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This papyrus sheet (H. 11.8 × W. 10.4 cm) seems to preserve the upper, lower and left margins. The text consists of three different blocks written by the same hand, although the letters of l. 3–6 are slightly smaller than elsewhere. The verso is blank. The hand is irregular and awkward, strongly influenced by the cursive (in addition to ligatures, the ε of l. 4–6 should be noted). There are two types of α: one with a round belly, the other—only at the beginning of lines—with an angular belly and plunging below the line. The latter can be observed from the second century (e.g. P.Yadin 16 [127 CE] or 21 [130]) down to the end of the third century (P.Berl. 11734 [Brashear 1990]). Other clues, such as the shape of η with an apex or the very narrow ε like a Latin e, suggest a second century date, without rejecting the beginning of the third century. The text is not very neat: the lines, e.g., are far from horizontal and there are mistakes (e.g. l. 2 ⟨ἐν⟩). Finally, the text is written across the fibers, which would be surprising for a literary roll. Since we have the beginning of a text with its title, we might have the protokollon of a roll, which would explain the orientation of the fibers. But normally, the protokollon is left blank or, if necessary, reserved for the title, whereas it is partially occupied here by the first column of text. In addition, the height preserved, which is probably original, is much lower than what is expected in the case of a literary roll.

The formal and external elements suggest strongly that this is an excerpt of longer work, in this case an astrological work of Nechepso, copied for private use, and not the beginning of a roll that contained the entire work. Nechepso is considered one of the most famous astrologers of Greek and Roman antiquity, whose work is only extant in quotations by later authors (see Riess 1890 and 1892; Krauss 1982; on the historical figure of Nechepso, see Ray 1974 and Ryholt 2011). Beginning in the second century BCE, texts circulated under his name (often associated with Petosiris), which can be divided into four sets, according to the analysis most recently given by Pingree 1974: (i) fragments of astrological texts based on the principle of astral omina; (ii) texts in iambic trimeters transmitting Nechepso’s teaching after the revelation that endowed him with the art of the horoscope; (iii) iatromathematical texts (or astral medicine) and materia medica in connection with the stars; and (iv) numerology based on zodiac signs.

This papyrus probably offers a recipe consisting of an invocation (l. 7–10) and a procedure of a medical or magical type (l. 11); it ends, moreover, with a formula that gives it the character of a magical rite (l. 13). Such a text would point in the direction of an iatromathematical treatise, but, in fact, the excerpts and quotations of Nechepso that inspired the treatise of Thessalos of Tralles or that are quoted by Aëtius do not include any magic formulae and they give a much fuller description of the pharmacological preparation itself (or the conditions for collecting materia medica) than our papyrus seems to do. The presence of the magical words, moreover, creates a problem for the date of Nechepso’s treatise in the second century BCE, because they do not appear until the first century CE (see Brashear 1995, 3413–3414 et 3430, and GEMF 6, first published in 1998). Rather than assuming that we have here a second century BCE example of voces magicæ, I would suggest that this is an applied magical procedure to ward off a misfortune or more probably a disease (one of the meanings of ἀποτροπαῖος), that was integrated into Nechepso’s corpus as early as the first or second century CE. The presence, in the last line, of a concluding formula suggests that the sheet did not include an additional column and was therefore designed for a practical purpose, a fact which explains why it is not the work of a professional scribe and why it contains errors. It is not impossible, in fact, that this surprisingly small sheet itself was used as an amulet, which is one of the senses of ἀποτροπαῖος.
Apotropaic procedures when the Sun is in Virgo. Book 15 of Nechepso. … (5) … ANIEU BANIE[U?]… EROMEDOPS.ZA … ASPLÊX… AN … (10) ARIOUCH†EM.N … in hydromel(?).… perfect for me a perfect [incantation].

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1 One might be tempted to translate this as a hitherto unknown title: “Book 15 of Nechepso of the Apotropiasmoi (to be done) when the Sun is in Virgo,” but it is implausible that Nechepso wrote at least 15 books on apotropiasmi to be made under the sole sign of Virgo; the presentation of this title is also unusual: the author’s name normally precedes the title of the work followed by the book number. The genitive case of ἀποτροπιαϲµῶν is to be explained by the ellipse of ἐκ τῶν “taken from.” The word ἀποτροπιαϲµῶς refers to any action or object intended to repel an evil or evil demon. It can be a ritual, a sacrifice, a formula or even an amulet (for the last, see Berosius FGrHist 680, fr. 4C, where pieces of Noah’s ark serve as apotropiasmoi). Its connection with astrology is highlighted by Nemes. Nat.Hom. 35: “Egyptians … claim that the destiny determined by the stars is true and that it can be modified by prayers and apotropiasmoi, because, they say, we even go so far as to render cults to these very stars to appease them. They and other higher powers are capable of changing destiny, and that is why prayers, cults towards the gods, and apotropiasmoi were invented.” See also Ptol. Tetr. 1.3.18

2 Although this expression of time leaves no doubt about the astrological nature of the text, it is a priori difficult to locate our fragment in one of Pingree’s four categories given above in the introduction.

3 The word αϲπληξ (l. 9) has an ending found in other magical words, for example, νιχαροπληξ or οπλοµυρτιλοπληξ; perhaps it should be compared to the name of the demon of the 11th hour of the 5th day, ἄπληξ, in the Hygromantia Salomonis (CCAG 8.2).

4 One might just be tempted to connect αριουχ (l. 10) to αρχ of SM I 4, 2 (3rd cent.).

5 Hydromel or mead is not a rare ingredient in medical preparations. The word before it is a neuter noun in -µα in the plural dative, which leaves the field open to multiple possibilities, for example, Orb. Syn. 8.42, 2: καταπλάϲµατον ἄλεορον τε καθαρὸν καὶ πάλη ἄλφιτον ἐν ὕδροιματι ῥημημένη.

6 Our papyrus seems to end with a popular coda for magical formulae, cf. SM I 45, 53: τέλει τελίαν τὴν ἐπαοιδήν; GEMF 57/PGM IV 294–295 τελέϲατέ μοι τὴν τελείαν ἐπαοιδήν. Other examples of this expression are: 57/IV 2939 τέλει τελέαν ἐπαοιδήν; 74.714/VII 992 (κ)αλῶϲ µοι τέλει ταυτὴν τὴν ἐπαοιδήν); GEMF 4 (τέλει τε[λ]έαν ἐπαοιδήν); and Julius Africanus, P.Oxy. III 412, 17 (τελέϲέτε δ᾿ ἄµιν ἄοι[δήν].