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Healing across phraseological(?) borders: How to differentiate between “medical” and “magical” healing approaches in Coptic medical recipes?

The corpus of Coptic healing texts offers a wide range of therapeutic approaches, some of which – from a modern perspective – are categorized as „medical“, „magico-medical“ and/or „magico-religious“. The latter include, for instance, amulets, healing spells, prayers, anointing with holy oil, laying on of hands and others. Of particular interest in this context, however, are the medical recipes. Here there seem to be two possibilities: Recipes that contain magico-religious elements and those that dispense with them entirely. Accordingly, they can either prescribe only the administration of drugs (i.e., on an herbal, mineral or animal basis) or link the use or application of drugs to magical rituals. When working with such texts, one question that always arises is whether and how one could distinguish between such „magical“ and „non-magical“ medical (or pharmaceutical) approaches to healing. A very modern question that probably did not arise for the late antique users. However, in the context of my completed dissertation project, I felt forced to narrow down the corpus of recipe texts in order to be able to deal with the amount of material in a reasonable time frame. I therefore decided to work primarily on those texts that appear to be „purely“ medical and without magical elements. Whether and how I managed to do this will be the central topic of my lecture. And although the question of whether such texts should be separated at all is a very central and very controversial one, I do not want to make it the focus of my lecture. Rather, I would like to point out approaches on a less content-related, but more phraseological and purely textual level and present and discuss possible criteria for differentiation.