Divine Epiphanies of Paredroi in the

Greek Magical Papyri

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This paper examines the divine epiphanies of paredroi as described in the Greek Magical Papyri from Egypt.1 The paredroi, “assistants,”2 can fall into various categories, such as the daimones, the god Eros, or the assistance of some verses.3 But the word can also refer to the spell itself, or to a deity who is manifested as different entity. In what follows I examine the epiphanies of this last category of paredroi, studied as part of a much more complex process in the magical operation, in order to discern how the divine assistance, or even the spell itself which activates that assistance, was conceptualised. Questions to be addressed are: How are the terms paredros and god being used in these spells? Are they interchangeable, or there is a distinction and consequently is the paredros conceived of as a separate entity? And what does this distinction imply in a religious sense for the two conceptions? I focus on the problematic interpretation of the Spell of


2 As an adjective, literally “sitting beside”; as a noun, one who “sits beside.” The English “assistant” is a good working translation.

3 πάρεδρος may be applied to various types of daimones, such as the Good Daimon, the holy Orion, the powerful arch-daimons (e.g. PMG I.1–42, IV.1331–1389), and the daimon as the reanimated spirit and body of a person who died a violent death (e.g. IV.1928–2005, 2006–2125). It can also refer to a god, such as Eros identified with Osiris and Harpocrates (e.g. XII.14–95, IV.1716–1870). The term may also describe the divine assistance given by some verses, as in verses from Homer (e.g. IV.2145–2240).

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Pnouthis, and will compare the divine epiphanies in that spell with the process of the divine epiphanies of paredroi in other texts.

The epiphanies of this category of paredroi can be best analyzed in five spells: “Spell of Pnouthis, the sacred scribe, for acquiring an assistant (πάρδρος)” (PMG I.42–195, A.D. IV/V); “Spell to Selene” (I.147 ff.) included in the Spell of Pnouthis; untitled spell LVII.1–37 (A.D. I/II); “Lunar spell of Claudianus and ritual of the divine epiphanies of the Bear constellation over lunar offerings” (VII.862–918, A.D. III/IV); and “The old serving woman of Apollonius of Tyana” (XIIa.1–40, A.D. V).

The πάρδρος as the spell itself and as a god or goddess revealed as another entity

The “Spell of Pnouthis, the sacred scribe, for acquiring an assistant” is sent by Pnouthis to Keryx, clearly another magician, and written in the form of a letter. It is a complex and difficult spell that repays detailed examination.

At the start, Pnouthis writes to Keryx: εἰδὼς προσέταξα σοι τὸν πάρδρον πρὸς τὸ μὴ διαπίπτειν ἐπιτελοῦν 

which O’Neil translates “as one who knows, I have prescribed for you this spell for acquiring an assistant to prevent you failing as you carry out this rite.” In inserting the words “spell for acquiring an assistant” here and in the title of the spell, O’Neil is incorporating an interpretation that the πάρδρος referred to is in fact the spell itself. But the sense requires this interpretation, and this is confirmed first by the next phrase, παρδέλεμος τὰ πάντα καταλειπομένα ἐν βίβλοις ὑπηρετοῦντά σοι τὸν πάρδρον (this spell for acquiring an assistant) επέδειξε (45–48), and then by the parallel, a few lines later (51–52), ἀπέτειψε τὴν βίβλον (“this book”). Thus the term πάρδρος can be used for a spell to acquire an assistant.

How, then, is the divine revealed to the magician in this spell and what are the stages of the divine epiphany of the paredros?

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4 O’Neil at Betz 4; Preisendanz translated πάρδρον as “Beisitzer.”
First, Pnouthis refers in detail to the “sign” (σημεῖον) (65) of the divine presence. When the magician has completed the rituals, “a blazing star will come down and stand in the middle of the housetop and the star will be dissolved before your eyes” (75–78). Similarly, in “Mithras Liturgy” (IV.474–829), the god’s manifestation is signaled by lightning bolts and falling stars (702–704), and in the Corpus Hermeticum the gods in heaven are visible in the forms of stars with all their signs (Corp.Herm. 3.2). Again, in the Gospel of Judas the great invisible spirit as described by Jesus: “Let an angel come into being as my assistant/to stand by me,” and an angel emerged from a cloud of light. In the Testament of Solomon also, which is dated to the third or fourth century and which contains elements of Jewish demonology and magic, the daimon whom the god sent to Solomon described himself as γόνος εἰμὶ τοῦ μεγάλου, and when Solomon asked him ἐν ποίῳ ἀστρῷ κεῖσαι, he showed where his star is in the heavens.  

The next stage of the epiphany is described: when this blazing star comes down as stated, “you will look at the angel whom you summoned and who has been sent to you and you will quickly learn the gods’ wishes” (75–77). Then the magician should “approach the god and, taking his right hand, kiss it and say these words to the angel” (77–78). The magician should also prepare some food and Mendesian wine and “set these before the god with an uncorrupted boy serving and keeping silence, until the angel departs” (86–87).  

A major interpretative problem arises at this point. How should we understand these formally different references to “the god” and “the angel”? Ciraolo states that “the term ἄγγελος is used interchangeably with θεός, essentially as

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7 For the possible purposes of this spell see I.98–127.
synonyms, and the word does not appear to have any special connotations.” Similarly, according to O’Neil: “this angel or messenger (ἄγγελος) is also referred to as ‘the god’ throughout the spell.” But could these words effectively be used as synonyms here?

It will be helpful first to look at the comparative material, a series of paredros spells that have their own interest and problems. We can consider these spells in their own right before returning to the Spell of Pnouthis.

(a) “Spell to Selene” (I.147 ff.), which is included in the Spell of Pnouthis. In this spell also there is a similar manifestation of the god as “some star from heaven setting itself gradually free and becoming divine/deified (θεοποι[ο]δμ[ε]νον)” (154–155), and there are again references both to “the god of gods” (162) and to “the angel” (173, 177).

(b) Spell LVII.1–37, a compulsive spell addressed to the goddess Isis. At the beginning the magician requests of Isis “give me a sign of the results (σημείον μοι τῶν ἀποτελεσμάτων δός)” (16–17), nicely anticipating the successful completion of the spell. Isis’ sign is then described: “you will see a star … that has hurled an image (χαρκτήρα) and leapt into you yourself, so that you become stricken by god (θεόπληκτον)”


10 Similarly see VII.799–801.

11 “Results” is the normal meaning of ἀποτελέσματα. Hock, in Betz 285, prosaically renders it “things that are going to happen”; Preisendanz translates “Vollendung.”
It is also made clear to the magician that “the image (χαρακτήρ) from the goddess (πρὸς θεᾶς) is that of Kronos, who encourages you” (27). Here the conception of assistance involves Isis and her image Kronos. So the magician is instructed, ἔχε [δὲ εἰς φυλακῇ πρὸς οκείμενον τὸν χαρακτῆρα (25–26). Hock translates this “wear the above picture for protection,” but that rendering of πρὸς οκείμενον would require the word order τὸν πρὸς οκείμενον χαρακτῆρα, and the notion of “wearing” a physical “picture” introduces a step into the sequence which does not seem to be there. So the sentence should rather be translated “have as protection the [mental] image set before you,” with both εἰς φυλακῇ and πρὸς οκείμενον having predicative force.

The goddess’ revelation to the magician in the Isis spell is similar to the god’s manifestation in the spell of Pnouthis (I.75–78, 154–155). In the Isis spell, as in the spell of Pnouthis, the goddess/god sends a sign to the magician. In both spells, the divine, initially, reveals itself through a natural phenomenon, the fall of a star. In the spell of Pnouthis, an angel is sent to the magician, in the present spell the image of Kronos. In both cases the god/goddess serves as a divine assistant to the magician through the angel or the image, which are the final

12 On the thunderbolt associated with the star (ἀστεροβλής) presented as striking the initiate in the mysteries see R. Seaford, Euripides’ Bacchae (London 1997) 197; for ἀστεροβλήσαι in relation to magic see Porph. V.Plot. 10.4–5; on a mystic level compare Dionysus’ epiphany in Euripides’ Bacchae as Dionysus and the [his] image ὁ Βρόμος … φάσμ’ ἐποίησεν κατ’ αὐλήν … φαεννὸν <αἰθέρ> (or φαεννὴ <εἰκὼν>) (629–631).

13 Hock translates πρὸς θεᾶς as “in the name of the goddess,” but the sense of the goddess as agent is what is required.

14 The term paredros is not used here, but the phrase τοις συνεργήσαι (31) indicates the assistant.

15 Preisendanz also translates “Halt aber [zu deinem Schutz] das vorliegende Zauherzeichen bereit.”

16 The explicitly mentioned physical images at XII.17–20, IV.1722–1740, and VII.869–870 are a different matter.

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forms of the transformable signs of the divine epiphany. Nevertheless, there is one difference: in the Isis spell, the magician himself becomes stricken by the god.

(c) The erotic “Lunar spell of Claudianus and ritual of heaven and the Bear constellation over lunar offerings” (VII.862–918). The conception of πάρεδρος here involves the “Mistress Selene the Egyptian” (κυρίαν Σελήνην Αἰγυπτίαν, 871) and her “sacred angel or assistant” (ἱερόν ἄγγελον ἡ πάρεδρον, 883). Thus, when among her many epithets (881–883) Selene is described as “lady of the night, walking through the air” (νυξία, ἱροδία, 882) these words help to anticipate the invocation to “send forth your angel from among those who assist you, the one who is the leader of the night” (ἕκαστον ἄγγελον σου ἐκ tôn παρεδρευόντων σο[ pupperon], καθηγού-μενον τῆς νυκτός, 891–892). This invocation also sketches a hierarchy among the assistants and a connection between Selene and the magician who summons her: the goddess Selene has “assistants”; their “leader” is to become the magician’s “assistant.”

The moment in which the goddess is magically efficient is associated with an allusion to the visual image of a physical phenomenon, that of fire: “but when you see the goddess becoming fiery red (πυρρὰν), know that she is, already, attracting (ἄγει ἐδη)” (889–890).

The spell also involves a shrine of olive wood and the ritual of preparing a clay image of the goddess, κυρίαν Σελήνην Αἰγυπτίαν ... σχηματιζομένην παντομορφον (871–872). O’Neil

17 The epithet ἱροδία occurs only here and is not found in LSJ; but εἴσοδία is used to describe a deity in the PGM, see PGM ad loc.

18 Note also a similar hierarchy in the address “assistants (παρεδρος) of the great god” (IV.1349), in which the arch-daimons are subordinate this time both to the magician and to the great god (spell IV.1331–1389, in which the “Bear constellation” is also mentioned).

19 On the association of angels and fire, as their source, cf. the Jewish Book of Mysteries, Sepher Ha-Razim: M. A. Morgan, Sepher Ha-Razim: The Book of the Mysteries (Chico 1983) 21.
translates “making her in the form of the Universe.” The adjective παντόµορφος or πάµµορφος can certainly be used of the Universe (cf. LSJ), and this is relevant here, because of the subsequent descriptions of Selene as “mistress of the whole cosmos” (δέσποινα τοῦ σύνπαντος κόσμου) and “ruler of the entire cosmic system” (καθηγουµένη αυστήµατος τοῦ σύµπαντος) (881–882), but it literally means “of all forms,” and the critical question is: who is doing the shaping (σχηµατίζω)? On O’Neil’s interpretation, the verb is passive—“being shaped” by the magician. But this is difficult and the verb is surely better taken as describing Selene in the middle voice, the one “assuming all forms.” Elsewhere, another god, Eros, is described as “the master of the forms” (δεσπότης τῶν µορφῶν, XII.50–51) in the spell called “Eros as an assistant” (XII.14–95). The various forms of Eros are emphasised when the magician asks Eros to serve him “assuming the likeness (παρµοιούµενος) of a god (or a goddess) such as men and women worship” (41–42). Similarly Eros is asked to accomplish his task as written on a piece of papyrus, “having assumed the likeness (παρµοιοµοθείς) of a god (or a goddess) whom he (or she) worships” (83).

(d) “The old serving woman of Apollonius of Tyana” (XIa.1–40). The goddess invoked by the magician is described as “the goddess called the mistress of the house (οἰκουργός)”

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20 Preisendanz: “dargestellt als Allgestaltige.”

This phrase translates the name of the Egyptian goddess Nephthys, the wife of Seth. Moreover, in this spell there are elements of the goddess’ association with Seth, such as the use of “Typhon’s skull” in the ritual to be practised for the goddess’ manifestation, her appearance “sitting on an ass,” and the “tooth from the ass” (1–2, 11, 22).

The description of the goddess’ manifestation in two physically different forms needs close examination. She first appears in the form of a young woman of extraordinary beauty, and when the magician tells her, “I have a need of you with regard to the services of life (εἰς τὰς τοῦ βίου ὑπηρεσίας),” she will immediately strip off her beauty and be transformed into an old woman (16–18). In the form of the old woman she will tell the magician, “I will be your servant and assist you (ἐγώ σοι ὑπηρετήσω καὶ παρέδρευσω)” (17). Then the goddess will again take on her beauty, which she had just taken off, and will ask to be released (19). Once the magician ensures that the old woman will serve him, he must release the goddess (31–32). At this point the goddess and the old woman clearly become two different entities. The old woman is maintained inseparable from the magician, by her own molar tooth and by the tooth from the ass that the goddess gives him (21–22). When the magician wants to release the divinity in the old woman’s form, he must make fire and throw the teeth into it.

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22 For οἰκωμός note also possible influence from Iamblichus’ reference (Myst. 9.2) to οἰκοδεσπότης “master of the house,” the planet that sends the personal daimon to the individuals, while οἰκός is the technical term for the region of the zodiac sign of one’s birth.


24 On the reference to the fat of a black ass in the magician’s offering to the Bear and its identification with Seth/Typhon see the spell IV.1331–1389, at 1332, 1334–1335.

25 As to “clothing” and “unclothing” verbs describing the goddess’ changes of appearance, such imagery is often used both to denote physical, psychological, or philosophical changes and in ritual contexts. This spell has clear folk-tale elements.
and the old woman will flee without a trace.  

Here, the motif of a god or goddess assuming various forms, already examined in the previous spells, is simplified, by ascribing to the goddess human forms.

In addition to these four comparanda, the relation to the various forms of the divine can be studied in the Gnostic Apocryphon of John, written in Coptic, from the Nag Hammadi library. Here John describes a similar epiphany of Jesus, upon which the world was shaken and the heavens opened and John saw “in the light [a youth who stood] by me. While I looked [at him he became] like an old man. And he [changed his] likeness (again) becoming like a servant. There was [not a plurality] before me, but there was a [likeness] with multiple forms in the light, and the [likenesses] appeared through each other, [and] the [likeness] had three forms.”

The “many” forms of the god in magic and the Gnostic description of Jesus as a “[likeness] with multiple forms” may be compared to contemporary Neoplatonist thought. Plotinus, for example, argues that the “one” (ἕν) is at the same time also many (άμα καὶ πολλά) and that “a manifold one (τι ποικίλον ἕν) has the many in one” (Enn. 6.2.2.2 ff.). Iamblichus refers to the “one” god Helios and his many forms and to his manifold powers reflecting his one power.

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26 See also VII.914–916.
28 On the “one and many” and σύγκρασις in the Neoplatonists see Plot. Enn. 6.2.2.22, 6.3.25, 3.3.4; Porph. V.Plot. 31.9; Iamb. Comm.Math. p.29.1 Fest. Theo.Lar. p.5.18 de Falco; Procl. In Tim. II 268.1–3 Diehl.
29 Iamb. Myst. 7.3.12–16: διὰ τοῦ πλήθους τῶν δοθέντων τῶν ἐνα θεόν ἐμφαίνειν, καὶ διὰ τῶν πολυτρόπων δυνάμεων τὴν μιᾶν αὐτοῦ παριστάναι

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We may now bring these five spells and their portrayed epiphanies together in tabular form:

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<td>Sign: God</td>
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<td>Angel</td>
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<td>God</td>
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<td>Selene</td>
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<td>(Sign: Goddess)</td>
<td>Beautiful woman</td>
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</table>

**Conclusions**

Reviewing this phenomenological study of epiphanies of the paredroi, as the spell itself and as a god or goddess revealed as another entity, we can return to the initial question of how the terms paredros and god are being used in the Pnouthis spell and the comparative material: is it right to claim that “the god” and “the angel” are used interchangeably and are effectively synonyms? First, certainly at the beginning of the magic ritual,

dόναμνεν διὸ καὶ φησιν αὐτὸν ἑνα εἶναι καὶ τὸν αὐτὸν, τὰς δὲ διαμεῖψες τῆς μορφῆς καὶ τοὺς μετασχηματισμοὺς ἐν τοῖς δεχομένως ὑποτίθεται.

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this is incorrect: the magician would never pray to an “angel” to send him a “god.” Rather, he prays to the “god” to send him an “angel.” A matter of divine hierarchy is involved.

Second, all these spells are based on the logic that the πάρεδρος, originating from/sent by a god or goddess, may be revealed to the magician as an angel, the image of Kronos, or in the form of an old woman, but the god or goddess remains one entity and the sign of his/her epiphany gradually becomes another entity—the angel, the image of Kronos, or the old woman.

Third, the distinction between the god or goddess on the one hand and the angel, image of Kronos, or old woman on the other as two physical or divine entities simplifies the concept of πάρεδρος and aids in its being understood. This distinction also means that these forms of the god/goddess' manifestation to humans as angel, image of Kronos, or old woman could be easily conceptualised by the magician.

This distinction seems more difficult in the spell of Pnouthis, with the words “approach the god and, taking his right hand, kiss it and say these words to the angel” (I.77–78) and “set these before the god with an uncorrupted boy serving and keeping silence, until the angel departs” (86–87). But it is wrong to say that the terms angel and god are interchangeable here. Rather, they expose an intrinsic problem—the exact determination of divinity. The magicians here seem to be engaged in a deep theological sense with the religious and philosophical problem of the divine, referred to in these instances as god and its various transformable forms.30

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