MAGIC IN GRECO-ROMAN EGYPT:
THE SEMIOTICS OF A GRADUAL INTERPENETRATION
OF EGYPTIAN AND GREEK RITUAL BELIEFS

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ABSTRACT

When Ptolemy I seized Egypt after the death of Alexander the Great, he established a dynasty and a Greek-speaking administration of the country of the Pharaohs that was to last for almost three hundred years. A cross-cultural overlap started gradually to take place: some Alexandrian scholars became interested in Egyptian religion and magic, while some Egyptian priests learned to speak and write Greek. The aim of this paper is to examine the function of the sacred notion, belief and *praxis* of the Egyptian magic *(heka)* within this environment of cultural overlap. It will be shown that *heka* followed the old tradition, incorporated into new patterns. New prominence was given to ritual magic in the decoration of the Ptolemaic temples, which proves a solid performative bond between magic and religion in full format. The apotropaic formulae featured in Late Period documents were established in their Pharaonic precedents: the identification of the magician with a deity ("divine speech"), the attribution of the members of the human body to those of specific gods ("lists"), the invocation of deities by their secret names ("words of power") and the use of traditional magical formulae. The gradual derogation of the Egyptian notion of magic under the influence of the rationalism of the Ancient Greek will be shown briefly in the corpus of Graeco-Egyptian magical papyri, which were produced between the 2nd century BC and the 5th century AD.

THE THEOLOGICAL NATURE OF PHARAONIC HEKA

Seeking an etymology for *heka*, one must turn to the Coffin Text, spell 261 (de Buck 1947, 382-89; Faulkner 1973, 199-200; Ritner 1993, 17), which is entitled "To become the god «*Heka*»: "I am he whom the Lord of all made before duality had yet come into being ... I am the son of him who gave birth to the universe ... I am the protection of that which the Lord of all has ordained ... I am he who gave life to the Ennead of gods ... I have come to take my position that I may receive my dignity. Because to me belonged the universe before you gods had come into being. You have come afterwards because I am *Heka*.

The notion of *heka* existed before the creation of divine and mundane world and it was the cause for the emanation of cosmos. It was the "life-giving energy," which was conceived in the mind of the creator god and expressed as "divine logos." According to the Memphite theology, as expressed in the inscriptions on a late period monument, the Shabako Stone (Sethe 1928; Lichtheim 1973, 51-7), the creation of each human or divine being and, in general, of everything that exists in the universe, by the creator god Ptah was achieved through the verbal manifestation of the divine thought and its correct pronunciation as "logos" or "word, command." The divine "logos" had as encrypted point of reference the abstract, symbolic notion of "name" (Borghouts 1978, 10, 88, 123, 127, 128, 138, 51-5; Assmann 2001, 83-110; 1997, 114-15; Bickel 1994, 211-15; Lexa 1925, 113ff.). By "proclaiming the name of everything" Ptah gave birth, initially, to Shu and Tefnut and consequently to the whole Ennead. Without the notion of heka creation was not possible. All the gods and human beings came afterwards as a result of this divine creativity caused by *heka*. Gods and humans had their own *heka* alike.

In the Middle Kingdom wisdom text *The*

Instructions of Merikare, heka was described as the "gift" of the gods to mankind "in order to repel the strokes of bad events" (Volten 1945, 75 and 78). This protective attribute of *heka* was better expressed in the variety of spells and incantations that were inscribed on papyri, stele, statues and tomb or temple walls (Altenmüller 1980; Borghouts 1974, 1978). For the Ancient Egyptians, the mode of creation was not static but dynamic and it was repeated every day. That was clearly exemplified in the Underworld Books of the New Kingdom that describe the journey of the solar boat carrying the sun god and his retinue in the Underworld every night and its emergence as new life every morning (Hornung 1963, 1990, 1999). *Heka, as hekaw-semesu* ("eldest magician"), together with Isis - the goddess of magic - was among the crew of the divine bark, protecting the sun god Ra from every danger in the realm of the dead, especially from the serpentine demon of chaos, Apophis (Kousoulis 1999; Borghouts and Brodbeck 1977; Borghouts 1973; Zandee 1960, 192-3 and 294; 1992, vol. 1, 143-68; Assmann 1995, 49-57).

The liturgical conception, which is encrypted behind the mythological schemata and traditions in the funerary corpus from the Middle and New Kingdom, has been discussed by various scholars (Assmann 1972, 1973, 1990a; 1995, chapter 1; Willems 1988, 141-59; 1996a,b; Wente 1982; Bickel 1994, 129-36). There is a parallel mutual infusion of symbolic events in the Underworld — which derive from or, better, are influenced by the actual practice of public execution, and the capital punishment they re-enact (Ritner 1993, 170, n. 791) — and certain apotropaic procedures on earth. The heading of the spell 7 from the Papyrus of Nu (BM 10477) that addresses Apophis as an execration figurine made of wax, reflects an utilisation of "mythos" for private purposes: "Spell for passing by the dangerous coil of Apophis. Recitation by N: O waxen one who takes by robbery (and) who lives on the inert ones! I will not be inert for

you. I will not be weak for you. Your poison shall not enter my members, for my members are the members of Atum!" (Budge 1898, 29/6-16; Faulkner 1985, 36; Ritner 1993, 210-12; Eschweiler 1994, 91). An illustration of the wordings in this spell can be observed in the vignette from the fragmentary papyrus of Khnemenhab, where the bark of Re-Horakhty sails upon the water, while Apophis and a beheaded, bound kneeling figurine of an enemy are destroyed underneath the boat (Shorter 1937, pl. X). A variant of the same motif will appear again on the walls of the Ptolemaic temple of Edfu (Chassinat 1928, 213/13-229/3 and pls. 70-74).

In fact, it is really difficult to differentiate the magical from non-magical elements in a funerary or cultic liturgy. Similar techniques were used in both systems of thought and action as, for example, the literary technique of "listing": the identification of the various parts of the human body with individual deities (Kousoulis 2002; 1999, 278-88; Massart 1959; Sørensen 1984, 11-12; Dawson 1931, 26-7; Eschweiler 1994, 106-8). The enumeration formula penetrates every aspect of Egyptian thought and knowledge, including knowledge and definition of god, ritual and science (Assmann 1984, 102-7; Hornung 1982, 86-91; Waitkus 1987; Baines 1988; Piankoff 1954, 38-9, pl. 17). The basic concept behind such lists is simple: making the human members part of the divine, they could be shielded effectively from any danger or threat, either in this world or the realm of the dead. Such an idea derives from an ontological background, where human beings were regarded as "images" or "likeness" of god (Hornung 1963,, vol. 1, 22/2-3; 1982, 135-42; Buchberger 1993), or even god's children from birth (Hornung 1982, 138): "No member of his is without a god" (Borghouts 1970, 20) or "the god who is within you" (Erman and Grapow 1957, 2.359/3). The multiplicity of the divine images assimilated with each one of the bodily parts facilitates this return to the one creative source: the many, polytheistic

forms achieve the one theological unity of the "first time" (Hornung 1982, 66-7 and 93-6).

The *theophorous* aspect of the human nature was expressed in its full format during the course of a cultic/magical performance. The ritualist usually commences an invocation with the declaration "I am the god N..." and continues with the assertion "it is the god N who performs the rite, not me." The formula of the "divine speech" (independent pronoun *ink* + god's name) does not simply imply that the magician is the "mouthpiece" of god, the medium through which the divine will could be expressed, but it completely assimilates him with the invoked deity (Kousoulis 1999, 261-78; Assmann 1992, 1970; Derchain-Urtel 1975). As Assmann points out (1992, 92-4) "cultic communication is based on the principle that there is no direct confrontation between god and man," which consequently implies the symbolic transformation of the practitioner into god during the liturgical action. The tripartite level of symbolism that characterised the Greek mystery religions - *dromenon* (action), *deiknumenon* (representation), and *legomenon* (language) - could equally apply to an Egyptian cultic/magical performance: the first level corresponds to the real cultic action undertaken by the magician/priest or the king against the enemy and in front of a deity; the second level is that of the pictorial relief where it shows the king addressing the deity, and finally the third level includes the divine conversation of the god with the priest/king being transformed to a god.

The formula of the "divine speech" could equally be exercised against the hostile spirits and the deities of the Egyptian pantheon: "It is not the king who says this against you, O gods, it is Heka who says this against you, O gods!" (Sauneron 1951; Sethe 1908-1910, 234-5; Grapow 1911). These threats do not encrypt any hybris towards the divine, but they are in complete orthodoxy with the primeval power and superiority of the Egyptian magic. They could be equally exercised within a

negative/hostile and positive/beneficent framework, without altering the general character of *heka*. Again, the technique of the "divine speech" is met in both cultic and magical liturgies alike, which, a *priori*, excludes any contextual or performative differentiation between them.

So, *heka* was not only the power that made the creation possible but also it was responsible for the establishment and continuation of the divine and cosmic order *(maat)* (Assmann 1990b, 1994). It was a neutral force, neither negative nor positive, and it could be equally used for protective or apotropaic/destructive purposes. It did not oppose religion, because it was the force that animated the latter. Yet, the religious significance of the notion of the Egyptian magic was emphasised through the theological manifestation of *heka*, which is immanent in tomb inscriptions as early as the Old Kingdom (Ritner 1993, 14-6 and 26-8). On the walls of the Ptolemaic temples of Dendera, Edfu, Kom Ombos and Philae, *heka* appears as one of the fourteen *kas* of the sun god Re, an idea that was already present in the Coffin Texts of the Middle Kingdom (de Buck 1947, 385c; 1956, 207a-x).

EGYPTIAN MAGICAL PRACTICE UNDER THE PTOLEMIES AND ROMANS: RESISTANCE OR GRADUAL DEROGATION?

The theological manifestation of *heka* on the walls of the Ptolemaic temples is not the only example of the continuation of the Pharaonic magical heritage. The theological orthodoxy of a magical ritual is better exemplified by its reenactment during the every day cultic activities in all the major temples. According to a Late Period document, the Papyrus Bremner-Rhind (Faulkner 1933, 1936, 1937, 1938; Lustman 1999) the apotropaic ritual of overthrowing Apophis "was performed daily in the temple of Amun-

Re, Lord of the thrones of the Two Lands, who dwells in Karnak" (Faulkner 1933, col. 22/1). Yet, magical rituals were performed as part of religious festivals. That is best illustrated in the Ptolemaic festival in favour of Horus of Edfu *(Behdetite)*, celebrated over a fourteen day period at Edfu (Alliot 1949, 524ff), where execration images of serpentine images of Apophis, together with those of hippopotami and crocodiles, symbolising the god Seth, are used in rituals against the enemies of Horus (Kousoulis 1999, 63-120; Wilson 1997). The rituals were completed with the "striking of the eye" (of Apophis) (Kousoulis 2003, in press; 1999, 129-52; Borghouts 1973, 114-50), the offering of the hippopotamus cake, the "trampling of fishes" and "destruction of all the enemies of the king" (Chassinat 1930, 134/1-7). The destruction of Apophis should also have been part of the Busirite liturgy of the Osiris Mystery performed from 23 to 30 Khoiak near the tomb of Osiris in the divine necropolis at Dendera (Kousoulis 1999, 120-28; Chassinat 1966, 126-7). Similarly, at the temple of Esna of the Greco-Roman period the apotropaic ritual against Apophis has been developed within a proper cultic liturgy in the favour of the goddess Sakhmet on the first day of the year (Engelmann and Hallof 1996). It was performed by the same Sakhmet-priest, for there was not any caste of professional magicians in Ancient Egypt, but the priests were responsible for both the cultic and magical activities inside the temple precinct (Sauneron 2000; Ritner 1993, 204-14). Thus, the notion of *heka* was closely interconnected with the religious activities of the state and it was not only the concern of individuals performing rituals for their own benefit.

A change of perspective towards the notion of Egyptian magic gradually took place in the Greco-Roman period and the rationale for that should be sought in the inevitable encounter of *heka* with the rationalist approach of the Ancient Greek thought and its traditional opposition to the notions of *mageia* and *goēteia*. The former was introduced during the

5th century BC and it was regarded as the foreign and barbarian practice of the Persian priests, the *Magi,* while the latter was consistently bearing the meaning of «trickery, fraud» or "evil sorcery" (Segal 1981; Graf 1995, 1997; Aune 1980). Before these terms develop explicitly as a separate inferior domain in the cosmology and theology of Ancient Greece, however, magical practices, such as healing *(pharmakon/pharmatein),* sorcery *(epaoidē/epoidē)* or surreptitious killing, were closely interrelated with the traditional modes of religious expression (Graf 1997, 35-7). The change to this traditional attitude towards the irrational modes of thought and action was caused by the gradual upsurge of two intellectual factors: the philosophical theology of Heraclitus and Plato and the rational development of the medical science (Graf 1997, 38-42). The first altered the way of communication between humans and gods, while the latter renounced the traditional "magical" therapies of the priests and seers in favour of a more medical, scientific therapy, which was based on the observation of the bodily functions and the issuing of the appropriate remedy. Thus, philosophers and physicians became the enemies of *magos* and this differentiation was inherited in the Roman society, where the cognate Latin category of *magia* underwent the same "demonisation" (Ritner 1995; Kàkosy 1995; Brashear 1995; Frankfurter 1998, 198-237; Betz 1987; Barb 1963; Lexa 1925, vol. 1, 156-66).

The Romans' opposition to Egyptian magic derived mostly from their misconception towards the ancient cults of the Egyptians, and it was emphasised by the contemporary structures of Roman law (Festugière 1939; Ritner 1995, 3355-58). Modes of thought and actions that were perfectly legal and "orthodox" from the Egyptian point of view, they were regarded as suspicious and immoral by the Romans. That was best illustrated in the second century Greek tale of Thessalos, a physician from Asia Minor, who traveled to Upper Egypt seeking magical knowledge (Smith 1978, 172-89; Graf 1994; Ritner 1995, 3356-58). Egyptian priests' initial refusal to Thessalos' request should be seen in the favour of their unwillingness to risk capital punishment for imparting secret and sacred knowledge to a foreigner (Ritner 1995, 3357).

Within this environment of the cultural isolation of the magical behaviour, a gradual derogation of the native Egyptian magic belief was inevitable. This change is better reflected in the textual corpus of the Greek magical papyri (PGM) (Preisendanz 1973-1974; Betz 1982, 1986, 1991; Brashear 1995; Ritner 1995, 3358-71). These papyri were written between the 2nd century BC and the 5th century AD and include religious hymns, liturgies, mythological episodes *(historialae)* magical spells, formulae and a variety of performative ritual details. Some of the spells are written in Greek, others in Egyptian, either hieratic, old Coptic or Demotic. Their context is of syncretistic nature and it derives equally from earlier Egyptian, Greek and even Jewish religious beliefs and practices (Betz 1991, 248-49; Segal 1981, 351-54). In the former, one could see a continuation of the magic mechanisms of the Pharaonic period, for example in the ritual execution of Apophis we referred to previously. In PGM XIII, 261-264, a serpent is named after Apophis and is destroyed: "If you want to kill a snake say: 'stay, for you are Apophis!' And taking a green palm branch and holding its heart split it [longways] into two, saying the name over it seven times. At once the snake will be split (or will break open)" (Preisendanz 1973, 101; Betz 1986, 180). Prominent position among the latter occupies the Greek mystery cults and their relation with the magical ideas of the Egyptians. Betz believes that there is no distinction between mystery cult and magic in this corpus of material and the former provided the latter with the necessary legitimacy and cultural approval (Betz 1991, 249-53).

The use of the terms "magic," "magical," or "magicians" is quite common and prominent in these texts (Preisendanz 1974, 2449). Nevertheless, Hellenistic syncretism has affected the way the follower of the magical art appears in these texts. The magician in the PGM comes closer to the character of the Greek wandering craftsman, than the traditional Egyptian priest of the Pharaonic period, who understood the old languages and thus could interpret the magical material (Betz 1986, xlv-xlvii). Also, various magical methods that were acceptable in the Pharaonic period, like the technique of "forcing, threatening" the gods or the usage of special tools, are condemned in the PGM and special attention is given only to the efficacy of the "spoken word": "These are the things which the single spell accomplishes. Depending on what you are performing, after only the passage with the usual items. Most of the magicians, who carried their instruments with them, even put them aside and used him as an assistant. And they accomplished the preceding things with all dispatch. For [the spell] is free of excessive verbiage, immediately carrying out as it does the preceding things with all ease" (Preisendanz 1974, 2081-87; Betz 1986, 248-49). Yet, the emphasis on the religious initiation thought that extensively penetrates these texts tried to label and preclude unsanctioned religious activity that fell outside the purview of state religion.

CONCLUSIONS

The negative aura that penetrates the Greco-Roman attitude towards Egyptian magic derives mostly from the official Roman condemnation of these activities and it could be seen as such only from the Roman perspective, because magical behaviour still remained orthodox from the Egyptian perspective (Ritner 1995, 3355-6). What we have here is just a classification of *righteous* and *uncanny* behaviours, that does not take into account the individual characteristics of the social and cultural environment, whence those behaviours are emerged and developed. The applied criteria are often alien to the culture and sub-culture under discussion. Such accusations against magic, as the well known Harim conspiracy against the legitimate authorities and the Pharaoh Ramesses III (c. 1182-1151 BC) during the pharaonic period (Goedicke 1963; Weber 1977; Ritner 1993, 192-202), or the story of Thessalos in Roman times, are not really concerned with the real notion of the Egyptian magic or its misuse, but they simply consist of subservient effects and actions. The dramatic enactments against Ramesses III was just another pattern of rebellion against the cultic and state authorities, where it is not the misuse of magic that it is condemned, but the actual *prãxis* of revolt and its legal connotations (Ritner 1993, 192-202).

This sharp distinction, however, between religious/legal and magical/illegal practices has been held explicitly among historians of the multicultural socio-religious beliefs and practices of the ancient societies (Middleton 1987, 82-9; Deubner 1982, 275-98; Tambiah 1973, 1985, 1990; Winkelman 1982; Thomas 1971, 1975; Smith 1978, 192; Brown 1970, 17-45) since the publication of Frazer's monumental work, the *Golden Bough* (Frazer 1910, 52; Evans-Pritchard 1937 further spoke of two forms of hostile magic: "sorcery" and "witchcraft", while Goode in 1949 stressed the boundaries between "pious/religious" actions and "blasphemous" magical performances; cf. Tambiah 1990, 51-4). Yet, Marcel Mauss (1975), following Emile Durkheim (1915) stigmatised magic as anti-social and illegal behaviour.

The Western concept of magic was mainly derived from the belief that there were actions that could be accepted as "miraculous" and results of the "divine will," while others would be rejected as "blasphemous" and derivations of an uncanny supernatural power. This Frazerian dichotomy stigmatised the early egyptological studies on the subject (Gardiner

1915; Borghouts 1980, 1143-44; 1987; Hornung 1982, 210) and still remains intact, explicitly or implicitly, among the classical scholarship (Barb 1963, 101; MacMullen 1981, 70; Buriss 1972). The notion of *heka*, however, should not be used as a universal category (Ritner 1986, 1989, 1990, 1992, 1993, 1995), but it must be always analysed in its specific cultural context in conjunction with the other socio-religious modes of thought within that context (Ritner, 1993, 4-13, 204-14, 237 and 242; Koenig 1994, 291-303).

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