ANCIENT EGYPTIAN VERSUS CHRISTIAN-EUROPEAN UNDERSTANDINGS OF MAGIC AND THEIR ARTISTIC EXPRESSIONS

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What is magic? There is no simple or single answer. But the word magic can encompass alchemy, astrology, witchcraft, demons, spell casting, religion, or practically anything that cannot be explained by other means. The reason why there can be no simple definition is because there is no single understanding of what magic is. Not only is there no one definition, there is no one view of magic's purpose or moral quality. For example, many Christian Europeans of medieval times saw magic as nothing more than normal scholarship or, at worst, employing satanic powers. When not from a legitimate source in their eyes, they saw it as a contrast to good, divine, and Godly power. When one looks at the whole history of Christian views of magic, it is unclear where the line is between worship, miracles, etc. and satanic power. Thus, it was an issue Christians wrestled with extensively, particularly regarding the issue of prophecy.

However, Ancient Egyptian metaphysics, mythology, and religion saw magic drastically differently than Christian Europeans. Instead of being antithetical to divine order, magic was an expression of that order. Magic was, particularly through language, a connecting force between humans and the cosmic. It was also deeply interconnected with their understandings of truth, order, and ethics. Magic was fundamentally integral to how the world was balanced between cosmic and mortal realms (though in many ways they were inseparable). Without magic, chaos could not be

balanced with order.

So we can see that these are two distinctly different understandings of magic, its purpose, and its moral content. What is integral to this difference is whether one views magic as unnatural, supernatural, natural, or some combination of these. If it is unnatural, it is usually negative. If it is supernatural, it can be either beyond nature or a greater form of it. If it is natural, the distinction between magic and, say, physics is non-existent. Thus, "magic" is not a simple term. To explore these differences, we will examine how Ancient Egyptians differed from Christian European concepts of magic and how these ideological differences manifested in their artistic depictions of them. By the end, we will see how the term magic in our modern understanding has taken particularly from Ancient Egyptian perspective (e.g. such ideas created what we now know as astrology). First we will examine the Christian European view of magic, which is more negative than the Ancient Egyptian view.

Early on in Roman times, Christians were seen as capable of performing wondrous acts akin to magic, encouraging others to convert.[1] Opponents of Christianity, however, accused them of using evil sources for their "magic" as a way to prevent conversions to the religion.[2] So it is ironic that, hundreds of years later, it was Christians who developed such an intensely bigoted and convoluted view of magic. However, Christian (particularly medieval) views of magic hinged on what the source of that power was.[3] Some types of magic were actually actively encouraged and considered part of the natural sciences.[4] In fact, if we use the character Merlin as a case study

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[1] Patrick Maille, "Martyrs, Magic, and Christian Conversion," *Journal for the Academic Study of Magic* 5 (2009): 175, accessed December 17, 2015, Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost.

[2] Ibid., 176.

[3] Gareth Griffith, "Merlin," in Studies in Medieval Romance, vol. 16, Heroes and Anti-Heroes in Medieval Romance, ed. Neil Cartlidge (n.p.: D. S. Brewer, 2012), 104, accessed December 17, 2015, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7722/j.ctt81fr9.

[4] Ibid.; Anne Lawrence-Mathers, *The True History of Merlin the Magician* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 140.

(believed at the time to be an actual figure), we can see that the "revealing" of Merlin excited medieval people's interest in "the forces of nature, the power of demons, and the boundary between the two."[5]

Furthermore, scholars who saw Merlin's magical powers as legitimate used them as proof that Northern Europe could rival other nations in having an older history of magical arts.[6] But, again, the legitimacy of this flaunting depended on Merlin's magic having not come from sorcery, which they considered heathenism and demonic. For an artistic example of this idea of a scholar magician, Gustave Doré's 1888 engraving of Merlin reflects this history of scholars having a limited distinction between science and magic.[7] Looking at how Merlin is depicted by Doré, it would be difficult to distinguish him from other depictions of academic or monk figures. This is expected considering that early medieval monks would not think of themselves as performing magic, but would employ techniques such as mandrake (a classic tool in magic).[8]

In medieval understanding, thus, the difference between natural and supernatural mentioned earlier merges, explaining why the natural sciences often dabbled in what we would now call the magical. The source for the magic in this case depends on whether the power in the magical act was extracted from the thing itself, or outside of it in some spiritual source.[9] Alchemy, for example, was often seen as extracting power which already existed in the thing itself (e.g. using a mandrake's properties), whereas charms or transmogrification were debatable.[10] Again, if the source of power was not from the thing itself or spiritually from God (e.g. miracles), then it would be drawing from

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[5] Lawrence-Mathers, 140.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Gustave Doré, *The Enchanter Merlin, from 'Orlando Furioso' by Ludovico Ariosto (1474-1533), published by Hachette in 1888 (engraving) (b/w photo)*, 1888, Bibliotheque des Arts Decoratifs, Paris, accessed December 17, 2015, Bridgeman Images, image no. CHT164261.
[8] Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1990), quoted in Griffith 105.
[9] Griffith 104-105.
[10] Ibid., 105.

an ungodly, unnatural source.

Given the requirement that magic be either from Godly acts or from the thing itself, Christian Europeans considered magic from other sources to be drawing from some other forbidden power, such as the demonic. There are two issues that we can determine from this prohibition. One, avoiding such magical arts is avoiding satanic influence, corruption, and sin. Second, violating this prohibition is a kind of hubris on the part of the individual believing they can perform acts akin to miracles without God being the source of the power. In other words, magic that falls outside the strict scholarly idea of it is assuming an unnatural power, not in the sense of unnatural as we understand it today but unnatural as in against the natural order established by the creator. Furthermore, wanting such magical power is being desirous of extreme power to, essentially, play God (e.g. shapeshifting or necromancy).

Lastly, the issue of demons is one deserving attention, especially before we get to how the Ancient Egyptians saw what we might call demons. While the subject of Christian demonology is complex, for our purposes the central issue is whether they saw demons as negative, thus making magic drawn from them suspect. Additionally, looking to how they understood demons can shed light on how they hierarchized the supernatural generally. As we will see, the way Christianity views them is quite different from how the Ancient Egyptians did. Using Merlin as a case study once again, his prophetic power and his magic generally was often questioned due to him being supposedly born from an incubus (see the vellum "Council of Demons" work for a medieval depiction of this).[11] Indeed, "supernatural powers of both good and evil are present in him," making his magical powers and powers of prophecy subject to question.[12] This is indicative of how demons

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[11] Lawrence-Mathers, 141; French School, Ms Fr. 95 fol.113v Council of Demons, from 'l'Histoire de Merlin', c.1280-90 (vellum), C13th, Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris, accessed December 17, 2015, Bridgeman Images, image no. XTD69818.
[12] Griffith, 108.

were seen in the Christian understanding, and their place in their supernatural hierarchy. Put simply, demonic sources of magic were tainted.

Another way demons appear in Christianity is that they are often "conceived as rather spiritual creatures, whose physical manifestations can be the symbol of the human conflict with the inner self."[13] With such demons, they expressions of the conflict of soul more so than actually existing supernatural or natural beings.[14] A classic example of this type of demon is the temptation of St. Anthony, artistic depictions of which tend to show the demons as animalistic expressions of internal conflict, such as Matthias Grunewald's "Temptation of St. Anthony."[15] In this altarpiece panel, the demons are monstrous representations of sins and personal failings. As such, these types of demons are not supposed to be considered literal but figurative. Thus, in both cases of Christian demons, they are either expressions of inner strife and evils, or are negative in a supernatural hierarchy of existing beings.

Now that we have a general understanding of how magic is in the Christian view and how they morally hierarchize the supernatural, we can examine the older and more positive Ancient Egyptian view of magic. In particular, our emphasis will be on how magic was inseparable from Maat, cosmic order, and language. The most important element of Ancient Egyptian magic to understand is the element of human agency it requires, and that magical agency was seen as integral to such a person's existence.[16] In other words, magic was not esoteric in essence, only somewhat in practice (e.g. priestly roles using magic more effectively and extensively). The reason this magic was

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[13] Rita Lucarelli, "Demonology during the Late Pharaonic and Greco-Roman Periods in Egypt," *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions* 11 (2011): 111, accessed December 17, 2015, Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost.

[14] Lucarelli, 111.

[15] Matthias Grunewald, "Temptation of St. Anthony," from the Isenheim Altarpiece, C.1512-16, oil on panel, Musee d'Unterlinden, Colmar, France, accessed December 17, 2015, Bridgeman Images, image no. XIR17679.

[16] Edward Karshner, "Thought, Utterance, Power: Toward a Rhetoric of Magic," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 44, no. 1 (2011): 52, accessed December 17, 2015, Philosopher's Index, EBSCOhost.

not restricted fundamentally can be said to have originated in Ancient Egyptian accounts of creation. For example, in Memphite theology, Ptah comprised the Ogdoad within himself (considered separate in some other Egyptian theologies) and all things manifested from his speaking from his mouth, the Atum (see detail of Atum from the Tomb of Nefertari for a depiction of Ptah/Atum).[17] In this tomb painting, notice that he wears the crown of Upper and Lower Egypt and is holding the ankh, showing his complete power over both kingdoms and his power creation. Thus, word or language has a fundamental power, and the world is a linguistic creation. This "word" idea is true for other branches of Ancient Egyptian theology, but Memphite is the clearest example.

How this relates to Ancient Egyptian understanding of magic is that words are how magic is manifested and expressed. That is, the extent to which a person is participating in the cosmic order is their degree of understanding of the "word."[18] Magic was not simply performing impossible acts or tricks, but was rather using language (what we might call spell casting) to connect a person to the cosmic.[19] It should be made clear, though, that the human and the cosmic realms were not stratified like the Christian system is. Rather, the cosmic and the human planes are different but interacting constantly. Thus, employing linguistic magic is a point of interaction with what we might call the natural order.

One example of this view of magic are hieroglyphs. Hieroglyphs are not just words or pictographs, but a divine connection. The word "hieroglyph" itself contains the word "high" (coming from Hellenistic interpretation), thus invoking a divine origin and/or connection. Furthermore, the word in Ancient Egyptian most often translated as "magic" is "heka," the key action point of which is "Ka," which is the essence of how a person can exist in the physical world.[20]

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[17] Detail of Atum from the Tomb of Nefertari, C. 1256 BCE, tomb painting.
[18] Karshner, 56.
[19] Ibid., 53.
[20] Ibid., 57.

If one looks further at the details of the hieroglyph for "heka," this word for magic can be translated as "soul writing."[21] Thus, magic (employed through language) is a creative and connecting force, integral to the cosmic structure and the relationship of humans in their existence.

Another element to seeing the importance of linguistic magic in Ancient Egyptian understanding is its relationship to order and chaos. For example, Apophis was often seen as the opponent to order by threatening to overturn the natural progress of sun-god's divine bark across the sky.[22] Apophis is also sometimes merged or confused with Seth, another symbol of chaos opposed to the orderly Osiris, whom he literally dismembered to destroy his order.[23] Notably, Seth is artistically represented as a mysterious strange animal, thus embodying the concept of chaos. The vignette from the Book of the Dead of Lady Cheritwebeshet is an example of Seth.[24] In this depiction, we interestingly see both Apophis and Seth shown, with Apophis being the snake attempting to stop the bark, and Seth the defender of the sun-god's journey. Thus, this work shows both not only the two figures of chaos but their necessity in keeping balance (which we will explore more shortly).

What is important about Apophis specifically as a chaos figure is that his name means "babbler," so the antithesis of intelligent speech.[25] So the chaotic force does not speak rationally but irrationally. So again, we see the relationship between language and cosmic/divine order. And since we have already seen the interconnectedness of magic and language, it is clear that magic, using reasoned word, is the way order is created and balances chaos' irrational language.

The ordering property of magic also has strong moral content, but one unlike the Christian

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[21] Ibid.

[22] *The British Museum Dictionary of Ancient Egypt*, ed. Ian Shaw and Paul Nicholson (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2002), s.v. Apophis.

[23] Ibid., s.v. Seth.

[24] A vignette from the Book of the Dead of Lady Cheritwebeshet, C. 1069-945 BCE, painted papyrus, Egyptian Museum, Cairo, accessed December 17, 2015, Bridgeman Images, image no. WNF640468.

[25] Karshner, 60.

one explored. This moral content also explains the source of power for Egyptian magic generally. Put simply, magic, language, and order all draw their power from Maat, perhaps even more so than Isis, who is in some ways the patron of magic. Maat is a goddess who embodies and is cosmic order and truth, represented by her feather of truth used in the weighing of the heart (see the "Weighing of the Heart" from the Papyrus of Ani for an example).[26] This depiction shows the role of Maat's feather of truth as integral to the passage of the Ka through existence. Furthermore, she represents both metaphysical and mortal ethical concepts, and her ordering principles represent true intelligence/reason.[27] It is through conjunction between the ordering Maat and destabilizing characters like Seth and Apophis that the world can go through the necessary cycles of creation and destruction, forming a balanced world (e.g. natural disasters being often being restorative).

Consequently, if magic uses the creative power of word to express intelligent ordering of chaos, then magic is participating in this natural process of the universe. Thus, through Maat and language, magic in Ancient Egyptian understanding is anything but unnatural, perverse, or immoral. On the contrary, magic is not only the link between the mortal and the cosmic but an expression of Maat's power of truth and justice - one which humans can participate in.

Finally, as we used demons as a case study for the Christian understanding of magic, we will do so with Ancient Egyptian's understanding. In short, demons do not exist in the same sense that the do for Christians.[28] Rather, what we might call demons in Ancient Egyptian ideas would be something closer to a Seth animal, which, as we have seen, is necessary in the Ancient Egyptian world order as a balance and creative destroyer.[29] Other creatures that could appear as demons are

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[26] Nicholas Campion, "Egypt: The Solar Society," in *Astrology and Cosmology in the World's Religions* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 2012), 86; Weighing of the Heart from the Papyrus of Ani, C. 1250 BCE, painted papyrus.
[27] Karshner, 58-59.
[28] Lucarelli, 110.
[29] Ibid., 114.

merely other types of beings in what could only generally be referred to as a supernatural hierarchy. In other words, like magic, "demons" in Ancient Egyptian understanding are part of the cosmic order, not in opposition to it or unnatural. And as we have explored, such creatures would not be the source of magical power for Ancient Egyptians, for Maat is far more central, and Isis is the primary employer of magic.

Having seen two drastically different ideas of magic, what can we conclude about what magic is? Put simply, what defines magic entirely a matter of perspective. For Ancient Egyptians, magic might best be described as a kind of "practical wisdom" which is an expression of the creative ordering principles of the universe.[30] It is ethical, linguistic, and the connection mortals have to the cosmic. This is quite unlike the Christian view of magic, which is either supporting or completely condemning depending on the source of such magic's power.

One misconception we can certainly dispense with is that Ancient Egyptians had an unsophisticated view of magic. Some older accounts of Ancient Egyptian magic have mistakenly described it as fetishization and perversion of religion and priestly roles.[31] Our previous examination reveals this is untrue, with Ancient Egyptian magic ultimately being a more philosophically and artistically sophisticated than the Christian view. In fact, many older Christian sects and our current understandings of magic have drawn extensively from Ancient Egyptian magic, with astrology being the most direct example.[32] Thus, though one will never find a single comprehensive definition of what magic is, we can be certain that the Ancient Egyptians, unlike Christianity, had very complex, integrated, and refined views of magic.

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[30] Karshner, 52.

[31] Adolf Erman, *A Handbook of Egyptian Religion* (London: Archibald Constable & Co. Ltd., 1907), 148-149.

[32] Campion, 82; E. A. Wallis Budge, *Egyptian Magic* (London: Kegan, Paul, Trench and Trübner & Co., 1901), xii-xiii.

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