

The *Precatio terrae* and *Precatio omnium herbarum* are two short late antique hymns found in herbals from the 6th century on. The former addresses the earth as a deity and asks for her aid in ensuring that the medicinal herbs which the speaker is gathering will be potent; the latter addresses the plants themselves with a similar request to be effective. Other late antique Latin prayers to medicinal plants are also known, all prose (Howald and Sigerist). The *Precatio terrae* and *Precatio omnium herbarum* have received more attention, since they contain quasi-metrical sections and have been generally treated as poems; more recent scholarship has recognized that the meter is erratic at best (Kenney, Shackleton Bailey) and that they are probably best treated as prose as well (McEnerney), which has led to greater recognition of the late antique parallels.

What has not been discussed is that these prayers have earlier Greco-Egyptian parallels, and that rather than being an isolated late antique practice, magical addresses to plants have a long classical history. The Greek magical papyri contain a number of hymns addressed to deities, but also to plants and other spell ingredients. (See, e.g., PGM IV.286-95, IV.2967-3006, VII.376-84). The spells of PGM show the larger ritual context in which such hymns were deployed; although McEnerney expresses surprise at some of the ritual instructions accompanying the late antique hymns to plants, which include directions for the person gathering the herb to purify himself, sprinkle himself with pure water, draw a circle around the plant with gold, silver, or other magical materials, or to pick it in a particular month or time of day. McEnerney distinguishes such “magical” spells from the hymns of the *Precatio terrae* and *Precatio omnium herbarum* proper in order to note slippage between the categories, but the papyri make it clear that we *should* expect these Latin invocations to have been originally used in just such a ritual manner. Besides the spells preserved in the papyri, we have extensive, though much less detailed, references to plant-picking rituals in sources such as Pliny and the Latin medical literature. The two invocations here discussed are unusual Latin examples of the sort of hymns which were extensively used in gathering medico-magical materials, but which we otherwise have only Greek examples of.

The invocations to plants that found their way into the late antique herbals are typical specimens of the invocations used in plant-picking rituals throughout the empire, if not earlier. A desire to see a distinction between them and magical invocations, however, is not purely modern; the removal of such texts from an overtly magical context and their preservation as excerpts, without directions for use, in the literary tradition is typical of antique discomfort with obviously magical material. This paper will discuss the parallels *Precatio terrae* and *Precatio omnium herbarum*, what the Greek spells can add to our knowledge of the intended uses of such invocations, and the avoidance of discussion of magic in technical literature which led to their eventual form as isolated hymns.