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ST. PHOKAS IN A SPELL FOR SNAKES
(Anecd. Athen., P. 83, 9, Delatte)

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Armand Delatte gathered in his *Anecdota Athenienses* unpublished texts of a wide range of themes and dates relevant to the study of religion in Late Antiquity. The fragment here discussed belongs to the first of these texts, a magical handbook copied by different hands in the XVI th. and XVII th. centuries.¹ It is a recipe "For Binding Wild Beasts" which, according to A.Delatte should start:

" Ἄγιε Λουκά, φοῦκτα σιδεροπεντοδάκτυλε· τῆσον πάλλων σίδερον, δῆσον ὄφιν ἔχιδναν καὶ πᾶν κακὸν κυρόμενον ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς ..."²

("Saint Lucas, five-iron-fingered palm, stand brandishing a steel, bind snake, viper and any evil creeping on earth...").

The original text reads, as Delatte's notes show, φοουκά, a word of Hebrew origin designating a deep red stone which doesn't make any sense in this context. Delatte's correction doesn't add much to the meaning of the passage and creates an awkward apposition of "palm" to "Saint Lucas". But the original reading "φοουκά" can be understood as a proper name³ in agreement to P.Oxy. 1060 = P.G.M. 2 (Vol. II 209-10), an amulet for warding a house:

"... φωρ φωρ Ἰάω Σαβᾶθ, Ἄδονέ (sic), δένο (sic) σε, σκορπίε Ἄρτερήσειε (sic) ἀπάλλαξον τὸν οἶκον τοῦτον ἀπὸ παντὸς κακοῦ ἐρπετοῦ καὶ πράγματος, ταχύ, ταχύ ὁ ἅγιος Φωκάς ὧδέ ἐστι..."

("...phor, phor, Iao, Sabaoth, Adonai, I bind you, Scorpion Artemisius, keep away from this house any harmful reptil and evil, quickly, quickly! Saint Phokas is here...")

Saint Phokas - Modern greek preserves a change form, Φοῦκας which accounts for the /u/ we find in the codex - is invoked in both places owing to his power against snakes. Related to this power are the miracles that took place by the saint's tomb in Antiochia where snake bites were instantly cured.⁴ Saint Phokas, who died under Trajan, is still invoked against snakes today;⁵ so we find a tradition running from at least the VI th. century (Gregor of Tours and the Papyri), through medieval and modern times (Delatte's text) up to nowadays that regards this saint as a snakebinder.

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¹ This date corresponds to the only manuscript of the two collated by A.Delatte where the passage here under study appears, Codex 1265 of Athens' National Library.

² Armand Delatte, *Anecdota Athenienses* p. 83, 9.

³ Ph.Koukoulès prints without any critical commentary Φουκά in his Βυζαντινῶν Βίος καὶ Πολιτικὸς, editions of the French Institute in Athens, 1955; vol. VI, p. 259.

⁴ Gregor. Tur. De glor. martyr. 98 quoted in P.Oxy. ad locum. Different and often contradictory news about Saint Phokas' life can be found in Ἄκτεριου Ἀμαθείας, Ἐγκώμιον εἰς τὸν ἅγιον ἱερομάρτυρα Φωκά and the notes to it in P.G. XL, 300-313. See also ZPE 86, 1991, 41-43.

⁵ Vid E.Tsokatou, Λαογραφικὸ Ἡμερολόγιο, ed. Papaky, Athens, 1986, p. 196.