

Chapter 2

Ancient Egypt

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Introduction

This chapter on ancient Egyptian magic consists of two sections.¹ The first deals with the question of whether magic is an appropriate or useful term for scholars to use in the context of ancient Egypt. As will be shown, it should primarily be understood emically as the rendering of the Egyptian term *heka*, which refers to a special power created by the gods as a means of warding off evil effects, of influencing gods, demons or humans and of “charging” things with a special efficacy. The transmission of Egyptian magical texts is then briefly considered: magic and its uses were a matter of learned knowledge.

The second section provides a historical overview of the development of Egyptian magic from the third millennium BC until the end of paganism during the first centuries AD. The primary sources for each of the six epochs are highlighted to give a clear impression of the Egyptian material and to make the specific research more accessible to a wider audience. The selected material includes not only magical texts, such as spells against demons and people(s), spells for healing and protection or divination and explanatory texts, but also stories that show “magicians” in action.

General

The question has been asked as to whether magic is a useful category in modern research.² One could and perhaps should abandon the term and incorporate it simply within the field of religion, for both are concerned with the relationship between humans and the divine. But magic can be taken in the emic sense as a concept that was understood by the ancient Egyptians themselves. The following comments, therefore, cover mainly these phenomena of ancient Egyptian magic and seek to give an overview of the different sources available.

What Egyptians meant by the term *heka* (*ḥkꜣ*), which is best translated as “magic”, can be deduced from the following two Egyptian papyri. The first, *Papyrus Ebers* (second millennium BC), is mainly a collection of recipes against different diseases. In a spell accompanying the drinking of a medicament (*pekheret* [*pḥr.t*]), we read: “Strong is the *heka* because of the *pekheret* – (and) vice versa” (*Papyrus Ebers* 2.2–2.3).³ The other one, *Papyrus Brooklyn* 47.218.48+85 (sixth century BC), is a compilation of texts against snake-bites. In 2.3–2.4 it reads: “[One] (can) rescue (the patient) from it (= the snake) by *heka* (and) by *pekheret*”.⁴

Pekheret is a substance and action intended to fight or keep away a disease. Many medical recipes are titled “*pekheret* for healing (a malady).” A list of drugs and an instruction for their preparation and use typically follow. Thus *pekheret* signifies something along the lines of “prescription.”

The efficacy of the drugs can be increased by charging them with magic. Here is an example taken from the snake papyrus:

PRESCRIPTION (*PEKHERET*) FOR HEALING SOMEONE BITTEN BY ANY SNAKE:

itju-plant – it grows in Hibis . . . Then one has to grind it with sweet beer. (It) has to be drunk by the bitten one. He will be healthy at once.

To be spoken over it as magic:

(Oh) this *itju*-plant which grows under the side of Osiris as efflux which comes out from those in their Netherworld: kill the poison . . .! (*Papyrus Brooklyn* 47.218.48+85 5.22–5.25)

More often the words to be spoken are explicitly called spells (singular *ra* [*rꜣ*]) in the heading. These are the typical Egyptian magical texts. Substances can be used together with them, and, if they are to be used, they are mentioned in the instructions after the spell.

For the Egyptians, magic is a constituent part of the world as it was divinely created. The *Teaching for King Merikare* (second millennium BC) highlights the origin of magic with the creation:

“[The Creator] has made for them *heka* as weapons in order to ward off (the) effects of what happens (= the events), over which one keeps watch night (and) day” (*Merikare* E 136–137).⁵

Thus magic is natural in the sense of being associated with forces in nature. Any internal disease, any enemy one could not reach physically, any desire, any dangerous animal and any possible divine intervention could be treated by magic. This is not intrinsically morally good or wicked: it is only through its use that the practice of magic can be morally evaluated. The origins of magic in the creation and its preservation in medical papyri further associate

Egyptian magic with learnedness (Egyptian *rekh* [*rh*]). Performing magic was made easier by having access to texts and following their instructions; and conversely, one only needed to be able to read the texts to perform magical rites. In a well-known narrative, *The First Tale of Setne Khaemwase* (third or second century BC), a story about the adventures of an Egyptian sorcerer, we are told how Naneferkaptah was able to steal a magical book written by Thoth, the god of wisdom. And:

He (= Naneferkaptah) recited a spell from it; [he charmed the sky, the earth, the netherworld, the] mountains, the waters. He discovered what all the birds of the sky and the fish of the deep and the beasts of the desert were saying. He recited another spell; he saw [Pre (= the sun-god) appearing in the sky with his Ennead], and the Moon rising, and the stars in their forms. He saw the fish of the deep, though there were twenty-one divine cubits of water over them. He recited a spell to the [water; he made it resume its form]. (*I Khaemwase* 3.35–3.38)⁶

Naneferkaptah's wife is curious and tries out the same spells. And, indeed, they work simply by reading them! In short, no special supernatural inspiration was necessary for the successful performance of magical acts. It was enough to follow the written instructions.

Naneferkaptah is able to learn the texts very quickly by a special technique: "He had a sheet of new papyrus brought to him. He wrote on it every word that was in the book before him. He burnt it with fire, he dissolved it in water. He realized that it was dissolved. He drank it. (Now) he knew what had been on it" (*I Khaemwase* 4.3–4.4).⁷ This incorporation of the spells prevents Naneferkaptah from ever forgetting them.

As a special form of written knowledge, magic could become dangerous, in that the texts could fall into the wrong hands. The so-called *Admonitions of an Egyptian Sage* (written ca. 1800 BC?), a literary composition dealing with the motif of losing order in state and society, describes exactly such a situation: "LO, the private chamber, its books are stolen, the secrets in it are laid bare. LO, magic (spells) are divulged, spells are made worthless through being repeated by people" (*Admonitions* 6.5–6.7).⁸

Measures could be taken to restrict access to magical texts. The learned priests could decide not to record the instructions and formulae in writing, like, for example, when one finds admonitions such as: "His (= of a god) matters shall not be specified in gods words (= in writing)" in a cult-topographical text⁹; or "Do not let the eye of any man whatsoever look upon it with the exception of yourself, or your father or your son".¹⁰ Even though such passages are

sometimes found as appendices to magical texts, they suggest that the magical formulae and instructions nonetheless circulated. These exhortations to keep a text secret seem to be nothing more than a hint at the exclusive character and thus at the efficacy of the spell in question. But it is conceivable that there was also a real secret oral tradition which only sporadically or much later found its way into writing.

Another method of preventing a magical ritual or spell from being recited by anybody who could read was to deploy an uncommon writing system. For example, Greek characters could be used for writing whole Egyptian texts, or a special cipher system could be used for key words.¹¹

To say that magic was used by everybody regardless of their social position would not be an exaggeration. Even the actual performance of magic was not restricted to learned people. Of course, the lector priests, the masters of the secrets, and the ritualists were the “magicians” par excellence because they had access to a great number of magical texts. But even shepherds knew some spells and performed magic for protecting their cattle.

In narratives, the abilities of magicians are without limits. These stories are extremely rich in fantastic motifs, and we can be fairly sure that they were greatly enjoyed and that the magicians acting in them were much admired.

One final point should be addressed: Where and how were magical texts transmitted? Of course, texts that were exclusively transmitted orally are lost to us. Our main source today is papyri, the ancient books. These comprise both large collections of magical texts and sheets with only a single spell. Other relevant material can be found on ostraca (potsherds and limestone flakes). On papyri and ostraca, typically the Hieratic and Demotic cursive scripts were used. Hieroglyphs are normally restricted to texts on tomb or temple walls or on stelae. In the Late Period, however, even statues are found totally covered with magical compositions.¹²

In Egypt there was no formally sanctioned canon of magical texts. Each set of formulae and instructions, and sometimes even separate spells, could exist as independent units. When common spells are recorded in different collections, the actual wording can vary. This is a frequent phenomenon in Egyptian literature: texts rarely took invariable, stable forms. Rather, they were continuously reshaped over time. They could be dissembled into separate parts, which in turn could be reassembled and recombined with other textual material, resulting in new compositions.

Manuscripts extant today were generally composed either for a specific individual, who is named in the text, or for general use, in which case the Egyptian

word for “NN” (Egyptian *men* [*mn*]) served as a placeholder for the name. In both cases it is clear that the personal object of the magic needed to be named, just as knowledge of a name implied power over someone. In religious texts, for example, gods were often unwilling to reveal their real, most secret name. In one story, we are told how the goddess Isis, well versed in magic, tortured the sun-god to gain his real name.¹³

Quite often pictures accompanied the magical texts.¹⁴ One common form of illustration displayed helpful gods overcoming pestering demons; sometimes the divine helpers are depicted alone. Such illustrations are generally crudely drawn, a result of the papyri having been copied by individuals for their own use or that of others rather than by artisans for the official temple cult. Consequently, the magical papyri document the private use of religious knowledge by individuals. Sometimes three-dimensional depictions, that is, statuettes of the enemy or the bewitched person, were also used.

The iconography of the enemies against whom magic was deployed shows how the Egyptians imagined them: sometimes they appear as ordinary humans, but at other times such enemies appear monstrously disfigured. For example, a demon called *shekekek* (*shqq*) is drawn naked with one arm folded before his face and his tongue at his anus. Other demonic beings are depicted with animal heads (cf. the quite customary type of anthropomorphic gods with animal heads). Very common is the notion of animals as the incarnation of evil gods and their entourages.

At this point, we are in a position to offer a summary description of Egyptian magic (Egyptian *heka*) as it was understood within ancient Egyptian society:

- Magic is a form of knowledge that could be used to manipulate the natural and human world.
- The powers manipulated through magic are intrinsic to the world as it was divinely created.
- Magical power and knowledge were not intrinsically moralized; their use, however, could be morally evaluated.
- Magic’s learnedness is incorporated in papyri, and that made magic accessible in the first instance only to the literate.
- Magical knowledge was also imbued with a certain exclusiveness through admonitions in the texts to keep the knowledge out of the wrong hands.
- The crude illustrations decorating magical texts give limited evidence of magical formulae being disseminated beyond temple precincts.

Historical Overview

Magical texts and objects are known from Egypt from the third millennium BC until well into the first millennium AD. But the material is unevenly distributed. The earliest texts we have are spells against dangerous animals. This sort of text shows a remarkable continuity across the epochs.

During the second millennium BC, the sources increase in number and diversity. We now also have spells against other people and peoples, divinatory texts, stories about sorcerers and even objects related to magical rites.

When early in the first millennium BC Egypt was governed by pharaohs from several foreign dynasties, magic was still very much present. However, new forms like the Oracular Amuletic Decrees emerged alongside traditional techniques.

After Alexander's conquest of Egypt (332 BC), the Greek language began to play an important role in Egypt. The late Egyptian magical papyri show also signs of contact with Greek magic, which in turn was influenced by Egyptian magic. When Egypt was Christianized, the Greek alphabet was regularly used for writing the Egyptian language (Coptic script). The church authorities condemned magic, but in spite of this it was still much in use.

The more than 3,000 years of Egyptian magic call for a short summary of the most important continuities and discontinuities. Right up until Egypt was Christianized, magic was considered to be a quite natural phenomenon. It was widely accepted to look for divine help in cases of disease or other problems that were supposed to be of divine origin. Magic was always a sort of practical application of religious knowledge. This knowledge could also be used to do harm.

Not every type of magic is attested for every epoch, and sometimes practices could change. But at all times the principal way of performing magic remained the same: the combination of (1) a substance or substances used, (2) an act performed and (3) words (a spell) spoken was essential. Egyptian magic was always open to the reception of foreign material. The explicit inclusion of spells in foreign languages attests to this in a very obvious way.

The most important discontinuity was caused by the Christianization of Egypt. It was not only responsible for the end of the pagan temple cult; it also meant the abandonment of the pagan religion and that religion's magic. Suddenly not only black magic but any form of magic was demonized. Before this time, magic had also been used officially by the highest representatives of the Egyptian state. But now magic was only used privately and secretly.

Old Kingdom

The earliest period of Egyptian history from which texts have survived is the Old Kingdom (ca. 2740–2140 BC). Writing had been invented in the early dynastic period, but only from the third dynasty onwards are coherent texts extant. The earliest magic texts are concerned with dangerous animals. In several tombs one finds the following or a similar threat formula:

The crocodile (be) against him in the water,
the snake (be) against him on land,
against him who will act against this (tomb)!¹⁵

People wished to ward off the attacks of these animals. In Old Kingdom private (i.e. non-royal) tombs, there is quite often a scene of herdsmen crossing a ford with their cattle. Crocodiles are shown lurking for prey. But some of the men are stretching out an arm against the crocodiles in what is likely a magical gesture. The scene is sometimes captioned: “Warding off the crocodile by the shepherd”.¹⁶ A suitable spell was probably recited at the same time.

Elaborate spells against snakes are found in the corpus of the so-called *Pyramid Texts*. These texts – or rather many of them – were first incised on the walls of the burial chamber and the adjacent rooms of the pyramid of Wenis (twenty-fourth century BC), the last king of the fifth dynasty. The *Pyramid Texts* were originally royal funerary texts for the kings of the Old and Middle Kingdoms and were later adapted for private use in the Middle Kingdom (called *Coffin Texts*). Such texts include magical and religious injunctions, such as, for example, the following:

One snake is enveloped by another.
A toothless calf which came forth from the pasture is enveloped.
O earth, swallow up what went forth from you!
O monster, lie down, stumble!
The pelican (*hm-psd.t*) has fallen into the water.
O snake, turn round, for Re sees you. (*Pyramid Texts* spell 226)¹⁷

The language is cryptic and terse, and it is thus not easily interpreted. The method of making allusions through single words is very typical for these early magical and also religious spells in the *Pyramid Texts*. Are the two snakes fighting each other? Does this result in a mutual neutralisation? Why is the calf mentioned? Could it be the victim of the snakes instead of Wenis? The earth is addressed and summoned to swallow the snake. Because snakes

live on the surface of the earth or dig holes in it, the earth was considered to be an obvious helper against snakes. The snake is then addressed directly and ordered to be paralysed. The significance of the pelican is even more difficult to determine. Noisily landing in the water, it is certainly not acting directly against the snake. Is the attention of the snake diverted to the splashing bird simply to get the dangerous animal away from Wenis? The warning that the sun-god Re, the Lord of Maat (= the Right Order), has already detected the snake might indirectly threaten punishment for the snake should it attack. Threatening the enemy by having recourse to somebody still mightier is a general feature of Egyptian magical texts of all periods.

Middle Kingdom and Second Intermediate Period

Several types of material related to magic are attested from the Middle Kingdom. First of all, several execration figures are known. These are roughly shaped statuettes of bound captives. Inscribed with the names of Egyptian and foreign enemies of the Egyptian king, these figures were accoutrements for official practices by the highest officials of the Egyptian state. Although corresponding and explanatory ritual texts have been lost, we can assume that the figures were probably used in voodoo-like rituals. Moreover, the figures themselves are inscribed with a more or less standard text:

Ruler of Ta[...] (called) Kemek, born by his mother, over whom it is said "Are you a rebel?", (and) his army;

ruler of [...]wa (called) Iny, born by his mother, over whom it is said "Are you a [...] there?", (and) his army;

(female) ruler of Yamnaes (called) Satjit, born by her mother, over whom it is said "[...] does not kill(?)", (and) her army;

ruler of Rukit (called) Saktui, born by his mother, over whom it is said "Is there anybody who adheres to him?", (and) his army;

ruler of Makja (called) Wai, born by his mother, over whom it is said "Calf!" (and) his army;

...

all people;

all nobles;

all commoners;

all men;

all eunuchs;

all women;

Fountain of Horus (= region of the First Cataract?);

Wawat (= region south of the First Cataract);

[...]

Upper Egypt;

Lower Egypt;

...

(Now the text mentions their possible crimes:)

who might rebel;

who might conspire;

who might make a rebellion;

who might fight;

...

(The text starts again with the enumeration of dangerous people in Nubia and their allies:)

[their] champions;

their messengers;

all people (i.e. Egyptians), who are with them;

all Nubians, who are with them;

all Asiatics, who are with them;

...

(Next the Libyans are enumerated. Finally, the text mentions the names of two Egyptian individuals.)¹⁸

Another important find is the library of a healer and magician dating to the thirteenth dynasty. Altogether twenty-three papyrus rolls were found together in a box in a shaft below the Ramesseum at Thebes. This collection of books contained inter alia: an onomasticon, the tale of the Eloquent Peasant, the tale of Sinuhe, the teaching of Sisobek and other wisdom texts, a hymn to the crocodile god Sobek, rituals and no fewer than fifteen magical and medical papyri. In addition, there were many objects used for performing magic, for example, amulets (cf. Figure 2.1, a *djed* pillar, and Figure 2.2, a composite *wedjat*-eye).¹⁹

All of these texts belonged to the same man. He was a lector priest (*kheri-hebet* [*hry-hb.t*]). It is clear that reciting religious compositions like hymns to gods, using magical texts like spells for warding off demons and preparing and

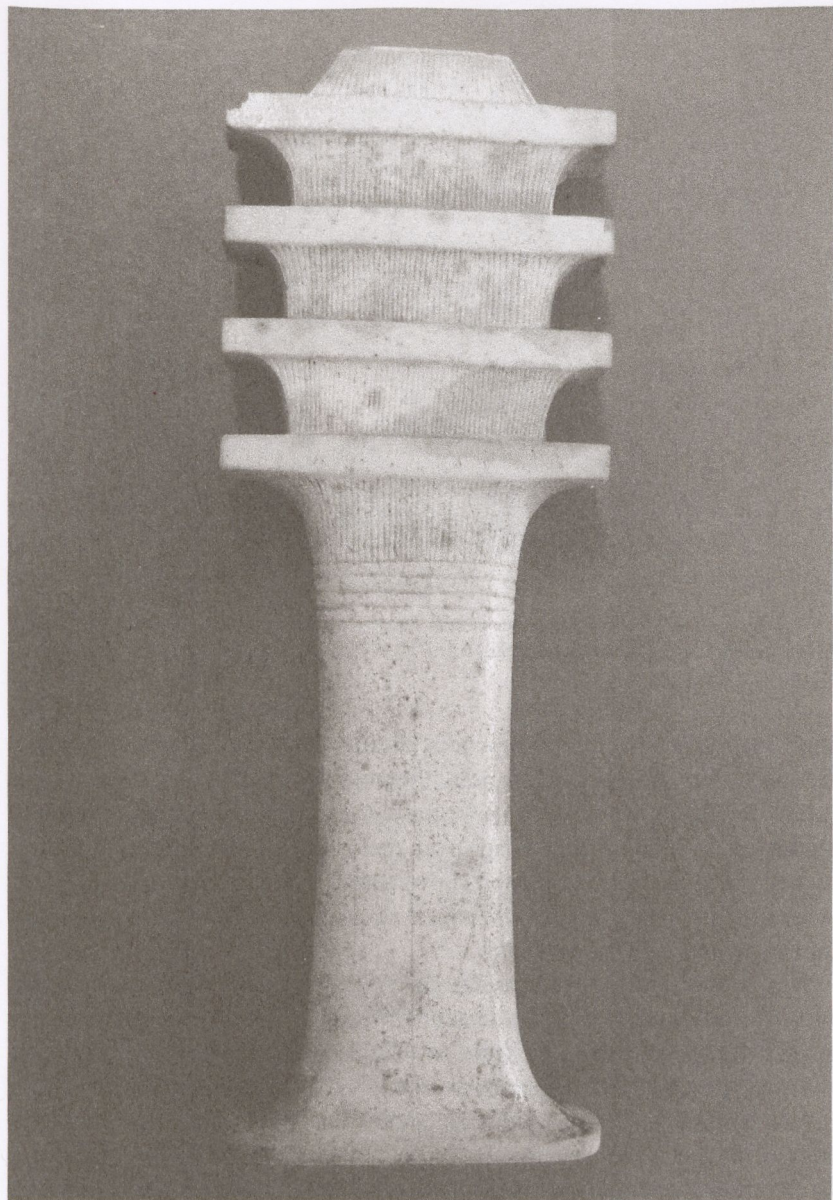


FIGURE 2.1. A *djed*-pillar, Late Period. British Museum, London, BM/Big no. 2100. Image ANoo881443_001.jpg of the British Museum.

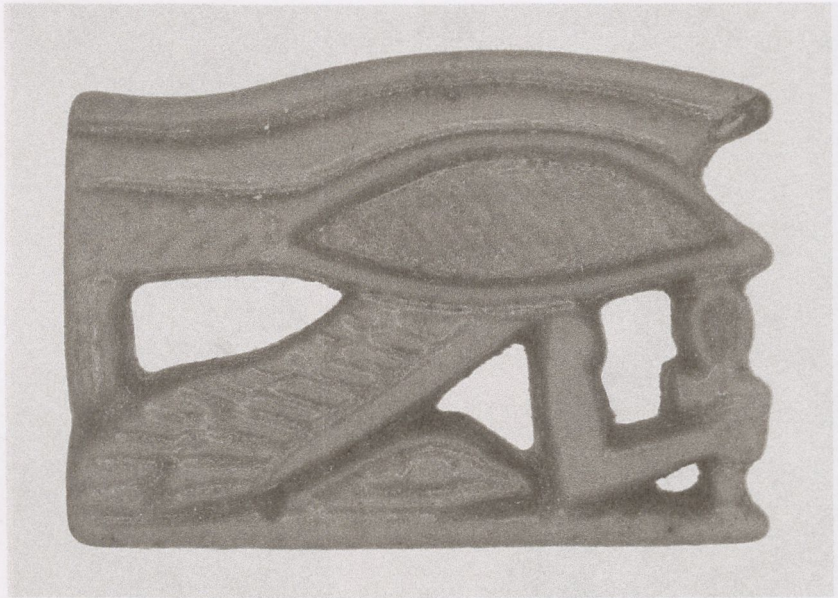


FIGURE 2.2. A composite *wedjat*-eye. British Museum, London, BM/Big no. 7378. Image AN00948666_001.jpg of the British Museum.

applying medicine were the functions of one and the same man, and these functions were associated with each other in ancient Egypt.

The Egyptians were particularly afraid that magical texts might be used by the wrong people. The passage from the so-called Admonitions quoted in the second section of this chapter shows this clearly. It becomes obvious that according to Egyptian belief the papyri alone contain whatever is necessary for enacting magic.

From the Second Intermediate Period comes *Papyrus Westcar*, a well-known manuscript containing stories about Old Kingdom kings and chief lector priests (*kheri-hebet heri-dep* [*hry-ḥb.t hry-dp*]) acting as magicians.²⁰ This gives a vivid picture of what magicians were able to perform in fictional literature. In one of these stories, a magician forms a little crocodile out of wax and transforms it into a large living crocodile in order to catch an adulterous man. In another story, a magician folds up the water of a pool and thus gets back a piece of jewellery that has fallen into the water and sunk to the bottom. In the final story, a magician is able to reattach the heads of beheaded animals and make them alive again. Interestingly, the man is first summoned to perform this feat with a human being, but he refuses to do so. The same magician

also knows the number of the very secret chambers of Thot. Here again the important role of knowledge and its association with magic and magicians becomes apparent.

New Kingdom

The amount of written evidence for magical practice in the New Kingdom is significantly greater than that from the previous epochs. Although this increasing trend continues through later periods, it cannot be concluded that magic itself was more common in the New Kingdom and later. It is simply the result of preservation: the more recent a text copy, the better its chances of survival.

Spells for a mother and child are quite illustrative of magic more generally in the early New Kingdom. Pregnancy, labour and birth were dangerous and important at the same time. But the reasons for miscarriage, sudden bleedings, death of a child and so on were not transparent for the ancients. It is no wonder that people thought of demons as the agents and that they sought magical help.

ANOTHER SPELL FOR ACCELERATING (?) (*shꜣh*) LABOUR:

Open for me!

I am the one whose favour(?) is large,

the builder who built the pylon of/ for Hathor, the lady of Dendera,

who lifts up in order that she may give (birth).

Hathor, the lady of Dendera, is <the> one who is giving birth.

[THIS SPELL IS TO BE SAID] FOR A WOMAN. (*Papyrus Leiden I 348 recto*
13.9–13.11)²¹

Although the meaning of the word *shꜣh* is not entirely certain, the general drift of the spell makes it clear that some sort of help during birth was the aim of these sentences. The text begins directly by addressing someone who remains unnamed. But “Open for me!” is an order that is perfectly understandable in this context. The speaker next identifies himself as a god who is described as a builder. This is Khnum, who is known from other texts as the one who fashions the children. Here he is considered as a god who has erected a high building for the goddess Hathor, who is responsible for love and motherhood. He has thus built for her a place for giving birth. It is then asserted that the woman who is giving birth is actually Hathor herself. In this way, both the speaking healer and the woman are transferred to the divine sphere. This

should help, and the spell ends here. Only a very brief instruction for its use is appended.

The close association between Egyptian magic and medicine becomes explicitly clear in the famous *Edwin Smith Papyrus* of about 1550 BC. This manuscript is, however, certainly a copy of an older text. On the front, there is a long sequence of chapters dealing with wounds. The text is arranged from the head downwards, but when it reaches the shoulders, the papyrus breaks off. What is important for us here is that these texts are completely free of magic. But the back of the papyrus contains a series of spells against demons that were thought to cause infectious diseases. The normal procedures against them are applied: an address to the demons that refers back to a mythological precedent, magical spells and ritual performances. Both sides of the *Edwin Smith Papyrus* belong together. Wounds have an obvious cause, such as a blow from a weapon. This was perfectly clear to the Egyptians. But what about fevers, infections, parasites? The Egyptians had no chance of detecting the real cause of all these diseases and therefore considered harmful supernatural forces. It was logical that there could only be one way of getting rid of them: the gods had to help. Magic is the practical application of religious knowledge, that is, the knowledge about the gods, their cults, their myths, etc., just as Egyptian astrology could in principle be understood to be the practical side of astronomy. Thus, like the Ramesseum library to which magical, religious and medical papyri belonged, the *Edwin Smith Papyrus*, which contains medical and magical texts, shows that for the Egyptians these groups of texts formed a unit and should be taken together as healing texts.

The search for help and protection from demons must have led to the question of what would happen if a demon comes from a foreign country and does not understand the Egyptian language. During the New Kingdom, when Egypt had extended its territory far into the Near East and into Nubia, contacts with other cultures were most intense. No doubt the Egyptians must have noticed that other peoples used magical spells in their own languages. Why not try to be on the safe side by using at least some of them, too? Here is a good example:

Conjuration of the Asiatic disease IN THE SPEECH OF CRETE:

sntkppwyiymntrkr.

THIS INCANTATION IS TO BE SPOKEN OVER FERMENTED BARM(?), URINE . . . TO BE APPLIED TO IT. (*Papyrus BM EA 10059 7.4–7.6* [old numbering II.4–II.6])²²

The Asiatic disease is possibly leprosy. Because of its foreign origin, a spell in a foreign language likely seemed especially helpful. The short spell was to

be recited over the medicine, which was to be applied to the infected parts of the skin.

From the New Kingdom, there exists a long papyrus, the *Magical Papyrus Harris* = *Papyrus BM EA 10042*, with hymns and spells against dangerous animals. Interestingly, most of the hymns do not show any sign of their intended use. But the heading to them is clear: "THE PERFECT INCANTATIONS TO BE SUNG which drive off the 'immersed' (= the crocodiles)" (*Papyrus BM EA 10042 I.I*).²³

Later on, another heading introduces spells and instructions against these animals. The first section runs as follows:

FIRST INCANTATION OF ALL CONJURATIONS ON WATER OF WHICH THE MAGICIANS SAY: DO NOT REVEAL IT TO OTHERS! A TRUE SECRET OF THE HOUSE OF LIFE (= THE TEMPLE SCRIPTORIUM)!

O egg of the water, spit of the earth,
seed of the Ogdoad,
Great one in heaven, prince in the underworld,
he who is in the nest before the Lake of Knives (i.e. the sun-god)!
I came with you out of the water,
I penetrate with you from your nest.
I am Min of Coptos.

THIS INCANTATION IS TO BE SPOKEN <OVER> AN EGG OF CLAY,
PLACED IN THE HAND OF A MAN AT THE FORE OF A BOAT.

IF THERE APPEARS THE ONE WHO IS ON THE WATER (= THE CROCODILE),
IT IS TO BE THROWN INTO THE WATER. (*Papyrus BM EA 10042 6.10-7.1*)²⁴

First the reader is urged to keep the spell secret. Then the sun-god, who rises in the morning from the water and his abode in the swamps (like a crocodile!), is addressed. The magician says he is with the sun-god all the time, because he is the fertility god Min himself. The spell is to be recited over a lump of clay and can be thrown against a crocodile in case of an encounter with this dangerous animal.

Also relevant to a chapter on magic in ancient Egypt is the phenomenon of divination.²⁵ Two types can be distinguished for the New Kingdom: hemerology, that is, the determination of lucky and unlucky days, and dream divination, by which the fate of an individual is foretold according to his or her dreams. The beginning of *Papyrus Cairo JE 86637* and its parallels give an idea of what a text on lucky and unlucky days looks like:

BEGINNING OF THE EPIPHANY FESTIVALS OF all gods (and) all goddesses
<ON> THIS DAY IN HIS TIME, FOUND IN OLD BOOKS:

FIRST MONTH OF THE INUNDATION SEASON DAY 1 – THIS IS THE SECOND OPENING OF THE YEAR: half good, half dangerous. (The god) Nehebkaw (*nḥb-kꜣ*) came into being on this day. FESTIVAL OF Osiris, FESTIVAL OF Isis, FESTIVAL OF every god, FESTIVAL OF (the crocodile god) Sobek, lord of Iwneferu (*iw-nfrw*). This means, you shall not travel with ships which are on the water on this day.

FIRST MONTH OF THE INUNDATION SEASON DAY 2: good, good. FESTIVAL OF (the god of the air) Shu, the son of Re, FESTIVAL OF (the divine sistrum player) Ihi, the son of Hathor, FESTIVAL OF (the hunter- and fighter-god) Onuris in Heliopolis, FESTIVAL OF (the lion-god) Miysis. This is the festival of victory which Re celebrated for Onuris, when (he) took the Horus eye for him. You shall not eat the 'fꜣ-plant (nor) cross the water on this day.

...

FIRST MONTH OF THE INUNDATION SEASON DAY 4: DANGEROUS. Festival of Hathor, the lady of Byblos. FESTIVAL OF Nekhbet, the White One of (the city of) Nekhen, FESTIVAL OF (the sky-goddess) Nut. Beginning a work <is> an offense. It is dangerous to join people. As for anybody who suffers from his heart on this [day], he will not (sur)vive. (*Papyrus Cairo JE 86637 I.1–I.5*)²⁶

With column 3, the papyrus continues with a second and more elaborate calendar. We are not told why a certain day is considered to be good or bad. Egyptologists have worked hard to find the reasons behind the verdicts.²⁷

Another type of divinatory text is *Papyrus Chester Beatty III*, which contained at least 230 dreams and their explanations (Figure 2.3). It is the longest Egyptian dream text. Many sentences are lost; others are incomprehensible as far as the way of reaching the prognosis is concerned. From those which we are able to understand, it becomes apparent that a similarity between the things dreamt and the dreaming person's situation is supposed to exist:

If a man sees himself in a dream

burying an old man,
good; it means prosperity.

cultivating herbs,
good; it means finding victuals.

bringing in the cattle,
good; the assembly of people for him by his god.

working stone in his house,
good; the establishment of a man in his home.

...

towing a boat,

good; his landing happily in his home. (*Papyrus Chester Beatty III 6.1–6.6*)²⁸

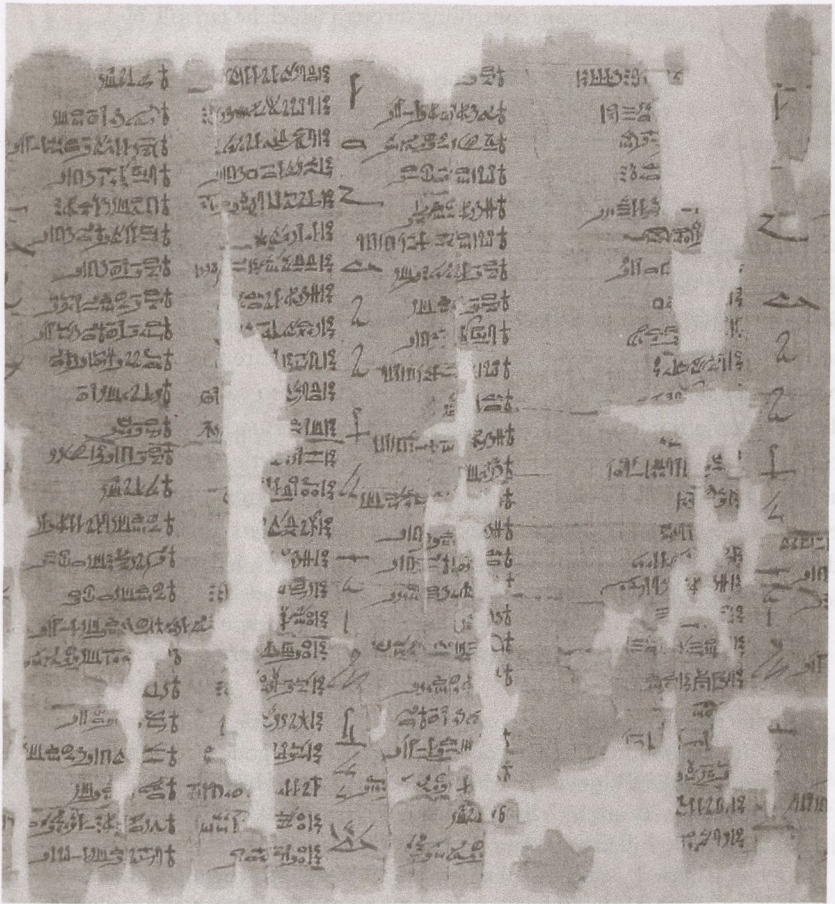


FIGURE 2.3. Dream Book (Papyrus Chester Beatty III), detail of sheet 2, New Kingdom, 19th dynasty. British Museum, London, BM/Big no. 10683. Image AN00423176_001.jpg of the British Museum.

Or, by means of word play, a connection between a dream and fate is found (it is simply by chance that only bad interpretations occur in the following selection):

If a man sees himself in a dream
 seeing his penis stiff (*nht.w*),
 BAD; victory (*nht.w*) to his enemies.
 ...
 being given a harp (*bin.t*),

BAD; it means something through which he fares ill (*bin*).

...

removing (*it.t*) the nails of his fingers, BAD;

removal (*it.t*) of the work of his hands.

...

entering into a room with his clothes wet (*iwh*), BAD; it means fighting (*'h3*). (*Papyrus Chester Beatty III 8.2–8.16*)²⁹

The Egyptians were not content with discovering what fate might bring in the future. They also tried to fight against it. The idea is simple: if the gods were to forbid animals to kill men, organs to die, demons to act badly and so on, everything would be fine. People tried to ensure that they were fully protected against these and other dangers with the so-called Divine Decrees. These often quite long texts were styled as decrees issued by great gods. They could be written on a piece of papyrus, put into a little box and worn as an amulet around the neck for protection. These writings often contained an enumeration of any possible dangers, as well as threats against the animals, demons and gods who were viewed as adversaries, should they neglect the following command issued by Osiris:

Royal decree of Osiris, First One [of the Westerners (= of the dead people)] ...

Driving away a male dead (= a restless ghost), a female dead and so on ... any god, the (bad) influence of a god, the influence of a goddess ... as death of his head, death of his eyes, death of his belly, death of his backbone ... death by a crocodile, death by a lion ... death by a snake, death by a scorpion ... death of being killed by a bronze (weapon), death of being buried, death of not being buried, death of falling off a wall, death of drowning ... death of his loins, death of the lung(s) ... death of his teeth ... death of a (falling[?]) sycamore ... death of any herbs ... death of the bone of a bird (in the throat), death of the bone of any fish ... death of starving, death of thirsting ... death of going<-to>-one's ka (= dying), any death which comes about by men and gods ...

If the removal of any (demonic) enemy, fiend, male dead, female dead, and so on is delayed:

Then the enemy of the heaven will split it asunder, then the enemy of the earth will turn it over forcibly, then Apophis (i.e. the enemy of the sun-god) <will be> in the Bark of Millions (= the bark of the sun-god), no water will be given to the One who is in the coffin, the One who is in Abydos (i.e. Osiris) will not be buried, the One who is in Busiris (i.e. Osiris) will not be covered up, no offerings will be made to the One in Heliopolis (i.e. the sun-god) ...

the people will not offer on all their festivals to any gods. (*Papyrus Turin 1993* verso 7.6–10.1)³⁰

Such threats, promising as they do the destruction of world order, it was hoped, would force Osiris enforce his command and protect the man or woman who was using such a text.

Although it commended protective magic, Egyptian society took the harmful uses of magic seriously as well and criminalized it. The most famous case stems from an assassination attempt against Ramesses III. As the trial acts recount, one conspirator made voodoo-like figures and brought them into the palace:

When Penhui bin who was overseer of the cattle said to him, “Give me a text in order to lend me terror and might!”, he gave him one text from the papyrus box of Usimare miamun (= Ramesses III), the great god, his lord. And he began (to cause) (magical) excitement among the people during the god’s arrival (= procession). He reached the side of the harim (and) also this great, deep place (i.e. the royal tomb which was under construction?). And he began to make inscribed men of wax, in order to have them taken inside by the agent Idrem, entangling one gang, bewitching the other one, taking some words (= messages) inside, bringing the others out. (*Papyrus Lee 1.2–1.5 = KRI V 361,15–362,8*)³¹

The Egyptians were well aware of the dangers of black magic. Because the use or the fear of magic was not a phenomenon linked to any specific social strata, it is no surprise that king Amenhotep II (1428–1397 BC) warned his vice-roy in Nubia in an official letter, which was later incised on a stela, “Beware of their (= the Nubians) people and their magicians!” (*Urk. IV 1344,12*).³²

Illness, misfortune and even death were sometimes blamed on bad demons or malevolent magic.³³ As treatment could only be properly applied if the agent of the misfortune was known, it was essential for the Egyptians to ascertain which god had been provoked to do harm. A so-called “wise woman” (*remtjet rekhet [rmt.t rh.t]*) was regarded as a proper source for this information. She remains a quite shadowy figure in the extant texts, but she must have played an important role. From Deir el-Medine there are some New Kingdom texts that give us at least an impression of when and how the “wise woman” was consulted:

I went to the wise woman (and) [she] said to me: ‘A manifestation (*baw [bzw]*) of (the god) Ptah is with you because of (the man) Pashu because of an oath on behalf of his wife. Not at all a manifestation of (the god) Seth’ (*Ostrakon Gardiner 149*).³⁴

In this instance, someone was seeking to identify the god who had caused his or her problems. Only when it was revealed to that person could he or she act against it. We do not know what the education of a “wise woman” was or what her qualifications were, nor whether there was one in each town or village. But we know that even the goddess Isis, the great sorceress among the gods, could act in the role of the “wise woman”.

A charming story from the New Kingdom tells us about necromantia, the calling of dead people who have become spirits (singular *akh* [ʒh]). The First Prophet³⁵ of (the god) Amunre Khensemhab encounters a spirit whose tomb and funerary equipment are decaying and who has ceased receiving offerings. Such ghosts could become dangerous, as they might haunt living people in order to get their share or to do harm to them; in this instance, however, the ghost does not seem to be particularly evil. Because the text is incompletely preserved, one cannot tell why Khensemhab tries to win the favour of the ghost:

And he (= Khensemhab) climbed on the roof [of his house. And he said to th]e gods of the sky, the gods of the earth, (the gods) of south, north, west (and) east ... “Cause this noble spirit to come to me!” And he (= the spirit) came [... THEN] the First Prophet of Amunre, the king of gods, Khens[emhab, said to him: “Tell me your wishes!] I will have it done for you” ... [... THEN this noble spirit said to him:] “The one who is naked <in> the wind in wintertime [cannot feel warm]; hungry, without fo[od ...” THEN the First Prophet of Amunre, the king of gods,] Khensemhab, sat down weeping: “What a terrible state of existence: not eating, not drinking, not g[etting old, not becoming] young, not seeing the rays of the sun disk, not smelling the north wind!”³⁶

The ghost seems to be sceptical about the High Priest’s promises to renew the funeral of the spirit, because it is not for the first time that he was told this. One can only guess that now he gets what he wants but that Khensemhab is pursuing his own interests.

Third Intermediate Period and Late Period

About six centuries of mostly foreign rule over Egypt followed the era of the New Kingdom: the Libyans (946/945–ca. 735 BC), the Nubians (ca. 746–ca. 655 BC) and the Persians (525–401 and 342–332 BC). In between, native Egyptian dynasties could establish themselves, but sometimes Egypt was divided among several local rulers. Times of disorder and times of restoration followed each other. Magic continued to be of the greatest importance, and some new forms emerged alongside older ones.

One Oracular Amuletic Decree in particular exemplifies the great efforts in this period to enumerate more and more possible dangers (*Papyrus London BM 10083*, from the ninth or eighth century BC):

We (= the protective gods) will protect her from a female demon of a canal, from a female demon of a well, from a female demon of the Nile, from a female demon of a lake, from a female demon of a pool which (the inundation) has left behind, from a male demon, from a female demon of her father and of her mother, from a female demon of her family of her father, from a female demon of her family of her mother.

We will appease them (= the demons) for her.

We will cause her to be sound during all of her life time.

We will protect her from the magic of a Syrian, from the magic of a Nubian, from the magic of a Libyan, from the magic of an Egyptian, from the magic of a sorcerer (or) a sorceress, from any magic of any kind. (*Papyrus London BM 10083* verso 21–40)³⁷

This section is followed with an enumeration of diseases and then with promises such as these: “We will provide her estate with cattle, with goats, with servants (and) female servants, with barley, with emmer, with copper, with clothing” (*Papyrus London BM 10083* verso 64–67).³⁸

During the Late Period, a new type of magical device appears quite regularly – the so-called Horus cippi or Horus stelae. An example is illustrated in Figure 2.4. The god Horus, depicted as a naked child, is standing in the centre. He is grasping dangerous animals of the desert (snakes, a gazelle, a lion and a scorpion) and is thus annihilating them. Over his head, there is the face of the god Bes, a protective deity. To the left and to the right respectively, there are a papyrus-stem with a falcon and the symbol of the god Nefertem. Under Horus, there are two crocodiles, which again symbolize the victory over the powers of chaos and danger. On the back of these stelae, there is often a long spell against dangerous animals and sometimes other spells accompanied by illustrations depicting demonic beings being overpowered. Although some of the Horus stelae are very small and could possibly have been worn as a kind of amulet, others are really large and bear an extensive collection of spells and illustrations. The normal use of these stelae was to pour water over them, collect the water and then deploy it as a kind of holy water. To accomplish this, the more elaborate Horus stelae stood on block-like bases which contained basins for receiving the water. Even a human statue could be combined with a stela on the same base. A famous example is the statue of Djedher, dated to the fourth century BC. Djedher



FIGURE 2.4. Horus stela, front side, Late Period. British Museum, London, EA 36250, BM/Big no. 60958. Image AN00179099_001.jpg of the British Museum.

is squatting on a large base block and is holding a Horus stela in front of him. The figure and the base are entirely covered with inscriptions. Only the skin is left free. Most of the texts are spells against poisonous animals, but we are also informed about Djedher's reasons for having the statue made. In one passage Djedher addresses the reader: "O every priest, every scribe, every wise (man) who will see this 'reciter' (i.e. a statue which recites), who will recite its [writing]s, who will know its formulae: You should protect its spells!" (lines 123–124).³⁹

After the request for a funerary offering for Djedher, the text continues with the reasons why Djedher should be respected:

... since I have done good things to all people (and) to all the inhabitants of the nome of Athribis, in order to rescue everybody, who comes on the way, from the poison of any male serpent, any female serpent, and reptile. I have done likewise to everybody, who is in the house of the necropolis, in order to make alive the one who is dead (and) to rescue them from any biting mouth (i.e. snake). (lines 127–131)⁴⁰

A famous papyrus of about 600 BC, *Papyrus Brooklyn 47.218.48+85*, could be called a handbook on snakes (cf. p. 53). It consists of two parts. The first treats all of the snakes known to the Egyptians; the second gives many magico-medical spells and treatments against snake-bites. Interestingly, the first part includes not only zoological features of the snakes but also the key information for magically treating them, namely, which god or goddess they represent, for example:

AS FOR THE MALE ASIATIC (SNAKE) (= *Vipera ammodytes*): It is (coloured) like a quail, its head is large, its neck is short, its tail is like the tail of a mouse. . . . It is the manifestation of (the god) Sobek – VARIANT: (the goddess) Neith. (*Papyrus Brooklyn 47.218.48+85* § 18)⁴¹

As one can see, in this case, there existed conflicting views about the god or goddess of whom the snake was a manifestation.

Just as in the earlier epochs, in the Late Period, there are narratives which demonstrate how marvellous the abilities of magicians were imagined to be in Egyptian literature. One story is preserved in the *Papyrus Vandier* from about 600 BC. The main character is Merire, an extremely good magician. But the wicked lector priests at the royal court have prevented him from becoming known to Pharaoh and even tried to kill Merire. They poison Pharaoh. Merire is called in order to save Pharaoh, who is predicted to have only seven more days to live. The only way to save his life is to send Merire into the netherworld in place of Pharaoh. Once Pharaoh has sworn to Merire that he would touch neither Merire's property nor his wife, Merire prepares himself and goes to the dead ones. Osiris grants Pharaoh seventy-five additional years of life.

After some time, the goddess Hathor tells Merire that Pharaoh has broken the oath, that he has taken Merire's wife and has killed his son. Because Merire cannot leave the netherworld, he forms a golem-like man out of clay and sends him to the world of the living. The golem has Pharaoh punish and burn all of the evil magicians in Heliopolis, returns to Merire and brings him a bouquet. This, however, makes Osiris angry, because he thinks that Merire had left the netherworld. The rest of the story becomes very fragmentary and then breaks off completely.

A Greek story belonging to the so-called *Alexander Romance* tells us about Nectanebos (II), the last native king of Egypt (360–342 BC). Whenever Egypt is attacked, he uses magic in order to fight the enemy. Later on he comes to the royal court in Macedonia and begets Alexander the Great.

Graeco-Roman Period

After Alexander's conquest in 332 BC, a fundamental change took place in Egypt. Unlike the earlier foreign dynasties that ruled Egypt, the new Greek overlords used their own language and writing to an unprecedented extent. True, the Persians had already made use of Aramaic for administrative purposes in Egypt, but Greek became much more prominent and visible, because it was also used for official inscriptions by the king.

When Egypt lost its independence and fell to the Romans in 30 BC, the state administration used Greek nearly exclusively and Egyptian survived only in the temples. During the Graeco-Roman period, therefore, Egyptian scripts were almost exclusively retained in texts of priestly scholarship. Very long compilations have survived, especially from the Roman period, a very productive epoch.

During Graeco-Roman times, the Hellenistic and the Egyptian worlds saw a scholarly exchange of ideas and knowledge, although in other respects each culture adhered to its own traditions. More difficult to grasp is their relationship with Jewish and Mesopotamian elements. An extreme case is seen in the following section of a late Roman magical spell from a lamp divination:

HERE IS the copy of the summons itself which you should recite:

"O, speak to me, speak to me, *thes* (= Greek *theós* 'god?'),⁴² *tēnor* (= Hebrew 'Give light!'),⁴³ the father of eternity and everlastingness, the god who is over the entire land, *salgmo*, *balkmo brak* (= Hebrew 'flash of lightning?') *nephro-banpre* (= Egyptian 'beautiful of face, soul of [the sun-god] Pre') *brias* (= Greek 'you are strong?') *sari* (= Egyptian 'lord?') of gods, *melikhriphs* (= Greek 'honey ...') *larnknanes herephes* (= Greek *euryphyēs* 'broad-grown?') *mephro-brias* (= Egyptian 'beautiful of face' [i.e. *nephro*] + Greek 'you are strong?') *phrga-phekse ntsiwpshia marmareke* (= Greek *marmarygē* 'flashing?') *laore-grepshie* (= ... + Greek *kryphie* '(o) hidden one?')! Let me see the answer to the inquiry on account of which I am here. Let an answer be made to me concerning everything about which I am asking here today, truly, without falsehood. O *atael apthe gho-gho-mole hesen-minga-nton-rotho-boubo*⁴⁴ *noere* (= Greek *noerē* '(o) intellectual one?') *seresere* (= Greek *sýre sýre* '(o) Syrian, (o) Syrian?') *san* (= Egyptian 'brother') *gathara eresgshingal* (= Ereshkigal) *sakgiste ntote-gagiste* (= Greek *dodekaskistai* = 'twelve baskets?') *akruro-bore* (= Greek *akrourobóre* 'swallowing the tip of her tail', i.e. the moon) *gontere!*" (*Magical Papyrus London/Leiden* 7.19–7.26)⁴⁵

In the long sequences of *vores magicae*, that is, magical names, which were often impossible to understand,⁴⁶ not only is a beneficent Egyptian god like the sun-god Pre (= Re) invoked but so are many Greek ones, whereas others are Hebrew and Mesopotamian, including Ereshkigal, the Sumerian goddess of the netherworld.

This text has a feature in common with the other Demotic magical texts, but it differs from the older Egyptian corpus. Whereas in the earlier epochs the sequence was heading – spell – instruction, it is now heading – instruction – spell, as in the Greek magical papyri.

There is even a spell in a foreign language (cf. p. 64 for a similar case in the New Kingdom): “SPELL OF GIVING PRAISE [and] love in Nubian: ‘*symyth kesyth hrbaba brasakhs lat*, son of(?) *bakha*’. Say these; put gum on your hand; and kiss your shoulder twice, and go before the man whom you desire” (PDM lxi 95–99).⁴⁷

In another instance, a Greek and an Egyptian version of one and the same spell can be found next to each other:

(Demotic:) [A spell] for going before a superior if he fights with you and he will not speak with you:

(Greek:) Do not pursue me, you, so-and-so, (Old Coptic:) I am (Greek:) *papipetou metoubanes*. I am carrying the mummy of Osiris, and I go to take it to Abydos, to take it to Tastai, and to bury it at [Al]khas (= the necropolis of Abydos). If he, NN, causes me trouble, I will throw the mummy at him.

(Demotic:) Its invocation in Egyptian again is that which is below:

(Demotic:) Do not run after me, NN. I am *papipety metybanes*, carrying the mummy of Osiris, going to take it to Abydos to let it rest in Alkhas (‘*lgh’h*). If NN fights with me today, I shall cast it out. (PDM xiv. 451–458 = PGM XIVb. 12–15 = *Magical Papyrus London/Leiden* 15.24–15.31)⁴⁸

Very often glosses indicating the pronunciation of a word were added. Their use shows that a knowledge of Greek and Egyptian was required if someone wished to consult the papyrus. Interestingly, the Demotic written passages also show signs of being transformations of a Greek original. But matters can be complicated: the Demotic written word ‘*lgh’h*’ clearly represents the Greek *alkhai* [αλχαι]. This in turn, however, is a phonetic rendering of the Egyptian ‘*rq-hh*’, the name of the necropolis of Abydos. All three forms of the word occur in the same London/Leiden papyrus, which gives us some idea of the transformation processes from one language and script to the other and back again underlying the extant text. It also shows how easily the etymological understanding was lost. Did those who wrote ‘*lgh’h*’ not know that the Greek

alkhai in their *Vorlage* was a way of writing 'rq-ḥḥ? If they did not, how much of what they wrote did they understand? If they were aware of it, why then did they choose a purely phonetic rendering? Were just the sounds important or was it for encrypting the text? One might point to the Egyptian cipher system for disguising certain words – only single words, never whole sentences.

The Demotic magical papyri do not contain only magical and medical instructions. One also finds short explanations of Greek mineral and plant names in Demotic, like the following:

(Greek:) *thithymalos* (= *tithýmallos* = “spurge”),

(Demotic:) which is this small herb which is in the gardens and which exudes milk. If you put its milk on a man's skin, it eats. (*Magical Papyrus London/Leiden* verso I.7–I.II)⁴⁹

First the Greek name of the plant is given in Greek. Then the characteristics of the plant are given in Demotic.

Many similar Demotic magical texts are still extant, including three further manuals.⁵⁰ The types of matters covered in these texts include the following: lamp divinations, vessel divinations, rituals for seeing a god in a vision (“god's arrival”) and other divinatory inquiries, spells for causing favour, love charms, instructions on how to separate a man from a woman, spells against bites and stings, spells against bones in the throat, rituals for performing harm to others, explanations of plants and minerals, and medical and other prescriptions, even including one for a donkey that is not moving.

Just as in the earlier periods, there are also extant in the Graeco-Roman epoch manuscripts of narratives on magicians. The best-preserved and best-known stories are centred around Setne Khaemwase, the fourth son of Ramesses II (1279–1213 BC). During his father's long reign, he developed a strong interest in Egyptian antiquities and several restoration inscriptions he left on older monuments bear witness to this. Setne Khaemwase's reputation as a great sorcerer likely derived from his preoccupation with antique buildings and tombs. Although the longest Demotic manuscripts we have are from the Ptolemaic Period (First Setne Story) and the Roman Period (Second Setne Story), the narratives are much older. An Aramaic papyrus from Egypt of the fifth century BC contains a story on Horus-son-of-Paneshe (i.e. “Horus, son of the wolf”), a character who is later known from the Second Setne Story.

In this narrative, we are told how Setne and his son Siosiris descend into the netherworld, where they discover the fate of people who have been just or unjust during their lifetime on earth. Later on, a Nubian magician comes

to Pharaoh asking the Egyptian to read a sealed papyrus roll he has brought with him without opening it. For Siosiris, this is a trifling request, and he is easily able to read what is written. This story within the story takes us back into far distant times and tells how the Nubian king had one of his sorcerers – the Nubian title *ate* is used – bring Pharaoh to Nubia in the night, beat him before the Nubian king and return him to his palace within six hours. Pharaoh understandably disliked the idea of having to suffer the same treatment again. His magician, Horus-son-of-Paneshe, realized who was using magic against Pharaoh, protected him with amulets and succeeded in preventing the Nubian magic from being effective during the following night. Horus-son-of-Paneshe then started his magical counter-attack against the Nubian king. For three nights, the Nubian king was taken magically to Egypt, severely beaten before Pharaoh and returned to Nubia. The Nubian sorcerer was unable to protect his lord. To seek help for him, the sorcerer went to Egypt to look for the one who was acting against him. He identified Horus-son-of-Paneshe and began a magical contest with him. This fantastic showdown deserves to be quoted in full:

The sorcerer then did a feat of magic: he made a fire break out in the court. Pharaoh and the nobles of Egypt cried out aloud, saying: "Hasten to us, you lector priest, Horus-son-of-Paneshe!" Horus-son-of-Paneshe made a magic formula and made the sky pour a heavy rain on top of the fire. It was extinguished at once.

The Nubian did another feat of sorcery: he cast a big cloud on the court, so that no man could see his brother or his companion. Horus-son-of-Paneshe recited a spell to the sky and made it vanish and be stilled from the evil wind in which it had been.

Horus-son-of-the-Nubian-woman did another feat of sorcery: he made a great vault of stone, 200 cubits long and 50 cubits wide, above Pharaoh and his nobles, so that Egypt would be separated from its king and the land deprived of its lord. When Pharaoh looked up at the sky and saw the vault of stone above him, he opened his mouth in a great cry, together with the people who were in the court. Horus-son-of-Paneshe recited a magical spell: he created a boat of papyrus and made it carry away the vault of stone. It sailed with it to the Great Lake, the big water of Egypt.

Then the sorcerer of Nubia knew that he could not contend with the Egyptian. He did a feat of sorcery so as to become invisible in the court, in order to escape to the land of Nubia, his home. Horus-son-of-Paneshe recited a spell against him, revealed the sorceries of the Nubian, and let him be seen by Pharaoh and the people of Egypt who stood in the court: he had assumed the

shape of a bad bird and was about to depart. Horus-son-of-Paneshe recited a spell against him and made him turn on his back, while a fowler stood over him, his sharp knife in his hand, and about to do him harm. (*II Khaemwase* 6.13–6.24)⁵¹

Very shortly after this final defeat of the Nubian sorcerer, the story takes an unanticipated turn: this very sorcerer of this old story is the same Nubian who has brought the papyrus roll to Pharaoh's court 1,500 years later, and Siosiris is identified as the reincarnation of the excellent ancient magician Horus-son-of-Paneshe!

The First Setne Story shows also a remarkably fantastic and complex plot. Setne is looking for a book written by the god of wisdom, Thoth. He finds it in the tomb of Naneferkaptah and steals it.

Later on, he sees a beautiful woman called Tabubu and wants to have sex with her. But she asks him first to donate all his possessions to her, to have his children agree to this formally and to have them killed. Setne does all of this, but then when he goes to touch Tabubu, he finds himself in the street. He and the reader realize that the whole Tabubu episode was nothing but a phantasmagoria effected by the dead but still magically powerful tomb owner, who forces Setne to return the book.

These Setne Stories are not the only narratives on magicians in the Graeco-Roman period. There are other fragmentary Setne texts and a still unpublished story about king Zoser (twenty-seventh century BC) and his famous vizier Imhotep, who, among other things, has to fight a magical duel with an Assyrian sorceress.

Coptic Period

Egypt was Christianized during the first centuries AD. Having in Roman Egypt become exclusively used by a diminishing priestly elite, the scripts that had hitherto been used for writing Egyptian were gradually abandoned. The Copts, that is, the Egyptian Christians, considered these writings to be heathen and wrote their language, the latest form of Egyptian, with Greek letters, including some additional signs taken from the Demotic script for sounds not represented in the Greek alphabet.

Despite the changing scripts and the new religious prohibitions, magical practice remained ensconced in Egyptian society. As in other parts of the newly Christianized world, many magical texts were altered rather than abandoned, as is exemplified in the following prayer, written in Coptic but shaped by vestigial magical notions from Egyptian antiquity:

Move yourself, father, in the seventh heaven and the fourteenth firmament! Send me Jesus Christ, your only-begotten son, in order that he seals my body and this bowl – since what you bless will be full of blessing – (and) in order that he dispels every unclean spirit of the dirty aggressor, from 100 years downward and for 21 miles round, be it a male demon, be it a female demon, be it a male poison, be it a female poison, be it a vain, ill-bred, dirty demon!⁵²

Apart from the inclusion of Jesus as the supernatural helper, the text is not really different from much older Egyptian texts. One gets the impression that those practising magic simply used Christianity as a new source of divine helpers.⁵³

It seems possible that at least some of the Coptic magical texts originate in older Egyptian ones. Others, however, are probably translations of Greek versions, but those in turn may also be translations of Egyptian texts.

The Coptic authorities considered pagan religion, as well as its magical practices, demonic. Therefore, they fought against the use of magic at the same time as they were attempting to destroy the pagan temples and books.⁵⁴

A personal view of conversion can be found in the *Confession of Cyprianus*. The author admits to having acquired secret and magical knowledge in several countries, including Egypt, and to having performed many kinds of black magic before he was baptized. Cyprianus eventually became a bishop and was martyred during the persecutions that occurred under Diocletian (284–305 AD). Cyprianus writes:

Then I began confessing my sins . . . I cut open the womb of women for the demons. . . . I have buried for him (= the devil) children who drink milk from their mother in the earth, I have suffocated others, I have cut off their head for the dragon, since he promised me “I will effect your matters by this” . . . I took the head of children for Hekate’s sake who is said to be a virgin. I offered the blood of unmarried girls to Pallas (Athena). . . . I have persuaded numerous other demons by such offerings in order to go my way to the devil.⁵⁵

Cyprianus also confesses to practising alchemy and forging gold, killing friends, conjuring illusions, empowering others to fly and walk on water, summoning the winds and so on. He also admits teaching and training many magicians (the Greek word *magos* is used).

In sum, the attempt to suppress magic within the campaign of Christianizing Egypt was not very successful. Still long after the Arab conquest of Egypt (642 AD), Coptic magical documents are found, including, for example, this spell from the tenth or eleventh century AD:

To bring a man to death: About three (times) daily borax and *al-mumiya* (= asphalt) (and) sweat of a black ass. Anoint his head (with it) (*Papyrus Cairo 42573*).⁵⁶

In this Coptic prescription, we find the Arabic word *al-mumiya*. The occurrence of this foreign word shows that one fundamental feature of Egyptian magic remained unaltered during throughout millennia: whatever was considered to be helpful was incorporated into the magical practice.

Perspectives for Future Research

Apart from the necessity of publishing new material – a general need in Egyptology which cannot keep up with the many new discoveries – four points can be singled out:

Because magical texts are no longer considered to be garbled phantasms that do not deserve serious scholarly treatment, one must try to understand the magical texts within their cultural framework as purposely worded and intentionally written. Texts against diseases must therefore reflect in some way the illnesses against which they were designed. Thus it should be possible to get an idea of which disease a spell was meant to counteract. Such a medical reading of Egyptian magical texts is still in its infancy. This approach could possibly lead to an understanding of how the Egyptians thought about internal ailments, psychosomatic diseases and even mental illnesses, as well as how they grouped and categorized them.

A better understanding must also be sought of the religious and mythological concepts underlying each individual spell. How could this or that god help in a particular situation? Why just this god and not another one? Why in this special mythical constellation or at this particular locality? A careful comparison of magical texts to other religious texts can certainly be rewarding for a better understanding of both corpora.

It could be interesting to unravel the textual connections and transmissions. How are cultic texts transformed into magical ones? How are parts of them transplanted into magical spells? How are these in turn reworked? What does it mean when we find a spell in one case alone on a piece of papyrus but in another case embedded in a long magical manual? Although these are questions of details, they can possibly also help in detecting general patterns.

Finally, a fundamental point still deserves more thought, namely the long-debated question of the relationship between religion and magic. It is true that in Egypt, magic was a part of religion. But a phenomenon like the explicit inclusion of spells in foreign languages is found only in magical texts and not, for example, in temple cult texts. Magic was not, therefore, simply a part of Egyptian religion; at the same time, it was actually something more.

Notes

1. I would like to thank Cary Martin for correcting my English. Please note that small capitals are used in quotations for indicating red ink in the original manuscripts. The texts summarised on p. 73 and p. 78 can be found in Hoffmann, Friedhelm, and Joachim Friedrich Quack, *Anthologie der demotischen Literatur*. Münster: Lit, 2007.
2. Otto, *Magie*.
3. Cf. Westendorf, *Handbuch*, vol. II, 548.
4. Cf. Sauneron, *Traité d'ophiologie*, 23–24.
5. Cf. Quack, *Merikare*, 78–79.
6. Cf. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, vol. III, 130.
7. *Ibid.*, 131.
8. Cf. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, vol. I, 155.
9. Quack, “Explizite Aufzeichnungsmeidung”, 340.
10. Book of the Dead, rubric to chapter 133.
11. Dieleman, *Priests, Tongues, and Rites*.
12. E.g. Jelínková-Reymond, *Djed-her*.
13. Borghouts, *Magical Texts*, 51–55.
14. Eschweiler, *Bildzauber*.
15. Cf. Sethe, *Urkunden des Alten Reichs*, 23, 12ff. Cf. also 226, 13ff. Hawass, in *Egypt, Israel, and the Ancient Mediterranean World*, 30, publishes an extended version.
16. Cf. Erman, *Reden, Rufe und Lieder*, 29.
17. Cf. Leitz, “Die Schlangensprüche in den Pyramidentexten”, 392–396, and Fischer-Elfert, *Zaubersprüche*, 53.
18. Posener, *Cinq Figurines d'envoûtement*. Cf. Fischer-Elfert, *Zaubersprüche*, 79–81.
19. Gnirs, “Nilpferdstoßzähne und Schlangenstäbe”, 128–156. For amulets in general, see Andrews, *Amulets*; Müller-Winkler, *Objekt-Amulette*; and Petrie, *Amulets*.
20. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, vol. I, 215–222; Parkinson, *Poems*, 102–127.
21. Cf. Fischer-Elfert, *Zaubersprüche*, 72–73.
22. This and other sentences in foreign languages contained in the same papyrus are collected in Deines and Westendorf, *Wörterbuch der medizinischen Texte*, vol. II, 1032. Cf. Leitz, *Magical and Medical Papyri*, 63.
23. Cf. Leitz, *Magical and Medical Papyri*, 31.
24. Cf. *Ibid.*, 39–40.
25. Lieven, “Divination in Ägypten”, 77–126.
26. Cf. Leitz, *Tagewählerei*, 428–432.
27. Cf. *Ibid.*, 452–479.
28. Cf. Gardiner, *Chester Beatty Gift*, vol. I, 15.
29. Cf. *Ibid.*, 17.

30. Cf. Borghouts, *Magical Texts*, 4–6, and Fischer-Elfert, *Zaubersprüche*, 104–107.
31. Cf. Fischer-Elfert, *Zaubersprüche*, 91.
32. Cf. Helck, *Urkunden der 18. Dynastie*, 50
33. Cf. Zandee, *Death as an Enemy*.
34. Cf. Karl, “Funktion und Bedeutung einer weisen Frau”, 136.
35. “Prophet” is a priestly title.
36. Gardiner, *Late-Egyptian Stories*, 89.11–91.10; cf. Fischer-Elfert, *Zaubersprüche*, 92–93.
37. Cf. Edwards, *Oracular Amuletic Decrees*, vol. I, 10, and Fischer-Elfert, *Zaubersprüche*, III.
38. Cf. Edwards, *Oracular Amuletic Decrees*, vol. I, 12, and Fischer-Elfert, *Zaubersprüche*, III.
39. Cf. Jelínková-Reymond, *Djed-her*, 123.
40. Cf. *Ibid.*, 124.
41. Cf. Sauneron, *Traité d’ophiologie*, 13, and Leitz, *Schlangennamen*, 109–115.
42. This word is written in hieroglyphs.
43. ē is written with the Greek letter ēta.
44. The gloss above *rotho* shows that this is a mistake for *ortho* (= Greek “correct”).
45. Cf. Betz, *Greek Magical Papyri*, 207; explanation of *voces magicae* according to Quack, *Das Ägyptische und die Sprachen Vorderasiens*, 427–507, esp. 468–470.
46. There was probably no necessity to understand these words; cf. Jamblich, *De mysteriis*, vol. VII, 4 ff. for the importance of just sounds.
47. Cf. Betz, *Greek Magical Papyri*, 289.
48. Cf. *Ibid.*, 221.
49. Cf. *Ibid.*, 240.
50. Cf. Johnson, “Introduction to the Demotic Magical Papyri,” in Betz, *Greek Magical Papyri*, lv–lvii.
51. Cf. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, vol. III, 149.
52. Cf. Kropp, *Zaubertexte*, vol. I, 48, vol. II, 59.
53. For Mary in Coptic magical texts, see Beltz, “Maria in der koptischen Magie”, 27–31.
54. van der Vliet, “Spätantikes Heidentum in Ägypten.”
55. Cf. Bilabel, *Texte zur Religion*, 176–177.
56. Cf. Fischer-Elfert, *Zaubersprüche*, 128 XI.