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A Note on P. Kellis I 82


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P.Kellis I 82 is a wooden board containing a calendar of good and bad days which was to be consulted before making use of an oracle or practising other kinds of magic. It is dated to the fourth century AD. The text of the edition is the following:

1 Τόν ἡμερὸν· τῆς Κυριακῆς, [day numeral betw. 1-4, quality]
2 ἐκακῆ, ἡ σαπρά, ἢς παρατηρήσεως [–]
3 Σελήνης, ἡ σαπρά, δὶς κακῆ, θὰ κακῆ,
4 ἢς παρατηρήσεως· ἢς ἀρεως ἢ παρατηρήσεως,
5 ἤ {η} ἀνεπιτήδειος· ἔρωμο [day numeral betw. 1-5]
6 σαπρά, ὡς κακῆ, ἢ σαπρά, ἢς ἀρεως· ἢς σαπρά, ἢς σαπρά [πρά·]
7 Διὸς ἢς σαπρά, ἡ παρατηρήσεως, ἢς παρατηρήσεως, ἢς παρατηρήσεως, ἢς παρατηρήσεως
8 ἆριστης ὡς κακῆ, ἡ σαπρά, ἢς κακῆ, ἢς σαπρά, ἢς κακῆ, ἢς κακῆ, ἢς κακῆ, ἢς κακῆ
9 Κρόνου αὐταὶ σαπρά, ἢς παρατηρήσεως, ἢς κακῆ, ἢς κακῆ, ἢς κακῆ
10 πρά.
11 Σελήνιοδρόμιον·
12 ὡς καλῆ
13 ὡς καλῆ
14 ὡς καλῆ
15 ὡς καλῆ

Lines 1-10 of the text are explained as a calendar of bad weekdays, according to the editor to be understood as: Sunday, if falling on the 5th day of a month: bad, if falling on the 7th day of a month: evil etc. The question why only days 1 to 12 of a month would have been paid attention to had to remain unanswered.

Lines 11-33, starting with the interesting addendum lexicis σελήνιοδρόμιον for ‘moon orbit’, are taken to be ‘a calendar of good and bad days within an unspecified month’.

To the parallel texts mentioned in the commentary to P.Kellis I 82, one close parallel could be added that appears to be very helpful in understanding the text on this tablet. It leads to a slightly different interpretation thereof, at the same time offering a solution to the unsolved problem why only weekdays numbered from 1 to 12 would occur. This parallel can be found in the Introduction to the so-called ‘Second Edition’ of the Sortes Astrampsychi (a Greek oracle-book, composed before the middle of the third century AD in, probably, Egypt1). This ‘Second Edition’ is still only available in the edition by R. Hercher of 1863.2 At the end of its Introduction, after the directions for use of the oracle, and after citing the prescribed prayer to be said before consulting the oracle, follows this advice (Hercher p. 3):

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Watch also for day and hour on which the oracle works best. You should ask the questions on the following days of the week: on the third, which is the day of Hermes, on the fifth, which is the day of Aphrodite, on Sabbath, which is the day of Kronos, and on Sunday, which is the day of Helios; on the other days absolutely not.

And (you should ask the questions) at the following hours: on Sunday at the third hour, on Sabbath at the sixth hour, on the fifth day at the fifth hour, and on the third day at the third hour; for on these days and hours the surer answers are given. (.....)

And you also have to consider the days of the moon as they are set forth here:

day  1 in the morning
     2 in the afternoon
     3 do not question the oracle
     4 the whole day long
     5 do not question the oracle
     6 the whole day long
     7 in the morning

e tc. until  29 in the afternoon, 30 in the afternoon.

In short: whoever wanted to make use of these Sortes first had to choose one of the right weekdays, and on that day one of the right hours. Then he would have to check with the help of the given list if his chosen day was one of the right days of the moon.

‘Days of the moon’, ἡμέρας τῆς σελήνης, must point to the use of a lunar calendar,3 which is not surprising in a magical context. Magical prescriptions show the use of lunar days in everyday’s magical

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3 In the Roman and Byzantine period the Egyptians normally used the ‘Alexandrian’ calendar based on the solar year of 365 1/4 day, whereas for special occasions (often related to magic or religion) the older Egyptian ‘Wandeljahr’ of 365 days (cf. D. Hagedorn - K. A. Worp, Das Wandeljahr im römischen Ägypten, ZPE 104, 1994, 243-255) was still in use. Both are solar years with fixed months of 30 days, at the end of the year followed by intercalary days. For the use of a lunar calendar in Egypt see R. A. Parker, The Calendars of Ancient Egypt, Chicago 1950; A. E. Samuel, Greek and Roman Chronology, München 1972, 11-12, 145-146.
practice. The way these moon days were counted may have been very easy: not by using a difficult written lunar calendar, but just by observing the then mostly clear Egyptian night sky (day 1 probably being the first day of the invisibility of the crescent at the time of new moon).

I would suggest that this lunar system was only in use for counting the days, i.e. for giving the days a ‘lunar’ number, as a remnant of the ancient use of the lunar calendar for religious and magical purposes.

Now back to the wooden board Kellis 82: The close resemblance of the above part of the Introduction to the Sortes Astrampsychi with P.Kellis 82 makes it clear that

1) the numbers in lines 1-10 do not denote days, but hours; referring only to the 12 hours of the day (the night being normally too evil for practising magic);

2) in lines 11-33, the σεληνοδρόμιον, being a list of thirty days, does not refer to the days of an ‘unspecified month’, but to the days as numbered according to the moon (30 days being the maximum length of the moon’s orbit).

In this way the wooden board Kellis 82 furnishes a complete and perpetual calendar by which the owner would always be able to compute the right time to practise his magic.

Leiden

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4 E.g. PGM III 426ff.: - wenn der Mond sich nähert, und dann – – am 1. Tag der Göttin – – am dritten Tage des Mondes – – am 4. Tage des Mondes etc.; PGM IV 26-27: τη τρίτη, της σελήνης, am dritten Mondes; PGM IV 52-53: Προ- αρχείον προς τη σελήνην τού νυκτός του νυκτός γενέσθαι. Halt dich rein 7 Tage, bevor der Mond zum Vollmond wird; IV 57: σελήνης δε πληροθείτις, wenn es Vollmond geworden ist; PGM XII 351-352: γνωθι, πρός την σελήνην ἀνέπεσε νυστένων, Bring in Kenntnis, auf welchen Montag (der Leidende) erkrankte; PGM XII 308: επί ἡμέρας ιού, ἀρχύμενος ἀπὸ τῆς σελήνης γ’, where there seems to be no reason for translating ‘vierzehn Tage lang, beginnend mit der dritten Mondphase’ instead of ‘during 14 days, starting from the 3rd day of the moon’.

5 Cf. P.dem.Carlsberg 9, a mathematical astronomical text from AD 144 which attests the use of the 25-year cycle of lunar months, see Parker l.c. and Samuel l.c.

6 See Parker, l.c. p. 23.

7 If month and year would have to be added (for which there is no need in the magical context mentioned), they would be given according to the Alexandrian calendar, or even, considering the special uses of such dates, according to the ancient Egyptian ‘Wandeljahr’. For such dating one may compare the double dates in a number of hieroglyphic and demotic texts (dating up to the early Roman period) assembled by Parker, in which cases the dates according to the Egyptian c.q. Alexandrian solar year are accompanied by a lunar day-number. See Parker, l.c. 17-22.

Allowing for this ‘contamination’ of calendars would also solve the problem obtaining in the religious calendar P.Hib. 1. 27. In this text (l. 41-43, and in the parallel passage in P.Par. 1. 71-73), χρόνους | ταίς | σελήνην | ημέρας κ.τ.λ. could not be explained by the editors of P.Hib. in relation to the surrounding text and was thus taken to be ‘used loosely for “the days of the month” without any real reference to the moon’. There would be no problem if this using ‘the days according to the moon’ would only refer to the number by which each day was counted (a reason for this being possibly the use of tables of good and bad days like the one above!)

8 Cf. the heading of a similar calendar PGM VII 155 ‘ήμερομαντίας κ[αι] ἔραι, where, however, the day-numbers are not followed by numbers of hours, but by parts of the day like morning and afternoon. Hours are also mentioned with days 2 and 3 in the calendar P.Kellis 83.

9 There is no reason to believe that the text starts medinis in rebus, as the editor suggested in his introduction on p. 206, although, of course, the holes in the margin show that the tablet one time did form part of a larger tablet-book. Perhaps we may even compare the start of an invocation on the back of this tablet (l. 36-38) with the prayer which was prescribed to be said before consulting the Sortes Astrampsychi and with many similar prayers forming part of magical prescriptions in PGM passim.

10 The resemblance between the Introduction to the Sortes Astrampsychi and P.Kellis 82 does not necessarily imply the possibility that P.Kellis itself would constitute an abbreviated part of this Introduction (although a number of texts from the Sortes Astrampsychi are attested on papyrus, see G. M. Browne, l.c. note 1 above and P.L.Bat. XXV 8 with further literature); the good and bad hours and days are too different.