

# Religion, Technology, and Art

## Scott Possiel. *Textual Magic and the Experience of Religious Writing in the Roman World*

**Abstract:** This paper examines the application of religious writing in the Roman world as a tool for granting supernatural abilities to material objects. It outlines a category of textual magic comprised of objects from the 1st to 5th century Mediterranean including curse tablets, magical nails, and city walls. These materials utilize the inscription of named deities, esoteric signs, and sacred passages in order to transform art and media into powerful agents. In a period of overlap between oral and literary culture, the functions of writing as a technology were unbounded and flexible. These circumstances enabled the written word to operate not only as an interpersonal communication device, but also as a technology for enhancing religious experience. Textual magic, as a mechanism for creating agency in objects, aligns with contemporary theories of both materiality and textuality of the ancient world. Combining a material approach with a close reading of text, this paper argues that objects with religious writing from any tradition in Late Antiquity must always be approached with an appreciation for both their textuality and materiality.

This paper examines the emergence of religious writing in the Roman world as a means for granting supernatural abilities to material objects. It establishes a category of textual magic to analyze artifacts from the 1st to 5th century Mediterranean utilizing the inscription of named deities, esoteric signs and sacred passages in order to transform art and media into powerful agents. In a period of overlap between oral and literary culture, the functions of writing as a technology were unbounded and flexible. These circumstances enabled the written word to operate not only as an interpersonal communication device, but also as a tool for enhancing religious experience. Through the use of inscribed objects, individuals could manifest divine presences, contact supernatural powers, and perpetuate the proclamations of oral ritual. Textual magic, as a mechanism for creating agency in objects, aligns with contemporary theories of both materiality and textuality of the ancient world. From a material studies perspective, Ann Marie Yasin (2012) and Jane Bennet (2010) have recognized the potential for objects, especially those set apart from the ordinary, to affect human behavior and thought. Recent studies of ancient textuality such as Joseph Sanzo (2014) and Richard Gordon (2015) have discussed a similar potential for textual religion to function beyond its capacity to communicate information. Building off these studies, this paper understands the interaction between religious text and its material context as an important element of religious life in the Roman Empire. Through textual magic, an individual could interact with or direct supernatural powers in diverse ways, hopefully for their own benefit. This paper looks at three types of artifacts that exemplify textual magic and apply it for three different purposes. First, inscribed curse tablets demonstrate the capacity of textual magic to do harm by invoking gods or otherworldly beings in writing on lead sheets. Second, magical nails illustrate textual magic deployed for protective purposes. These bronze or iron nails display invocations of divinities or scriptural heroes in order to prevent theft or damage to property

wherever they are located. Finally, textual magic also appears on doors, gates and walls. This paper examines two instances of an apocryphal Christian text etched into the entrance of cities and homes to provide for their defense and to pass a blessing onto those entering. From these three groups of inscribed objects, this paper concludes that textual magic was part of the religious world of the Roman Empire, unrestricted by textual tradition. Discussing this same period, scholars have paid much attention to the revolutionary role of writing in the form of religious literature. The materials and mentality of textual magic, however, also represent a significant development in religious practice. Throughout its analysis, this study of textual magic affirms the need for scholars to treat any instance of religious writing as a material artifact in its own right and to interpret its meaning with equal weight given to both materiality and textuality.

Bio: Scott Possiel is a PhD Candidate in Ancient Mediterranean Religions at Boston University. His research focuses on the interaction of textuality and material culture among the religious traditions of the Late Antique Mediterranean. Utilizing theories of orality and literacy, materiality, and semiotics, Scott seeks to understand textual objects as more than mere devices for communication. He is currently writing a dissertation on the multi-functional application of writing at single "sites" in the sixth to eight centuries such as saints' shrines, magical ritual codices, and votive inscriptions.

### **[Dr. Phil. Christian Bauer](#) and [Prof. Andreas Muxel](#). **The Gigantomachia of Men and Machine or The Birth of Techno-Theology from the Spirit of Political Theology****

**Abstract:** Nowadays people are facing a struggle between mankind and AI. We have to reconsider that the development of mythological, religious and scientific thinking has brought about the first concepts of machine and machinery. This triangle, the further involvement of arts and the requirements of authorship lead to conflicts within the political realm.

Politicians are expected to deal with the challenges of the ubiquitous presence of machine intelligence. Some react by calling for ethical regulations to set limits with regard to algorithmic regulations. Considering the original self-determination of the individual we want to discuss the requirements that need to be fulfilled to strengthen the individual person as his/her own authority amidst powerful Techno-Theology on the one hand and elder version of Political Theology on the other.

The Gigantomachia between men and machine is a matter of authority, legitimacy, and sovereignty as well. It is still possible to prevent an escalation. To come closer to a solution we present the approach of digital majority.

BIO

Dr. phil. Christian Bauer is a philosopher with research in the field of information design, applied ethics, aesthetics, and anthropology. He lectures Information-, Media- and Communication Theory as well as Cultural Philosophy and Ethics at the University of Applied Sciences of Würzburg-Schweinfurt. He is looking for a general application of digital majority.

Prof. Andreas Muxel works and lectures in the field of design, art and technology. He is Professor for Physical Human-Machine Interfaces at the Faculty of Design at University of Applied Sciences Augsburg where he founded and directs the Hybrid Things Lab. He is looking for poetical and engaging tools for thinking, regardless of whether they are hardware or software.

**[Natalia Fedorova](#). Men inside the machine: artistic research of the 1960s Soviet space program histories**

**Abstract:**

The paper is an artistic research focused the earth - spacecraft communication patterns of Soviet engineers and cosmonauts. Communication modes revealed the programmatologies of the New Soviet Man and localised this man inside three machines. Spacecrafts such as Vostok 1 by a rocket. The new Space industry was formed from the existing rocket science industry and aviation. During the parade dedicated to Gagarin flight March of Aviators was played. The call to 'go higher and higher' in it was also a symbolical one and was aimed at achieving Heavens as a means of breeding New Man. So the third machine involved was the ideological machine operating through radio waves. In this case on 12 April 1961 Gagarin was inside three machines. Each of these technologies served military purposes primarily. Vostok spacecraft, as Gerovich points out, became the technological analog of the totalitarian myth, an omnipresent panopticon that monitored cosmonaut's every move (Gerovich, 2015:43).