

Wealth, Profit, and Social Capital in the Greek Magical Papyri

Philip F. Venticinque

IT HAS BEEN SAID that people in antiquity used magic to respond to anxieties, risks, and uncertainties they experienced over many things: health, love, law, money, and, for craftsmen and merchants, production and commerce.¹ Pliny the Elder (28.4) and Pollux (7.108) suggested that merchants and craftsmen, particularly potters and smiths, commonly resorted to apotropaic amulets and figurines to protect their workshops. Both authors likely followed a long tradition evidenced by texts like *The Kiln*, a late sixth- or fifth-century BCE poem which speaks of kiln daemons that potters feared: smasher (*suntrips*), crasher (*smaragos*), overblaze (*asbestos*), shaker (*salaktes*), and destroyer of the unbaked (*omodamos*).² Material evidence confirms use of the magical tools, so to speak, that the literary record describes. Curse tablets targeted craftsmen, merchants, and their shops, and charms placed near kilns and forges, such as depicted

¹ J. Dieleman, “Coping with a Difficult Life. Magic, Healing, and Sacred Knowledge,” in C. Riggs (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Egypt* (Oxford 2012) 337–338; R. Gordon, “Fixing the Race: Managing Risks in the Circus at Carthage and Hadrumetum,” in M. Piranomonte et al. (eds.), *Contesti Magici/Contexts of Magic* (Rome 2012) 47–74; E. Eidinow, *Oracles, Curses, and Risk among the Ancient Greeks* (Oxford 2007); F. Graf, “How to Cope with a Difficult Life. A View of Ancient Magic,” in P. Schäfer et al. (eds.), *Envisioning Magic. A Princeton Seminar and Symposium* (Leiden 1997) 113–114, and *Magic in the Ancient World* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1997) 157–158.

² C. A. Faraone, “A Collection of Curses against Kilns (Homeric Epigram 13.7–23),” in A. Y. Collins et al. (eds.), *Antiquity and Humanity: Essays on Ancient Religion and Philosophy presented to Hans Dieter Betz* (Tübingen 2001) 435–450.

on the Berlin Foundry Cup, indicate recourse to such measures.³ The Greek magical papyri, a collection of individual texts and handbooks from Egypt mostly dating from the second to fifth century CE, also included spells to confront a variety of problems, including financial ones.⁴ Though some addressed anxieties over money by detailing how to use Homeric verses inscribed on an iron lamella to procure inheritances, others were more clearly intended to assuage the concerns of craftsmen and merchants, like the spell for calling in customers, known as the “little beggar,” which promised not only wealth but a more successful workshop.⁵

Given the nature of the ancient economy, there was much to worry about, whether working in a marketplace, at home, or in a workshop. In addition to dealing with competitors and production risks, the costs of doing business (transaction costs) were high, and imperfect information about goods, services, clients, and partners (and their behaviors) complicated transactions.⁶ To confront such challenges, craftsmen and merchants used various

³ J. G. Gager, *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World* (Oxford 1992) 151–174; C. R. Potts, “The Art of Piety and Profit,” *G&R* 56 (2009) 55–70; C. C. Mattusch, “The Berlin Foundry Cup: The Casting of Greek Bronze Statuary in the Early Fifth Century B.C.,” *AJA* 84 (1980) 437.

⁴ K. Preisendanz and A. Henrichs, *Papyri Graecae magicae*² (Stuttgart 1973–1974); transl. H. D. Betz, ed., *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation, Including the Demotic Spells* (Chicago 1986).

⁵ *PGM* IV 2145–2240 (2175 for inheritances). For the “little beggar,” IV 2373–2440.

⁶ On transaction costs see R. H. Coase, “The Nature of the Firm,” *Economica* 4 (1937) 386–405, and “The Problem of Social Cost,” *Journal of Law and Economics* 3 (1960) 1–44; T. Eggertsson, *Economic Behavior and Institutions* (Cambridge 1990) 13–16. For antiquity see B. W. Frier and D. P. Kehoe, “Law and Economic Institutions,” in W. Scheidel et al. (eds.), *The Cambridge Economic History of the Greco-Roman World* (Cambridge 2007) 115–117; D. P. Kehoe, D. M. Ratzan, and U. Yiftach, “Introduction: Transaction Costs, Ancient History, and the Law,” in D. P. Kehoe et al. (eds.), *Law and Transaction Costs in the Ancient Economy* (Ann Arbor 2015) 1–35. On imperfect information see G. Akerlof, “The Market for ‘Lemons’: Quality Uncertainty and the Market Mechanism,” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 84 (1970) 488–500.

strategies. Individuals may have specialized where possible to carve out a niche.⁷ Many invested in social capital—defined variously as reputation, trust, esteem, and social networks—supported by these factors and by shared norms that facilitated, among other things, access to information about goods, customers, and colleagues, which can reduce transaction costs.⁸ They did so in several ways: by forming partnerships, relying on informal and formal networks, or maintaining membership in professional associations (described as *koina*, *sunodoi*, and *collegia* among other terms) to share resources.⁹ In particular, associations, which proliferated throughout the Hellenistic and Roman periods, institutionalized economic and social norms in their organizational charters by pairing financial rules with other rules about conduct towards colleagues. Following norms and establishing a positive reputation helped members generate social capital that could be so critical to success.¹⁰

Desire for wealth, success, and profit features prominently in many Greek magical texts that focus on business and commerce (less so in the Demotic magical texts compiled in many of the

⁷ K. Ruffing, “Driving Forces for Specialization: Market, Location Factors, Productivity Improvements,” in A. Wilson et al. (eds.), *Urban Craftsmen and Traders in the Roman World* (Oxford 2016) 115–131.

⁸ J. S. Coleman, “Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital,” *American Journal of Sociology* 94 (1988) S95–S120; R. Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (New York 2000) 19–22; S. Ogilvie, *Institutions and European Trade: Merchant Guilds, 1000–1800* (Cambridge 2011) 6–13.

⁹ See W. Broekaert, “Joining Forces: Commercial Partnerships or *Societates* in the Early Roman Empire,” *Historia* 61 (2012) 221–251; C. Hawkins, *Roman Artisans and the Urban Economy* (Cambridge 2016).

¹⁰ On associations see O. van Nijf, *The Civic World of Professional Associations in the Roman East* (Amsterdam 1997); P. Harland, *Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations. Claiming a Place in Ancient Mediterranean Society* (Minneapolis 2003); J. Liu, *The Collegia Centonariorum: The Guilds of Textile Dealers in the Roman West* (Leiden 2009); M. Gibbs, “Trade Associations in Roman Egypt: Their Reason d’Être,” *AncSoc* 41 (2011) 291–315; W. Broekaert, “Partners in Business: Roman Merchants and the Potential Advantages of Being a *Collegiatus*,” *AncSoc* 41 (2011) 221–256; P. F. Venticinque, *Honor among Thieves: Craftsmen, Merchants, and Associations in Roman and Late Roman Egypt* (Ann Arbor 2016).

same handbooks), but they do not speak to specialization as a solution for money problems or to anxieties related to production damage or loss. Instead, the *PGM* spells combine prayers for wealth or success with other seemingly non-economic requests including favor or charm (χάρις), elegance (ἐπαφροδισία), and reputation (εὐδοξία), the sorts of things related to and emblematic of social capital upon which craftsmen and merchants relied. By connecting profit and social capital in this way, the Greek spells reflect not only common concerns, but also the strategies craftsmen and merchants used to find success, at least partly, in their interactions with colleagues, customers, and competitors as described by documentary texts, inscriptions, and association charters. In this way, like documentary texts, the magical texts offer a different approach to understanding ancient economic thinking and practices when compared to literary texts; they suggest that profit, not just status, was crucial. Reading these texts alongside documents describing the actual practices of craftsmen and merchants also shows that a link between earning profit and investing in social capital was important in theory and practice.

Places, people, and prosperity

The *PGM*'s commercial spells emphasize attracting wealth or business to a place or a person and guarding that prosperity. The longest of the magical handbooks, a fourth-century bilingual Greek and Old Coptic text from Thebes (*PGM IV*), contains several commercial spells that share a concern for increasing a workshop's business, customers, and prosperity by means of figurines, sacrifices, offerings, and formulas. A short "business spell" (πρακτικόν) at IV 2359–2372, for instance, directs a practitioner to make a hollow Hermes figurine with a herald's staff in his left hand and a small money bag in his right. The spell next requires placing papyrus strips inscribed with secret names and formal requests of the god "to give income (πόρος) and business (πρῶξις) to this place, because Psentebeth lives here"

inside the statue to activate, if not animate, the figurine.¹¹ After hiding the statue in a wall of a house or workshop, the practitioner would need to offer a sacrifice, Egyptian wine, and to light a lamp to preserve its efficacy.

Two other spells contained in the same handbook claim to offer similar benefits: the so-called “little beggar” spell at *PGM* IV 2373–2440 and a spell for a phylactery to assure prosperity at IV 3125–3171. The “little beggar” spell, otherwise referred to as a “charm for acquiring business (καταπρακτικόν) and calling in customers (κατακλητικόν),” sought wealth and success partly through increased work (ἐργασία) for the practitioner’s business (πρῶξις). Like the business spell, the little beggar called for crafting a beeswax figurine, making sacrifices, and inscribing names, prayers, and formulas on papyrus strips.¹² The spell directed the practitioner to model a man “in the position of begging” so that customers will be attracted either to a workshop (ἐργαστήριον) or a house (οἰκία)—two foci of commercial activity.¹³ The spell also claims that the figurine will work wherever you put it and assures that by virtue of possessing it wealth and success await:

¹¹ For material placed in statues see C. A. Faraone, *Talismans and Trojan Horses. Guardian Statues in Ancient Greek Myth and Ritual* (Oxford 1992) 109–110 nn.41 and 43; D. Tarn Steiner, *Images in Mind. Statues in Archaic and Classical Greek Literature and Thought* (Princeton 2001) 114–120; S. I. Johnston, “Animating Statues: A Case-Study in Ritual,” *Arethusa* 41 (2008) 445–477. On statues in the *PGM* see A. Haluszka, “Sacred Signified: The Semiotics of Statues in the *Greek Magical Papyri*,” *Arethusa* 41 (2008) 479–494. On Egyptian traditions see J. Dieleman and I. Moyer, “Miniaturization and the Opening of the Mouth in a Greek Magical Text (*PGM* XIII 270–350),” *JANER* 3 (2003) 63.

¹² For spells to call in customers see also *Suppl.Mag.* II 97.7–9.

¹³ On Roman retail see C. Holleran, *Shopping in Ancient Rome. The Retail Trade in Late Republic and the Principate* (Oxford 2012). For location of production and trade see D. P. Kehoe, “The Early Roman Empire: Production,” in *The Cambridge Economic History* 559–566; P. Goodman, “Working Together: Clusters of Artisans in the Roman City,” in A. Wilson et al. (eds.), *Urban Craftsmen and Traders in the Roman World* (Oxford 2016) 314–323; for Egypt see D. Rathbone, “Roman Egypt,” in *The Cambridge Economic History* 708–709.

“by holding it, you will be wealthy and you will succeed” (ἔχων αὐτὸ πλουτήσεις, ἐπιτεύξει).

The phylactery for success (*PGM* IV 3122–3169) offers many of the same benefits and also required a wax statue to assure prosperity. Rather than a statue of Hermes or a begging man, however, the practitioner must make a figurine of a three-headed composite Egyptian god with the body of mummified Osiris often called “Pantheos” whom the spell identifies as Agathos Daimon.¹⁴ In addition to secret names written on papyrus and a magnetite gem placed inside the statue, sacrifices and libations also were needed to bring about what the spell promises: plentiful business (μεγάλως πράξει, 3130) for a shop, workshop, or wherever it is placed. Both Agathos Daimon and Pantheos, who is depicted in various ways, remained popular for protection beyond the Roman period. An amulet depicting Pantheos with scepters, bird tail, and wings is engraved with the imperative “protect!” (διαφύλαξον) on its reverse; several third-century examples bear variations of the formula “protect from all evil” (φύλαξον ἀπὸ παντὸς κακοῦ).¹⁵ Relying on a Pantheos figurine to do more than safeguard but also financially benefit a house or workshop seems to be an extension of the deity’s protective aspect.

Attention to the prosperity of a specific place can be found elsewhere in the *PGM*. The “Binding love spell (*philtrokatadesmos*) of Astrapsoukos” included in a fourth- or fifth-century book roll, perhaps from Hermonthis or Thebes, but not a part of the same Theban library as *PGM* IV, is one such text (*PGM* VIII 1–63).¹⁶ Yet despite its title, the spell is actually focused on commerce. The prayers addressed to Hermes concern wealth and prosperity, not attempts to compel affection, and the spell includes a

¹⁴ On Pantheos see C. A. Faraone, *The Transformation of Greek Amulets in Roman Imperial Times* (Philadelphia 2018) 144–147; see also C. Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets* (Ann Arbor 1950) nos. 251–261.

¹⁵ Bonner, *Studies* no. 257; S. Michel, *Die magischen Gemmen im Britischen Museum* (London 2001) nos. 290–292.

¹⁶ Cf. K. Dosoo, “A History of the Theban Magical Library,” *BASP* 53 (2016) 251–274, at 265–266.

request to force people to “open up their hands” and dispense gifts (18–19). The instructions for fashioning a wooden figurine of an animal dressed like Hermes also allude to commerce (54–59):

Take a piece of olive wood and make a small dog-faced baboon sitting down, wearing the winged helmet of Hermes and a box on its back, and inscribe the name of Hermes on the papyrus and put it in the box. Write in myrrh ink, praying for what you do or what you wish, and after putting a lid on, burn incense and place it where you wish in the middle of the workshop (ἐργαστήριον).
(transl. O’Neil)

Like the spells in *PGM IV*, the formulas written on the papyrus request business (πρᾶξις) and prosperity (εὐπορία) for the workshop. In this case, however, the prayers specifically ask for wealth and prosperity to be shared with the workshop’s proprietor (61–62).

Echoing the importance of location, a short spell in another fourth-century handbook from the Theban library that contained *PGM IV* prescribes a ritual intended to bring success to a workshop, but does so without using a figurine (*PGM XII* 96–106). Instead, the practitioner is tasked with burying magical material, specifically a bird egg inscribed with formulas, at the shop or home and offering a prayer to Agathos Daimon, identified as Ammon, “to send business and good daily profit” (ἐπαπόστειλον τῷδε τῷ τόπῳ πᾶσαν πρᾶξιν καὶ εὐ[π]ορίαν καθημερινήν). Similarly, a short, fifth- or sixth-century spell of unknown provenance (*Suppl. Mag.* II 97.7–9), described as a *katakletikon* like the “little beggar” spell in *PGM IV*, tells the practitioner to inscribe a triangular potsherd with the blood of a “Pontic mouse” and bury it in the place meant to prosper.

Other spells concentrate less on place; rather, by means of rings and amulets, these seek to benefit and bring profit to the wearer. For example, the instructions for creating a ring “for success and favor and victory,” engraved with a depiction of Helios, describe a charm that can do a great deal: fulfill desires, appease superiors, defeat opponents, and cure demoniacs (*PGM XII* 270–350). However, the ring also renders its wearer rich

(πλούσιος), provides profit (πόρος), and “makes men famous and great and admired and rich as can be, or it makes possible friendships with suchlike men” (ἐνδόξους ποιεῖ καὶ μεγάλους καὶ θαυμαστοὺς καὶ πλουσίους κατὰ δύναμιν ἢ τοιούτων φιλίας παρέχει, 271–272, transl. Smith).

Wealth, profit, and social capital

A focus on wealth (πόρος or πλοῦτος) and business (πρᾶξις) unites the commercial spells contained in the magical papyri. Spells like the “little beggar” and the *philtrokatadesmos* even include requests for financial capital and outward trappings of wealth like gold, silver, and clothing; the same spells, however, also ask for a variety of seemingly non-economic qualities. The “little beggar” spell, for instance, seeks “favor” or “charm,” as χάρις in the magical papyri is often translated, along with financial capital in the prayer intended to accompany the ritual and the consecration of the wax figurine (IV 2438–2440): “Give me favor, work for my business. Bring to me silver, gold, clothing, much wealth for the good of it” (δός μοι οὖν χάριν, ἐργασίαν εἰς ταύτην μου τὴν πρᾶξιν, φέρε μοι ἀργύρια, χρυσόν, ἱμ[ατ]ι[σ]μόν, πλοῦτον πολύολβον ἐπ’ ἀγαθῶι). In fact, with the exception of the *praktikon* spell (IV 2354–2367), which appears to focus solely on wealth and success for a workshop, the others all include requests beyond financial success and explore the relationship between wealth, profit, and social capital as well as that between workshops and craftsmen and merchants.

Like the “little beggar” spell, the instructions for making the Pantheos figure also connect favor with income or wealth and business. The spell the practitioner must sing before opening his shop makes the link clear (IV 3165–3171):

“Give me all favor (χάρις), all business (πρᾶξις), for the angel bringing good, who stands beside [the goddess] Tyche, is with you. Accordingly, give wealth (πόρος) [and] business to this house. Please, Aion, ruler of hope, giver of wealth, O holy Agathos Daimon, bring to fulfillment all favors and your divine oracles.” Then open [your establishment] and you will marvel at the unsurpassed holy power. (transl. Smith, adapted)

The spell’s description also indicates that favor and success are

related to a desire for notoriety (3125–3130):

Whenever you want a place to prosper greatly (εὐπορεῖσθαι μεγάλως), so that those in the place or temple where the phylactery is hidden will marvel, [use this rite.] For wherever this [phylactery] be placed, if in a temple, the temple will be talked about throughout the whole world; if in some other place, [the place] will prosper greatly (μεγάλως πράξει).

In other words, notoriety, and perhaps, given the commercial context, a specific favorable reputation associated with the practitioner and his establishment are tied to the prosperity (εὐπορία) that the rite aimed to achieve. Someone could be rich in money and possessions, but recognition—or reputation, as the case may be—not only is connected to, but is a type of, wealth and capital in and of itself that can also be accumulated and used.

The *philtrokatadesmos* spell (VIII 1–63) echoes the same sentiment as found in the “little beggar” about social and financial capital connecting places and people. This spell aligns several requests for wealth or prosperity and business with favor and similar personal qualities. After fashioning the statue out of olive wood that the spell requires, the practitioner is to write out formulas and requests on papyrus strips and place them in the box that the statue holds to assure success for the workshop and the practitioner (60–63):

In addition, write also these great names “IAO SABAOTH ADONAIE ABLANATHANALBA AKRAMMACHAMAREI, 365, give to the workshop (ἐργαστήριον) business (πράξις), favor (χάρις), prosperity (εὐπορία), elegance (ἐπαφροδισία), both to NN himself and to his workshop, immediately, immediately, quickly, quickly.” (transl. O’Neil)

What is written on the papyrus repeats in part the prayer uttered to Hermes that accompanied the rite. The prayer asks Hermes to grant the practitioner favor (χάρις), sustenance (τροφή), victory (νικῆ), prosperity (εὐημερία), elegance (ἐπαφροδισία), beauty (προσώπου εἶδος), and strength (ἀλκή) (4–5) along with gold and silver (31). These prayers are expanded upon at 36 where the practitioner requests business (πράξις) and prosperity (εὐπορία) as part of a longer prayer for help and protection for

himself and the workshop (20–35):

Wherefore, give me favor, form, beauty. Hear me, Hermes, benefactor, [inventor] of drugs; be easy to talk to and hear me, just as you have done everything in the form of your Ethiopian dog-faced baboon, the lord of chthonic daimons. Calm them all and give me strength, form (add the usual), and let them give me gold and silver, and every sustenance which will never fail. Preserve me always through all eternity, from drugs and deceits, every slander and evil tongues, from every daimonic possession, from every hatred of both gods and men. Let them give me favor and victory and business and prosperity. (transl. O’Neil)

O’Neil translated εὐπορία as “prosperity,” but given papyrological resonance and technical usage, the word can invoke the possession of resources required to hold minor or major offices and liturgies. Those deemed wealthy (εὐπορος) and suitable (ἐπιτήδειος) could be tapped to serve in various capacities based on an estimate of their wealth and property (πόρος) in census records.¹⁷ Thus the prayer unites personal characteristics, like elegance and favor, with economic benefits in the pursuit of the practitioner’s ends, in this case wealth and more business for the workshop. The request, then, could entail not only a desire for wealth but, perhaps, also some standing in the local community.

Another short spell, addressed to Helios, in a fourth-century handbook from Theadelphia in the Fayum, ostensibly grants victory and restrains anger, but also combines wealth or business success with social and personal benefits (*PGM XXXVI* 211–230). As detailed in this rite, the practitioner is to anoint his hand and wipe it on his head and face and offer a prayer to the sun seven times. After calling on the god and reciting *voces magicae*, the prayer asks for many things besides victory and restraining anger: health (ὕγία), influence (δύναμις), and strength (ἰσχύς), but also success (ἐπιτυχία), charm/elegance (ἐπαφροδισία),

¹⁷ Venticinque, *Honor among Thieves* 134, 147–154; cf. N. Lewis, *The Compulsory Public Services of Roman Egypt* (Florence 1997). For πόρος estimates in reports, including of craftsmen and merchants, see *Sel.Pap.* II 342 (169 CE) and 343 (early III), *P.Fay* 23 (150), *BGU* I 6 (157/8), *P.Col.* VIII 230 (200–225).

favor (χάρις), reputation (δόξα), and wealth (πλοῦτος) (221–227):

I beg you, lord, do not allow me to be overthrown, to be plotted against, to receive dangerous drugs (φάρμακα), to go into exile, to fall upon hard times. Rather, I ask to obtain and receive from you life, health, reputation, wealth, influence, strength, success, charm, favor with all men and all women, victory over all men and all women. (transl. Hock)

Though the specific requests indicate an applicability to multiple situations, its concern with wealth and success parallels commercial spells and suggests a use for financial matters if not necessarily for a shop or workshop.

This spell's inclusion of clauses focused on prevention of being overthrown, plotted against, slandered, or falling prey to *pharmaka* thus does not preclude a commercial context. The same can be said of the evil tongues, deceit, and slander from which the *philtrokatadesmos* offered its practitioner protection. Anxiety over curses (born of jealousy among professionals or otherwise) was considered to be particularly strong among craftsmen like potters and smiths (n.2 above). In addition, concerns over deceit and libel were precisely what professional associations in first-century Tebtunis sought to limit in their charters: these forbade slander, bearing false witness against colleagues, or prosecuting other group members.¹⁸

PGM IV was not the only handbook in the Theban library with prayers seeking both financial and social capital. Several spells in *PGM XII*, a third-century bilingual Greek/Demotic handbook that was among the library's contents, links profit and wealth (εὐπορία), business (πρᾶξις), and favor (χάρις) for the practitioner and the shop.¹⁹ The prayer contained in a text entitled "Himerios' Recipes" (XII 96–106) focuses on a workshop's success and is explicit about the relationship between social capital and profit. The practitioner is to write formulas on an egg and place it near the threshold of his home (which likely housed the workshop) and offer a prayer (104–106):

¹⁸ See *P.Mich.* V 243.6–8 (14–37 CE).

¹⁹ On the date see Dieleman and Moyer, *JANER* 3 (2003) 48.

The prayer concerning the egg: “Great God, give favor (χάρις), business (πράξις) to me and to this place where the egg lies, in the house I do my business, SELEPĒL THEŌĒPH and Good Daimon, send to this place every business (πάσα πράξις) and good daily profit (εὐπορία καθημερινή). You are my work. You are the great Ammon, who dwells in heaven. Come, help me. (transl. Hock)

Favor (χάρις) for its wearer is also among the powers of a ring fashioned according to instructions in the same roll (XII 270–350). The spell claims that a wearer will not only accomplish all that is desired, but will also be trusted and pleasing (ἐπίχαρις) to all (279). The spell also offers financial boons along with other qualities that would lead to what seems to be the ultimate goal of the text: to be famous (ἔνδοξος), great (μέγας), admired (θαυμαστός), and rich (πλούσιος)—or to produce friendships with the rich and powerful (271–272). But to be famous, admired, and rich also entails a combination of social and economic benefits, something the spell makes clear with its promise to produce profits (πόρους πάντας περιποιεῖν, 304) along with other benefits.

Christopher Faraone has connected spells like this to a Neo-Assyrian ritual practice called *egalkura*. Such spells typically relied on ointments, knotted cords, or rings like the one described in *PGM* XII 270–350, and sought “to enhance one’s attractiveness in the eyes of a superior” and “increase personal charisma.”²⁰ Whatever was the influence of different traditions, spells intended to increase charisma or status (perceived or actual), requesting favor (χάρις), referred to as *charitēsía*, are fairly common in the *PGM*.²¹ According to David Jordan’s tally, at least thirty-two texts contain a request for χάρις; the usual formula asks or

²⁰ C. A. Faraone, *Ancient Greek Love Magic* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1999) 102–103.

²¹ On *charitēsía* see L. Robert, “Amulettes grecques,” *JSAV* (1981) 42–44; R. Kotansky, *Greek Magical Amulets I* (Cologne 1994) 354–355; Faraone, *Ancient Greek Love Magic* 105–110; J. van der Vliet, “A Coptic ‘Charitesion’ (*P. Gieben Copt.* 1),” *ZPE* 153 (2005) 135–139; M. Cohn, “*P. Mich.* 3404 recto: An Unpublished Magical Papyrus,” *ZPE* 182 (2012) 243–257.

commands a deity to “give charm to me” (δός μοι τήν χάριν).²² *PGM* instructions to prepare amulets for different uses, as well as language inscribed on amulets, also include the same formulaic phrase.²³ Many amulets simply contain the word χάρις in the nominative or accusative as part of designs that depict various deities.²⁴

Normally, *charitēsia* are considered to have little to do with wealth—one spell explicitly states that it is “not about silver and gold.”²⁵ Instead *charitēsia* are thought to have been focused on charisma and social benefits, the sorts of things requested in a third-century spell for victory and favor addressed to Aphrodite/Kypris.²⁶

Your great name, for favor: “Everyone fears your great might. Grant me the good things: the strength of AKRYSKYLOS, the speech of EUŌNOS, the eyes of Solomon, the voice of ABRASAX, the grace of ADŌNIOS, the god. Come to me, Kypris, every day. The Hidden name bestowed to you(?) [is this]: THOATHOË-THOOTHATHOËUSTHOATHITHETHOINTHŌ; grant me victory, repute, beauty toward all men and all women. (transl. Kotansky)

A *charitēsion* in another fourth-century handbook from Thebes, on the other hand, unites a variety of social qualities with wealth and success, as do business spells. A spell called a “procedure for every rite” (*PGM* III 494–611) contains instructions on how to bring about a *sustasis* with Helios, a face-to-face conversation with a deity or higher power that transformed one’s status, offered access to power, or provided “revelatory knowledge.”²⁷

²² D. Jordan, “Notes on Two Michigan Papyri,” *ZPE* 136 (2001) 184.

²³ E.g. *PGM* VII 390–393, VII 215–218; Bonner, *Studies* nos. 7, 192, 206, 265, 355.

²⁴ Bonner, *Studies* nos. 3, 29, 159, 190, 204, 219.

²⁵ Cohn, *ZPE* 182 (2012) 247, col. i.10.

²⁶ *PGM* XCII 1–16 (= *Suppl. Mag.* II 63).

²⁷ Dieleman, in *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Egypt* 355–356; on *sustasis* see also Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World* 105–106.

The spell seeking *sustasis* with Helios in *PGM* III would seem to accomplish a change of status along these lines. Knowledge of the future, as from a divination rite, could result from following the spell's instructions, given its nature as an *omnibus* spell and its inclusion of a request to enlighten the practitioner with knowledge (585).²⁸ But the spell's prayer for financial capital and traits that support social capital serves as a reminder that perhaps nothing changes status or provides revelatory knowledge quite like wealth and success. Attaining (and maintaining) that wealth required a combination of money and characteristics like goodwill (εὐμένεια), sound judgment (εὐβουλία), honor (εὐδοξία), and favor (χάρις), as well as knowledge (575–581):

Come to me with a happy face to a bed of your choice, giving to me, NN, sustenance, health, safety, wealth (πλοῦτος), the blessing of children, knowledge, ready hearing, goodwill, sound judgment, honor, memory, favor, shapeliness, beauty to all who see me; you who hear me in everything whatsoever, give me persuasiveness with words, great god. (transl. O'Neil)

In his brief but insightful comments on *PGM* III 494–611, Graf maintained that the catalogue “described the ideal portrait of a man in Imperial Greco-Roman society,” combining “private virtues” with what he termed “social virtues” which would have helped someone attain an elevated position in society.²⁹ Winkler offered a similar assessment, writing that the list described traits necessary for someone “to shine in his community” and connected the need to display excellence and charisma with success in social interactions.³⁰ Graf framed his remarks within a larger discussion of the inability of modern categories imposed on magical material to correspond to ancient ones: love spells can look like other spells, and charms used to

²⁸ On *omnibus* spells see R. Gordon, “Imagining Greek and Roman Magic,” in B. Ankarloo et al. (eds.), *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: Ancient Greece and Rome* (Philadelphia 1999) 190–191.

²⁹ Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World* 158–159.

³⁰ J. Winkler, “The Constraints of Eros,” in C. A. Faraone et al. (eds.), *Magika Hiera* (Oxford 1991) 219.

attract customers were similar to spells used to attract lovers, for instance.³¹ Spells that would combine, then, requests for wealth with charm, beauty, and good reputation point toward the “polyvalent” aspect of the magical material that Graf discussed.

What is described here and in commercial spells also presents ideal traits for an individual transacting business and working to survive in ancient society, given the embedded nature of the economy and the importance of social capital for deriving profit, benefits, and advantages, as well as for maintaining or acquiring status.³² This would hold true regardless of profession or status. As Granovetter maintained, people do not make economic decisions (or any decision) in isolation.³³ Accordingly, seemingly non-economic undertakings, such as attending a funeral or banquet, participating in a religious festival, or erecting an honorific statue for a colleague or patron, to use examples from the world of ancient professional associations, can take on economic significance and have financial impact.

Like any other social or economic action, performing a magical ritual (be it a prayer for profit or a binding spell) was no less embedded in social, legal, and economic relations. A practitioner needed to navigate social, political, and economic hierarchies in his or her community and in the marketplace, and magic offered another means to do so.³⁴ In the same vein, to be seen as appealing or charismatic, if it connotes possession of a trusted or honorable reputation, the ability to win people over, good will, and traits that help achieve such ends, would be no less important economically than socially.

³¹ Cf. Winkler, in *Magika Hiera* 218–220, and Faraone, *Ancient Greek Love Magic* 106–107.

³² M. Granovetter, “Economic Action and Social Structure: The Problem of Embeddedness,” *The American Journal of Sociology* 91 (1985) 481–510; on social capital and advantages see R. S. Burt, *Brokerage and Closure: An Introduction to Social Capital* (Chicago 2005).

³³ See also R. Swedberg, *Principles of Economic Sociology* (Princeton 2003) 36.

³⁴ On social relations and magic’s “intentional context” see D. Collins, *Magic and the Ancient Greek World* (Malden 2008) 56.

Parallels for this combination of wealth and personal traits can be found in the corpus of magical amulets as well.³⁵ One silver *lamella*, a phylactery from second- or third-century Oxyrhynchus, links business or success (εὐπραξία) with favor (χάρις), friendship (φι[λία]), and elegance (ἐ[πα]φροδισία).³⁶ Another amulet, which depicts Harpocrates seated on a lotus and incorporates Selene and Helios into its design, asks that the bearer receive favor (χάρις), wealth (πόρος), and success (ἐπιτυχία).³⁷

Prayers and spells seeking to conjure charm or favor, elegance, a desire to seem pleasing to others, or good repute may reflect anxieties about social status. Cohn suggested that elevating one's status in the eyes of others was an aim of and reason to turn to spells like *charitēsia*.³⁸ But to combine the desire for commercial success and the desire for the social qualities cited suggests how the *PGM* spells reflect ancient ideas about wealth and profit and strategies used to acquire them.

Economic strategies and the importance of social capital

As Robert Putnam claimed in his landmark study of social capital *Bowling Alone*, trust “lubricates social life”;³⁹ and this was no less true in the ancient world. Investment in social capital offered a way to reduce transaction costs and secure profit. Access to networks supported by social capital not only provided information about people (agents, clients, colleagues), but could also yield details about prices related to goods and services (and their providers), about the authorities (who as market and judicial officials had some say over contracts, transactions, and disputes arising out of deals), and even about customers, information otherwise either unknown or difficult to obtain. Though relevant to all facets of a successful business, social capital, aimed at gaining customers and easing relationships with clients (or partners), perhaps seems most appropriate in terms of the desires

³⁵ Kotansky, *Greek Magical Amulets* 353; examples are nos. 45, 58, and 60.

³⁶ Kotansky, *Greek Magical Amulets* no. 60 = *Suppl. Mag.* 64.

³⁷ Bonner, *Studies* no. 192.

³⁸ Cohn, *ZPE* 182 (2012) 354.

³⁹ Putnam, *Bowling Alone* 21; cf. Swedberg, *Principles of Economic Sociology* 45.

expressed in the *PGM* commercial spells seeking customers, increased traffic to a business, and personal qualities.

In this light, the honor or reputation (εὐδοξία or δόξα), elegance (ἐπαφροδισία), and charm (χάρις) joined at times with goodwill (εὐμένεια) and sound judgment (εὐβουλία) that commercial spells seek take on added economic significance. Possessing these traits could increase trust or augment an individual's reputation in others' eyes, and that would have alleviated some transaction costs. Cultivating a positive reputation presumably had a salutary effect on customers, too, and did more than ease relationships with competitors or colleagues.

Cultivating social capital to secure profit and relying on the qualities cited in commercial spells were crucial elements of the economic strategies of many engaged in production and commerce throughout the Graeco-Roman world. That this is so is evident in several ways. Verboven expertly elucidated the importance that Romans engaged in commerce placed on *fides*, trust, and reciprocity for successful transactions and reliable credit relationships in the late Republican economy.⁴⁰ In her detailed treatment of Roman retail, Claire Holleran suggested that trust and reputation earned over the course of multiple interactions were important components of success, given the pervasiveness of shop credit among shopkeepers and traders.⁴¹ Cameron Hawkins has posited that trade credit founded upon reputation and trust played a vital role for merchants and craftsmen to secure goods, given the availability of money on hand (or lack thereof) and the expense of purchasing loans.⁴² The jurist Scaevola, writing in the second century CE, also noted the importance of reputation in discussions of loans (*Dig.* 20.1.34.1):

⁴⁰ K. Verboven, *The Economy of Friends. Economic Aspects of Amicitia and Patronage in the Late Republic* (Brussels 2002).

⁴¹ Holleran, *Shopping in Ancient Rome* 52–53; see also Hawkins, *Roman Artisans* 84–86.

⁴² C. Hawkins, “Artisans, Retailers, and Credit Transactions in the Roman World,” *Journal of Ancient History* 5 (2017) 66–92.

I have borrowed fifty from you and asked you to accept a mortgage instead of a surety. You well know that my shop and slaves are bound to no one but you, and you have trusted me as the honest man I am. (transl. Watson)

Most revealing here is the shop owner's explicit assertion of his trustworthy reputation to a creditor, which, along with the actual collateral offered, helps seal the deal.

Perhaps chief in the evidence for reliance on reputation, esteem, and trust in seeking profits, defending privileges, and obtaining benefits, however, is the investment that many craftsmen, merchants, and others made in social capital by joining associations which brought individuals together to coordinate, celebrate, commemorate, and provide mutual support. The papyri and inscriptions attesting to association activities—honorific monuments, epitaphs, group charters, and other documents—indicate that the characteristics alluded to in the magical spells were cultivated and commemorated by groups and individual members, if not always using those same terms. Honorific inscriptions routinely commended association members and patrons for honorable and trustworthy behavior, devotion to the group, and fulfillment of group norms and expectations, typically saluting *aretē*, *eunoia*, *eusebeia*, and *philotimia*.⁴³ Groups also apparently sought out or elevated those with good reputations: a fifth-century association of goldsmiths in Oxyrhynchus, for instance, described their leader as a man worthy of trust.⁴⁴

Honorific exchange was important not only as a means to assert or correct an identity but because it helped groups, their members, and patrons cultivate specific reputations; as such, it was an important economic and political strategy as well. Statues inscribed with short texts or honorary decrees, set up in public spaces or their own clubhouse, saluting patrons, members, or

⁴³ E.g. *I.Alex.Imp.* 94 (30 BCE–37 CE), a dedication on behalf of *philotimia*; *IGR I* 1314 (I CE), *eusebeia*; *I.Alex.Imp.* 97 (7 CE) *eunoia*; *TAM V* 1002 (I/II CE), honors for *philotimia* and *eusebeia*. On the honorific activity of associations see van Nijf, *The Civic World* 73–128; Harland, *Associations* 137–160; Ventricinque, *Honor among Thieves* 110–121.

⁴⁴ *PSI XII* 1265.4 (426 CE).

others, allowed associations and individuals to broadcast the likelihood that a craftsman, merchant, or an entire group would follow through on contracts, obligations, and group norms in the future.

Beyond public monuments that honored benefactors, colleagues, or associates, association charters, written on papyrus or inscribed on stone, that detail the obligations and rewards of membership also provide evidence that those involved in production and commerce concerned themselves with social capital and the qualities desired in commercial spells.⁴⁵ The importance of honor, esteem, reputation, and perhaps, implicitly, charm or charisma is made clear through the institutional framework of rules governing activities and establishing norms of behavior as detailed by the charters. Association members pledged to make monthly dues payments and financial contributions, to meet regularly, to share meals, and to celebrate births and property purchases, to mourn, and, in some cases, to provide burial. In addition, group members agreed to help each other when in need and provide assistance through loans or surety.⁴⁶ Associations punished failure to follow through on obligations as well as blatant breaches of trust and decorum: slander, false witness, prosecuting colleagues, acting against another's household, and failing to help those in need all could result in a range of penalties (*P.Mich.* V 243.6–8). An association engaged in the production, sale, or leasing of river boats in sixth-century Aphrodito enjoined members not to steal each other's customers (*SB* III 6704). The highest fines, however, were reserved for offenses seemingly

⁴⁵ For Egypt, see *P.Mich.* V 243 (14–37 CE), 244 (43), 245 (47); *PSI* XII 1265; *SB* III 6704 (538). Outside of Egypt, *ILS* 7212 (136), 7214 (117–138); *IG* II² 1368 (164/5). On charters see Venticinque, *Honor among Thieves* 37–50; J. S. Kloppenborg and R. S. Ascough, *Greco-Roman Associations* I (Berlin/New York 2011) 4.

⁴⁶ *P.Mich.* V 243.1–9, 244.8–11; late Roman examples are *PSI* XII 1265 and *SB* III 6704. Groups elsewhere adopted similar rules, e.g. the association of Diana and Antinous at Lanuvium (*CIL* XIV 2112) and the Iobacchoi at Athens (*IG* II² 1368).

most damaging to trust, reputation, or esteem: intrigue, plots, and destroying another's household.⁴⁷ In this way the rules contained in the charters defined not only social norms but the requirements for establishing a trustworthy reputation within the group, and perhaps reflected larger community preferences and concerns no less, and reinforced the importance of social capital for success.

Conclusion

In a corpus assembled to address all manner of concerns and anxieties, it is not surprising to find a number of spells that include prayers for success, wealth, or profit (πόρος, πλούτος), and increased business (πρᾶξις)—all the more so given the precariousness of the ancient economy. High transaction costs, competition for resources (and customers), and the seasonality of certain trades all affected craftsmen, merchants, and others. Alongside established strategies to deal with the risks and uncertainties of production and commerce, people also turned to magic in an attempt to benefit themselves and their workshops. The business spells in the *PGM*, however, do not seek wealth through increased trade knowledge or craft techniques; the spells make no request to be a better smith, weaver, craftsman, or merchant. Instead, the entreaties are prayers for being trusted, possessing esteem, obtaining a better reputation—in other words, social capital—and profit.

These qualities are not always described with the same intricacy, but the ideas expressed here that connect wealth and profit with charm and other characteristics that would promote trust and reputation seem persistent in the magical papyri and handbooks from Egypt. The slight variations in terminology seen in the texts may point more to the idiosyncrasies of word choice and preference of particular scribes and compilers of the handbooks. One man's *poros* may be another's *ploutos*; and the same can be said of the terms describing the personal characteristics considered necessary for success by those compiling the magical material. None of this lessens the importance placed on

⁴⁷ Venticinque, *Honor among Thieves* 61.

the social capital that these qualities imply. Nor was this limited to the Theban area or to a single magic library. That the spells derive from communities of different sizes and locations—Theadelphia, a smaller village in the Fayum to the north, and Thebes a larger city to the south—also suggests a wide resonance with or interest in such methods to tackle economic problems.

The particular mix of profit, personal qualities, and attention to social capital is perhaps fitting for spells that are not necessarily directed against anyone in particular. Unlike the curse tablets that Faraone asserted were directed at resolving interpersonal conflict, which name competitors or business rivals,⁴⁸ the specific situation tends not to be overt in the commercial spells of the *PGM*. Instead, spells like the “little beggar” or the *philtrokatadesmos* of *PGM* VIII speak to what the practitioner would need in order to achieve success regardless of the competition.

That craftsmen, merchants, and members of professional associations relied on social capital and the traits highlighted by these spells and prayers helps put in better perspective the commercial aspects of the approach to wealth and profit exhibited by the *PGM*. Access to social capital, gained through iterative scenarios and long-term relationships with individuals, even if mediated by association membership, came at a steep cost in terms of monthly payments and other fees, at least relative to the non-elite population. It is difficult to say whether turning to magic to pursue profit, customers, and social capital offered a less costly alternative. Magic, too, came at a cost (financial and social). Rather, magic might be considered as one possible strategy used by the same people who may have belonged to groups, or individual craftsmen and merchants who had been working on their own, to help confront commercial anxieties. In this sense, it may not be too difficult to perceive that the slander (*διαβολή*) that association charters sought to prevent among their members took aim not only at gossip, false witness, or libel,

⁴⁸ C. A. Faraone, “The Agonistic Context of Early Greek Binding Spells,” in *Hiera Magica* 3–32.

but extended to the use of curses and slander spells as well (*P. Mich.* V 243).

The blend of wealth, profit, social capital, and charisma in these spells also seems to point to something Verboven highlighted in his discussion of wealth and status in the Roman world. As he cautioned, despite the elite ideology encapsulated by authors like Cicero (and looked to by Finley for confirmation of status-based models of economic action), wealth was valued and necessary as “an absolute precondition for social status” which “tended to produce the other requirements” for status.⁴⁹ Though not a specific comment on the elite’s stated preference for avoiding commerce and pursuing status even at the expense of profit, it does suggest that neither wealth nor social virtues alone were enough for success. Pairing wealth with social benefits and virtues remained a necessity. More importantly, the *PGM* commercial spells, in combining financial goals and desired personal traits, are revealing of (or in tune with) special strategies in pursuit of profit, at least among the relatively well off, though still predominantly non-elite, membership of the professional associations of the Greco-Roman world.⁵⁰

April, 2019

Chicago
pventicinque@uchicago.edu

⁴⁹ K. Verboven, “The Associative Order: Status and Ethos among Roman Businessmen in the Late Republic and Early Empire,” *Athenaeum* 95 (2007) 863.

⁵⁰ A version of this article was presented at the “New Insights into Individual Magical Handbooks” conference held at the Neubauer Collegium for Culture and Society at the University of Chicago in May 2018. I would like to thank the organizers of the conference, Chris Faraone and Sofia Torallas Tovar, as well as Ari Bryen, Cam Hawkins, Paul Keen, Jim Keenan, and Giovanni Ruffini for their helpful comments on earlier drafts.