

# Ancient Egyptian Magic

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From everyday healing to treachery in the court of King Ramesses III, magic pervaded every aspect of ancient Egyptian life. Geraldine Pinch delves into the underworld...

## Magicians

In Egyptian myth, magic (heka) was one of the forces used by the creator to make the world. Through heka, symbolic actions could have practical effects. All deities and people were thought to possess this force in some degree, but there were rules about why and how it could be used.

### The most respected users of magic were the lector priests...

Priests were the main practitioners of magic in pharaonic Egypt, where they were seen as guardians of a secret knowledge given by the gods to humanity to 'ward off the blows of fate'. The most respected users of magic were the lector priests, who could read the ancient books of magic kept in temple and palace libraries. In popular stories such men were credited with the power to bring wax animals to life, or roll back the waters of a lake.



Statue of Sekhmet ©

Real lector priests performed magical rituals to protect their king, and to help the dead to rebirth. By the first millennium BC, their role seems to have been taken over by magicians (hekau). Healing magic was a speciality of the priests who served Sekhmet, the fearsome goddess of plague.

Lower in status were the scorpion-charmers, who used magic to rid an area of poisonous reptiles and insects. Midwives and nurses also included magic among their skills, and wise women might be consulted about which ghost or deity was causing a person trouble.

Amulets were another source of magic power, obtainable from 'protection-makers', who could be male or female. None of these uses of magic was disapproved of - either by the state or the priesthood. Only foreigners were regularly accused of using evil magic. It is not until the Roman period that there is much evidence of individual magicians practising harmful magic for financial reward.

## Techniques

Dawn was the most propitious time to perform magic, and the magician had to be in a state of ritual purity. This might involve abstaining from sex before the rite, and avoiding contact with people who were deemed to be polluted, such as embalmers or menstruating women. Ideally, the magician would bathe and then dress in new or clean clothes before beginning a spell.



Detail from an ivory wand ©

Metal wands representing the snake goddess Great of Magic were carried by some practitioners of magic. Semi-circular ivory wands - decorated with fearsome deities - were used in the second millennium BC. The wands were symbols of the authority of the magician to summon powerful beings, and to make them obey him or her.



Ivory wand ©

### **Private collections of spells were treasured possessions, handed down within families.**

Only a small percentage of Egyptians were fully literate, so written magic was the most prestigious kind of all. Private collections of spells were treasured possessions, handed down within families. Protective or healing spells written on papyrus were sometimes folded up and worn on the body.

A spell usually consisted of two parts: the words to be spoken and a description of the actions to be taken. To be effective all the words, especially the secret names of deities, had to be pronounced correctly. The words might be spoken to activate the power of an amulet, a figurine, or a potion. These potions might contain bizarre ingredients such as the blood of a black dog, or the milk of a woman who had born a male child. Music and dance, and gestures such as pointing and stamping, could also form part of a spell.

## **Protection**



Headrest of a scribe protected with protective deities including the god Bes, who warded off evil demons from the headrest's owner as he slept ©

Angry deities, jealous ghosts, and foreign demons and sorcerers were thought to cause misfortunes such as illness, accidents, poverty and infertility. Magic provided a defence system against these ills for individuals throughout their lives.

Stamping, shouting, and making a loud noise with rattles, drums and tambourines were all thought to drive hostile forces away from vulnerable women, such as those who were pregnant or about to give birth, and from children - also

a group at risk, liable to die from childhood diseases.

### **The wands were engraved with the dangerous beings ...**

Some of the ivory wands may have been used to draw a protective circle around the area where a woman was to give birth, or to nurse her child. The wands were engraved with the dangerous beings invoked by the magician to fight on behalf of the mother and child. They are shown stabbing, strangling or biting evil forces, which are represented by snakes and foreigners.

Supernatural 'fighters, such as the lion-dwarf Bes and the hippopotamus goddess Taweret, were represented on furniture and household items. Their job was to protect the home, especially at night when the forces of chaos were felt to be at their most powerful.

Bes and Taweret also feature in amuletic jewellery. Egyptians of all classes wore protective amulets, which could take the form of powerful deities or animals, or use royal names and symbols. Other amulets were designed to magically endow the wearer with desirable qualities, such as long life, prosperity and good health.

## **Healing**

Magic was not so much an alternative to medical treatment as a complementary therapy. Surviving medical-magical papyri contain spells for the use of doctors, Sekhmet priests and scorpion-charmers. The spells were often targeted at the supernatural beings that were believed to be the ultimate cause of diseases. Knowing the names of these beings gave the magician power to act against them.

Since demons were thought to be attracted by foul things, attempts were sometimes made to lure them out of the patient's body with dung; at other times a sweet substance such as honey was used, to repel them. Another technique was for the doctor to draw images of deities on the patient's skin. The patient then licked these off, to absorb their healing power.

### **Acting out the myth would ensure that the patient would be cured...**

Many spells included speeches, which the doctor or the patient recited in order to identify themselves with characters in Egyptian myth. The doctor may have proclaimed that he was Thoth, the god of magical knowledge who healed the wounded eye of the god Horus. Acting out the myth would ensure that the patient would be cured, like Horus.

Collections of healing and protective spells were sometimes inscribed on statues and stone slabs (stelae) for public use. A statue of King Ramesses III (c.1184-1153 BC), set up in the desert, provided spells to banish snakes and cure snakebites.

A type of magical stela known as a *cippus* always shows the infant god Horus overcoming dangerous animals and reptiles. Some have inscriptions describing how Horus was poisoned by his enemies, and how Isis, his mother, pleaded for her son's life, until the sun god Ra sent Thoth to cure him. The story ends with the promise that anyone who is suffering will be healed, as Horus was healed. The power in these words and images could be accessed by pouring water over the *cippus*. The magic water was then drunk by the patient, or used to wash their wound.



Horus ©

## **Curses**

Though magic was mainly used to protect or heal, the Egyptian state also practised destructive magic. The names of foreign enemies and Egyptian traitors were inscribed on clay pots, tablets, or figurines of bound prisoners. These objects were then burned, broken, or buried in cemeteries in the belief that this would weaken or destroy the enemy.

In major temples, priests and priestesses performed a ceremony to curse enemies of the divine order, such as the chaos serpent Apophis - who was eternally at war with the creator sun god. Images of Apophis were drawn on papyrus or modelled in wax, and these images were spat on, trampled, stabbed and burned. Anything that remained was dissolved in buckets of urine. The fiercest gods and goddesses of the Egyptian pantheon were summoned to fight with, and destroy, every part of Apophis, including his soul (ba) and his heka. Human enemies of the kings of Egypt could also be cursed during this ceremony.

**Magical figurines were thought to be more effective if they incorporated something from the intended victim, such as hair, nail-clippings or bodily fluids.**

This kind of magic was turned against King Ramesses III by a group of priests, courtiers and harem ladies. These conspirators got hold of a book of destructive magic from the royal library, and used it to make potions, written spells and wax figurines with which to harm the king and his bodyguards. Magical figurines were thought to be more effective if they incorporated something from the intended victim, such as hair, nail-clippings or bodily fluids. The treacherous harem ladies would have been able to obtain such substances but the plot seems to have failed. The conspirators were tried for sorcery and condemned to death.

## The dead

All Egyptians expected to need heka to preserve their bodies and souls in the afterlife, and curses threatening to send dangerous animals to hunt down tomb-robbers were sometimes inscribed on tomb walls. The mummified body itself was protected by amulets, hidden beneath its wrappings. Collections of funerary spells - such as the Coffin Texts and the Book of the Dead - were included in elite burials, to provide esoteric magical knowledge.

**The soul had to overcome the demons it would encounter by using magic words and gestures.**

The dead person's soul, usually shown as a bird with a human head and arms, made a dangerous journey through the underworld. The soul had to overcome the demons it would encounter by using magic words and gestures. There were even spells to help the deceased when their past life was being assessed by the Forty-Two Judges of the Underworld. Once a dead person was declared innocent they became an *akh*, a 'transfigured' spirit. This gave them *akhw* power, a superior kind of magic, which could be used on behalf of their living relatives.

## Find out more

### Books

*Amulets of Ancient Egypt* by Carol Andrews (British Museum Press, 1994)

*'Witchcraft, Magic and Divination in Ancient Egypt'* by JF Borghouts in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East* edited by JM Sasson (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1995)

*Magic in Ancient Egypt* by Geraldine Pinch (British Museum Press/University of Texas Press, 1994)

## Places to visit

Museums with good collections of Egyptian magical objects include the British Museum and the Petrie Museum in London, the Louvre in Paris, the Museo Egizio in Turin, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

## About the author

Dr Geraldine Pinch has taught Egyptology at Cambridge University and is now a member of the Oriental Institute, Oxford University. Her books include *Votive Offerings to Hathor* (Griffith Institute) and *Handbook of Egyptian Mythology* (ABC-Clio).