as a consequence, different religious education, shared in the same Hellenistic conceptual background, even if they interpreted it in different ways either to make it be more in tune with the religious traditions they had inherited from their ancestors or to conciliate it with the 'new' religious views they had embraced, like Christianity and Gnosticism, which were becoming more and more prominent within the context of a Roman empire where the *pax romana* had brought together people who would otherwise have been always alien to each other.

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<sup>83</sup> *PGM. IV* 1227-1264,62; on 'Jesus Chrestos' *ibid.* n. 168,62; on 'Iao' see *ibid. Glossary*, 335; other exorcisms in *PGM IV* 3007-86, 96-97; *PGM V* 96-172, 103; *PGM XIII* 243-244, 179.