

## Telesmata In The Picatrix

Telesmata is from Greek τέλεσμα via the post-classic Latin telesma and is possibly the origin of the English word talisman, dating as that English word does from 1638, with τέλεσμα in Ancient Greek meaning a payment, or an offering to offset a debt or for services rendered. According to my fallible understanding, in Hellenistic times it acquired the sense of an object intended as an offering to the gods, and to lesser divinities such as daemons, as a mark of respect or in order to seek their favour or ward off their wrath. Thus if a person had toiled to make the offering, the telesma, or had at the very least exchanged goods or money for it, it was believed that such labour or such an exchange revealed that one had earned their protection or their help. The more valuable the object, the more help or protection they might expect.

This belief in such offerings and their efficacy was an integral part of not only the diverse Greco-Roman paganus weltanschauungen but also of many other paganus weltanschauungen around the world, past and present, founded as such weltanschauungen are on the understanding, on the ancestral wisdom, or on the intuition that we mortals are part of a living cosmos with the gods (the divinities) and Nature considered as living beings (or as archetypes, manifestations of cosmic forces) who and which can affect us and who have affected us – as individuals, and as communities – in terms of good fortune and misfortune.

For such understanding, such ancestral wisdom, or such intuition included the insight that some mortal deeds were wise and some mortal deeds were unwise because wise deeds were those which aided or did not upset the natural cosmic balance and because unwise deeds – acts of hubris – did upset the natural cosmic balance and invited, sooner or later, retribution by the divinities, be such retribution personal (against the hubriatic individual) or against the family and descendants of that individual or against the community that the hubriatic individual was a part of. A pattern of hubriatic deeds which both Aeschylus and Sophocles so well described: Aeschylus in the Oresteia, and Sophocles in his Antigone and his Oedipus Tyrannus.

In respect of the Greek belief in such divinities and asking for their help there is of course that beautiful poem by Sappho [1]

ποικιλόθρον' ἀθανάτ' Ἀφρόδιτα,  
παῖ Δίος δολόπλοκε, λίσσομαί σε,  
μή μ' ἄσαισι μηδ' ὀνίαισι δάμνα,  
πότνια, θῦμον,

ἀλλὰ τυίδ' ἔλθ', αἶ ποτα κάτέρωτα  
τὰς ἔμας αὔδας αἰοῖσα πήλοι  
ἔκλυες, πάτρος δὲ δόμον λίποισα  
χρύσιον ἦλθες

ἄρμ' ὑπασδεύξαισα· κάλοι δέ σ' ἄγον  
ῶκεες στροῦθοι περὶ γᾶς μελαίνας  
πύκνα δίνεντες πτέρ' ἀπ' ὠράνωϊθε-  
ρος διὰ μέσσω·

αἶψα δ' ἐξίκοντο· σὺ δ', ὦ μάκαιρα,  
μειδιαίσαισ' ἀθανάτῳ προσώπῳ  
ἦρε' ὅττι δηῦτε πέπονθα κῶττι  
δηῦτε κάλημμι

κῶττι μοι μάλιστα θέλω γένεσθαι  
μαινόλαι θύμῳ· τίνα δηῦτε πείθω  
μαῖσ' ἄγην ἐς σὰν φιλότατα; τίς σ', ὦ  
Ψά]πφ', ἀδικήει;

καὶ γὰρ αἶ φεύγει, ταχέως διώξει,  
αἶ δὲ δῶρα μὴ δέκετ', ἀλλὰ δώσει,  
αἶ δὲ μὴ φίλει, ταχέως φιλήσει  
κῶκ ἐθέλοισα.

ἔλθε μοι καὶ νῦν, χαλέπαν δὲ λῦσον  
ἐκ μερίμναν, ὅσσα δέ μοι τέλεσσαι  
θῦμος ἰμέρρει, τέλεσον, σὺ δ' αὔτα  
σύμμαχος ἔσσο.

Deathless Aphrodite – Daughter of Zeus and maker of snares –  
On your florid throne, hear me!  
My lady, do not subdue my heart by anguish and pain  
But come to me as when before  
You heard my distant cry, and listened:  
Leaving, with your golden chariot yoked, your father's house  
To move beautiful sparrows swift with a whirling of wings  
As from heaven you came to this dark earth through middle air  
And so swiftly arrived.

Then you my goddess with your immortal lips smiling  
Would ask what now afflicts me, why again  
I am calling and what now I with my restive heart  
Desired:

Whom now shall I beguile  
To bring you to her love?  
Who now injures you, Sappho?  
For if she flees, soon shall she chase  
And, rejecting gifts, soon shall she give.  
If she does not love you, she shall do so soon  
Whatsoever is her will.

Come to me now to end this consuming pain  
Bringing what my heart desires to be brought:  
Be yourself my ally in this fight.

By the time the manuscripts of the *Picatrix* were written, as translations of a translation of an Arabic manuscript dating from some three or more centuries earlier, the concept of *telesmata* seems to have become somewhat divorced from its pagan origins since the *Picatrix* begins with a doxology to a singular God – *Ad laudem et gloriam altissimi et omnipotentis Dei cuius est revelare suis predestinatis secreta scienciarum* – echoing as it does the doxology to Allah, Al-Ahad, in that earlier Arabic manuscript and containing as that Arabic manuscript does several quotations from the Quran.

Thus, and again according to my fallible understanding, it seems to me that, given the importance attached in both the Latin and the Arabic text to *telesmata* [2] – the locus has, despite such doxologies, moved away from the pagan understanding of mortals as an integral (Ciceronian) balancing part of the cosmos, as part of Nature and of their community and personally aware of the consequences of hubris, toward the εἶδος – the abstraction – of mortals as individuals who can by *telesmata* and other means achieve certain personal desires or bring about certain changes beneficial to themselves. Almost as if *telesmata* and other similar means have replaced the numinous, the pagan, awareness of our status as mortals who depend on the harmony that the older divinities represented, manifest as this awareness is in the phrase *memento homo* [3]. A phrase adopted by the Roman Catholic church in the form "memento homo quia pulvis es, et in pulverem reverteris," [4] and which church, despite its faults, perhaps for centuries kept alive at least something of the pagan understanding of the error of hubris, its awareness of our temporary mortal life and of our fallible mortal nature.

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Note: This text is an edited version of a communication sent this year to someone who had enquired about the relation, if any, between the talismans described in the Latin text entitled *Picatrix* and Greco-Roman pagan beliefs.

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[1] My translation. The Greek text is that of Lobel and Page, *Poetarum Lesbiorum Fragmenta*, Oxford 1955.

[2] In the *Picatrix* the word used is *imago*, usually (in my opinion) mis-translated by the fairly recent (c.1638) word 'talismán' and which English word implies 'a semblance', a crafting by someone of something material which of itself presenced, was a semblance of, what was 'higher', numinous, by something which was 'lower', material, with such a presencing described by Marsilii Ficini in his *De Vita Coelitus Comparanda*.

Interestingly, *imago* occurs in the Latin version of the nine doxologies - v. 31 - of the Poemandres tractate of the Corpus Hermeticum, *cuius universa natura imago nata est*, with the original Greek being οὗ πᾶσα φύσις εἰκῶν ἔφου which I translate as "you who engender all physis as eikon", with *eikon* suggestive of what Maximus of Constantinople in his *Mystagogia* [Patrologiae Graeca, 91, c.0658] explains. Which is of we humans, and the cosmos, and Nature, and psyche, as eikons, although according to Maximus it is the Christian church itself (as manifest and embodied in Jesus of Nazareth and the Apostles and their successors and in scripture) which, being the *eikon* of God, enables we humans to recognize this, recognize God, be in communion with God, return to God, and thus find and fulfil the meaning of our being, our existence.

[3] Although the use of a similar phrase about mortality in the *Triumphus* is disputed, there is evidence to suggest that during those victory processions in Rome the triumphant General was reminded by someone of his mortality, qv. M. Beard, *The Roman Triumph*, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007. p. 272f.

[4] "Recall, mortal, you are dust and you will revert to being dust."