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**MAGICAL ICONOGRAPHY.
HOW CAN AN IMAGE PROTECT AND HEAL?**

BY GRZEGORZ FIRST

The Pontifical University of John Paul II in Kraków
grzegorz.first@gmail.com

Abstract: One of the features of the attitude of ancient societies towards the threats of everyday life was a close relationship between spiritual/magical and religious beliefs and the real actions aimed at overcoming dangers. This relationship is visible in the magical iconography of Ancient Egypt and other Ancient Near Eastern cultures – in the form of demons, minor deities, and other benevolent supernatural beings that can protect people. Images of these deities are sometimes accompanied by archaeological traces (holes for water, traces of rubbing, touching), indicating that images were also subjects of action. The question is how the magical and religious iconography meets the non-supernatural actions and how this custom could emerge in other parts of the Ancient world and in post-ancient times.

Keywords: Ancient magical and religious iconography, magic in Ancient Egypt and Near East, heritage of ancient magic.

One of the main tools used in magic by almost all ancient cultures is the image, the picture that helps to achieve the goals of magical action, like health, success, or happiness. Moreover, the image is an element that connects magic with religion; hence, its content and interpretation are not only magical, but also religious or theological. Such a fusion of magic and religion is evident in the cultures and religions of the ancient Near East, especially when we compare them with the modern, anti-religious perception of magical images in opposition to religious images, which seems to be the heritage of mainly the Christian religion¹.

Magical images, however, did not only fulfil a visual or aesthetic and symbolic or religious function; they might also have played a practical role in the magical healing process. The archaeological and iconographical material is provided primarily by Ancient Egypt. The most important for this study are an extensive group of magical stelae with rich iconography, which range from large, publicly displayed healing statues and smaller objects for private and personal use, the so-called stelae of Horus on crocodiles².

¹ Cf. texts collected in Mirecki/Meyer 2002.

² Kákosy 1995, 91–98; Kákosy 1999, 9–10; Satzinger 2002, 85–88.

The largest, even canonical, magical stele is undoubtedly the famous Metternich Stele, today at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York³. The Metternich Stele is a large stone stele with a base, tightly covered with hieroglyphic inscriptions and lines of images with deities in mixed figures (human and animal). It comes from the time of the last native pharaoh, Nectanebo II of the 4th century BC. The central figure of the stele is one of the iconographies of the god Horus, the so-called Horus as a child (*Hor-pa-chered* in Egyptian), whose Greek counterpart was Harpocrates. Here, Horus is portrayed as a naked child with a characteristic youthful ponytail and a mask of Bes above him, standing on two crocodiles. In both hands the deity holds a snake, a scorpion, an oryx antelope and a lion. Horus is adored by three deities standing on serpents. The presence of Horus in the form of a child is not accidental. It is associated with the Egyptian legend, engraved on the Metternich Stele, in which Isis, the mother of Horus, wanders through the marshes of the Delta in the company of seven scorpions⁴. During the journey, Isis and her companions are refused shelter by a rich woman. In retaliation, the scorpions bite her son. Isis, after being taken in by a poor inhabitant of the Delta, touched by the fate of a rich woman, who is also affected by other misfortunes, heals her son with the help of magical formulae. The inscription ends with a prescription for bites. The whole text is a combination of a mythical story and a magical spell, together with what seems to be useful paramedical instructions.

Iconographic motifs and the above-mentioned texts known from the Metternich Stele are found on numerous small monuments called stelae of Horus on crocodiles (Horus stelae or cippi)⁵. Ideologically, these objects refer to the aforementioned legend. In iconography they include the representation of Horus on crocodiles, images of other deities and inscriptions with magical formulae and spells. These objects are small; hence, it is widely believed that they were stored at home or carried by their owners. But what was their function? Probably they were poured with water, which then, with the help of recited magical formulae, was used to heal the sick—those bitten by a snake, scorpion, or other predatory animal. Such reinforced water could also have preventive functions. In this case, the water was enriched by touching the stone and the magical formulae, and it served as a preventive measure against bites. If a person were bitten, the wound may have been washed, but it was more likely that the bitten person would drink water⁶.

However, some smaller stelae also show signs of rubbing. These are especially visible on the representation of the face of Horus; perhaps the wound was

³ Scott 1950–1951, 201–217; first publication Golénischeff 1877.

⁴ Scott 1950–1951, 210–216; Brunner-Traut 1989, 141–143, 310–312.

⁵ Sternberg el-Hotabi 1987, 25–70.

⁶ Ritner 1989, 106–107.

rubbed with this part of the image. Traces of friction are visible on several stelae, including two from the collection of the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow (fig. 1)⁷. On these, we can see traces of rubbing on the face of Horus, which by comparison with other parts of the stele cannot be interpreted as a poor state of preservation. Another interesting object is the small stele from the National Museum in Poznań (fig. 2)⁸. This object is unique because the image does not have crocodile representations. Here we can also see traces of friction on the face of Horus. The question arises whether the rubbing operation was not only magical, but also medical. Rubbing could cause a warm feeling in the wound; perhaps this increased pressure so that the venom could be pulled out. Thus, the image conveys not only a symbolic message, but also one of practical activity. This interesting custom seems to be a rare example of the practical role of ancient magical iconography.

With larger stelae, which might have stood in the temple courtyards, the water was taken home and used there. In each case, however, the impact on the disease had three dimensions. The first included reciting formulae—spells whose selection was on the stele. The second was the contact with the holy water, which, had gained a special power after touching the spells and the sacred images depicted on the stele. The third and most practical aspect presumably would have been the application of some medications, perhaps even suctioning the venom of the sting and dressing the wound.

What medications could accompany water? We are dependent on speculation, but it is worth quoting a fragment of the story about *Isis and seven scorpions* engraved on the Metternich Stele, in which the final spell reads:

"Call out, 'May the child live and the poison die! As Horus will be cured for his mother Isis, those who suffer will be cured likewise!' It is a [poultice of] bread of spelt which drives away the poison so that it yields; it is natron and the stinging extract of garlic, which drive away the burning from the limbs"⁹.

These "medications" can be interpreted literally, but it should be noted that the magical context may suggest a symbolic meaning of each ingredient as well. Garlic, along with onions, was one of the basic elements of the ancient Egyptian diet with a widely known strong antiseptic effect. Natron, on the other hand, was a popular medication used by the Egyptians for mummification. Symbolically, its aim was to extend life beyond death¹⁰. The symbol of bread is also common

⁷ Hodjash/Berlev 1982, 244–245 cat. nos.: 185 (Inv. No. I.1.a.6038), 186 (Inv. No. I.1.a.4474), 188 (Inv. No. I.1.a.4960); Kákosy 1970, 19.

⁸ First 2013, 323–334.

⁹ Scott 1950–1951, 211.

¹⁰ On garlic and natron, see Helck 1975, 1267–1271 and Lucas 1932, respectively.

and clear. In addition to functioning as medical instructions, the mentioning of such ingredients could also be a more symbolic call for the forces of nature to heal the patient.

As we can see, the stelae served as a medium for specific healing purposes, both for preventing bites and treating their effects. It seems that this problem was marginal in the scale of other dangers and diseases in ancient Egypt. Nothing is more confusing. A scorpion bite was a frequent and serious peril, and its effects were extremely dangerous¹¹. It is worth mentioning that the scorpion populations in the Egyptian desert areas in the summer months could number from five to ten thousand individuals per hectare¹². A similar number can also be applied to snakes.

Archaeological collections across the world contain a significant number of Horus stelae, of different quality, sizes and workshops. They were particularly popular during the Late Period and the Ptolemaic and Roman times. In general, they functioned as "portable" amulets, but among them it is worth paying attention to those that can provide us with further information about how to use them. The stele from the collection of the Egyptian Museum in Cairo has a base in the shape of an oval water pool (fig. 3)¹³. The object is large (measuring 64 cm in height), comes from Memphis and is dated to Ptolemaic times. The stele contains a central representation of Horus as a child on two crocodiles, which is similar to the already mentioned amulets. What is more distinctive is that the stele is embedded in a deep base in which an oval-shaped basin was carved. From this basin, several channels surround the stele. The oval basin was used to collect water, which was probably poured onto the stele. The water then drained into the basin, where it was collected. In this pool, after the stele ablution, the water gained healing powers and could be used externally (wound cleaning) and, most likely, internally (i.e. drunk by the patient).

This stele is also remarkable because of its owner and its bilingual inscription. The owner was a man with a Phoenician name Paal-Astarte (in translation "made by Astarte"), which appears in both the Egyptian hieroglyphic and Phoenician text¹⁴. The undoubted Egyptian character of the object coupled with its likely Phoenician owner is an example of intercultural penetration of religious ideas together with magical and perhaps medical practices.

The interaction between magical images and water is another example of the practical role of ancient iconography. The technique of drinking water that had acquired healing properties through contact with magical textual formulae and images is a special case of the typical Egyptian "consumption of words" as a magical

¹¹ Farghly/Ali 1999, 290–294.

¹² Fischer-Elfert 2005, 21.

¹³ Inv. No. CG 9402. Daressy 1903, 3–11; cf. also Sternberg el-Hotabi 1999, B. I, 12 and Lacau 1921–1922, 189–209.

¹⁴ Vittmann 2003, 74, Figs. 36–37.

tool¹⁵. By drinking the *aqua* that had contact with the word, a person acquires the power indicated in the words and even swallows the potential of their content. One of the chapters of The Coffin Texts, a collection of religious and magical texts carved on Egyptian sarcophagi, expresses the following formula:

"This spell is to be pronounced over seven eyes of Horus, washed in beer and natron and drunk by man"¹⁶.

Natron appears again, together with beer, which was the common drink of the Egyptians. The Eye of Horus is a magical symbol of divine protection over man, popular in the form of numerous amulets. However, the most important thing here is the procedure of drinking the water, the "medicine" that had touched the religiously significant image or text.

In the context of the relationship between medicine and magic and Horus stelae as a link of both worlds, it is worth mentioning their presence outside of Egypt. These stelae were also found in Syria, Palestine, Phoenicia, Cyprus and Rome¹⁷. Such a geographical and cultural dispersion of amulets could also indicate, among other things, the transference of the idea of the "healing water" outside of the Nile Valley. The world of that time absorbed all useful magical and medical tools; the demand for amulets was the result of a growing desire among ordinary people for access to the achievements of magic and medicine, which had previously been reserved for religious and social elites.

Along with the Horus stelae, another interesting group of ancient Egyptian healing objects in connection with the healing effects of water are healing statues. These comprise a small group, especially when we compare them to the number of preserved Horus stelae¹⁸. The oldest known object of this type is the prophylactic statue from the time of Ramses III in which the king and the goddess / queen are depicted. The statue was erected in a chapel on the edge of the desert (Almazah)¹⁹. It was supposed to protect people, especially soldiers, from scorpion bites and snakes. "Canonical" healing statues from the Late Period are sculptures depicting the founder, who may be holding a Horus stele. These statues are mainly associated with several towns from the Delta, such as Tell Atrib, Chemmis, and Bubastis, but also with Thebes.

One of the better-known examples of this type of object is the so-called statue of Tyszkiewicz, currently in the Louvre collection²⁰. It comes from the collection

¹⁵ Ritner 1997, 104–105; Ritner 1989, 107.

¹⁶ Coffin Texts, chapter 341 – Faulkner 1973, 276.

¹⁷ Sternberg el-Hotabi 1999, 13–14, Kákosy 1999, 32–34; cf. also Wild 1981.

¹⁸ Kákosy 1999, 15–17; Kessler 2005, 81–94.

¹⁹ Egyptian Museum in Cairo Inv. No. JdE 69771. Cf. Drioton 1939, 57–89; Kákosy 1999, 15.

²⁰ Inv. No. E 10777. Cf. G. Lefebvre 1931, 89–96; Niwiński 2011, 34–35.

of Count Michał Tyszkiewicz, who probably purchased it in 1897. After the death of the count in the same year, the statue was purchased by the Louvre. The monument, made of basalt, is 68 cm high, and has been dated to the turn of the 4th and 3rd century BC. It might have been erected in a temple in the town of Bubastis in the Delta. The founder, a priest of the goddess Bastet, is represented here in a standing position while holding a Horus stele with both hands. The surfaces including the rear post, except for the face, neck, and feet, are tightly covered with magical spells and with images of deities, often in a mixed (human – animal) form. Currently, the statue does not have a basin (was it, perhaps, separate from the monument?), but its function is indisputable and is also confirmed by the carved text on its surfaces. It is worth noting that healing statues could fulfil their function in two ways: firstly, by healing a person who had already been bitten, and secondly, through preventive actions (spell recitation and contact with water could provide protection against bites or any kind of evil).

Another important example of the healing statue in the context of the technique of "healing through water" is a statue commissioned by Djedhor, now in the collection of the Egyptian Museum in Cairo (fig. 4)²¹. The basalt statue, which probably comes from Tell Atrib (ancient Athribis in the Delta), has been dated on the basis of a cartouche from the reign of Philip Arridajos at the end of 4th century BC. Unlike in the Tyszkiewicz's monument, the commissioner is represented in a seated position with his hands folded over a Horus stele leaning on his legs and resting on his feet. Right in front of these, there is a concave water pool. Again, it is the pool that clearly indicates the function of the object, in which the magical formulae engraved in the statue and the base play a fundamental part.

The healing statues provide a direct answer to the question about the technique of using water in the treatment process. That said, the two aforementioned monuments, which probably co-existed in time, contain different instructions, giving a choice to the patient or priest serving the cult. Both statues share part of the instructions²²:

"(Eye of Ra) overcomes all evil (...) snake venom, scorpion venom, all venomous animal that is in the body of man".

In the version of the statue from the Louvre, the instructions clearly indicate:

"The man who drinks this water".

Nevertheless, the statue from Cairo speaks enigmatically here:

²¹ Inv. No. JdE 46341. Cf. Jelínková-Reymond 1956; Kákosy 2000, 46–47.

²² Lefebvre 1931, 91.

"Which are in the body of a wounded man".

In the second case, the external contact of the water with the injured body was probably recommended, whereas the first variant of the formula clearly indicates an internal use of the water.

Apart from the statues with water pools, there is also an extremely interesting unpublished stele housed at the Brooklyn Museum in New York. This piece of evidence can testify to the special role of water with a magical and probably a medical process using theologically complex images²³. Here we can see a very interesting image of a deity which in Egyptological literature is called a polymorphic or pantheistic deity. This is a complicated theological idea which had a practical magical dimension. Polymorphic images are visible on a few objects (such as amulets, statuettes or papyri), where a human-animal deity with numerous magical and apotropaic elements and symbols is represented. The image on the stele has a human body with the characteristics of a muscular dwarf, the head of the god Bes, four arms, a pair of wings and an animal tail. The most characteristic feature of the iconography of this type of deities is also visible here: the additional animal heads, attached to the high headgear (*kalathos*). The deity stands on the *ouroboros* (a symbol of eternity) which in turn encircles different animals (a turtle, a scorpion, and a lion) and bound captives (which appear again at the deity's feet). Interestingly, below the polymorphic figure, a semi-circular hole has been preserved, and this is probably the end of the libation channel. The stele measures 80 cm and could be placed in a public place near a water source or water pool. Originally, water flowed through the opening at the bottom of the stele, providing magical security, curing ailments, and preventing harm. The entire polymorphic figure is extremely difficult to interpret; in fact, it has been associated with sun worship, the manifestation of the soul of the deity, and a strong magical message that provides divine power and potential in everyday life²⁴.

Finally, within the group of amulets we should also mention magical gems, which became very popular mainly in Roman times²⁵. In addition to their medical role, their purpose was to provide their owner with happiness, health, success, and love. The combination of medicinal practices and magical activities, together with images and divine symbols are, however, confirmed in the *Greek magical papyri* (PGM)²⁶. These compound a group of textual sources written in Greek and originating from Graeco-Roman Egypt. The collection of *PGM*, which remains ideologically in the Egyptian religious environment, also contains strong

²³ Inv. No. 37.229, mentioned by Frankfurter 1998, 49, footnote 33.

²⁴ First 2017, 198–202.

²⁵ For a basic literature about ancient magical gems cf. Mastrocinque 2003 and 2007.

²⁶ Betz 1992, with further references.

Greek and Oriental influences. These papyri are dated from the 2nd to the 5th century AD, and include numerous, sometimes shredded fragments of spells, formulae, recitations and prayers with magical, medical and practical purposes: healing, ensuring prosperity, happiness, love, etc.

When analyzing the content of the magical papyri, it should be noted that descriptions of magical characters appear both in the invocation (i.e., in the content of the spell / formula), as well as in the prescription. A good example is found in a spell for divine favor from the Great Magical Papyrus from Paris (*PGM IV*), in which it is recommended to mould a figurine. The prescription is following:

“This is how to make [the phylactery]: Taking Etruscan wax, mould a statue three hand-breadths high. "Let it be three-headed. Let the middle head be that of a sea falcon; the right, of a baboon; / the left, of an ibis. Let it have four extended wings and its two arms stretched on its breast; in them it should hold a scepter. And let it be wrapped [as a mummy] like Osiris. Then having fixed it [firmly] in whatever place you choose, sacrifice to it a wild white-faced [falcon?], and burn [this offering] entire; also pour to it, as a libation, the milk of a black cow, / the firstborn [of its mother] and the first she suckled. [By these sacrifices you will have completed the deification of the statue.]”²⁷.

After moulding the figurine, the spell recommends sacrificing it, to make a libation (which will deify it) and then to recite several *voces magicae*. Undoubtedly, the complex structure of the figure (which comprises a multitude of heads, wings, crowns together with other elements typical of polymorphic iconography), as well as the presence of the cosmic element in the form of the moon, are to guarantee the practitioner happiness and success²⁸.

Conclusions

Magic has a practical dimension, as evidenced by the traces of rubbing, the use of water and other examples employed to revive magical images. All of these practices testify to an active role of Egyptian iconography in the processes of healing and protecting people. Some similar archaeological evidence is documented in other Ancient Near Eastern religions such as in cases of Pazuzu or Lamashtu demons. In all cases magic has deep theological roots and aspects, visible for example in the already mentioned Egyptian polymorphic iconography or in the great variety of magical beings in Babylonian or Assyrian religion and art. Studies of magic in the Graeco-Roman world, in which (especially in Late Antiquity) magic was clearly under Egyptian and Oriental influences, point to some of its characteristic dimensions, especially if

²⁷ P.Bibl.Nat. Suppl. gr. no. 574, 4th cent. AD – *PGM IV*, 3125–3171 – Translation by Betz 1992, 98–99.

²⁸ Koenig 1994, 127–129.

we refer them to religion. The magic focused on physical and material activity, since it has strong technical features, uses mechanisms and instruments together with formulae. Magic imposes a manipulative approach in relation to divine forces, which are expected to provide specific solutions (such as protection, cures, happiness, or success). Undoubtedly, an important element of such action was the images themselves, since these were not only magical symbols or of the causative force, but also in some cases a tool for healing and ensuring health.

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Fig. 1: Stele from the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow, Inv. No. I.1.a.6038: Hodjash, Berlev 1982, 244–245 cat. no. 185.

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Fig. 2: Stele from the National Museum in Poznań, Inv. No. A-886: First 2013.

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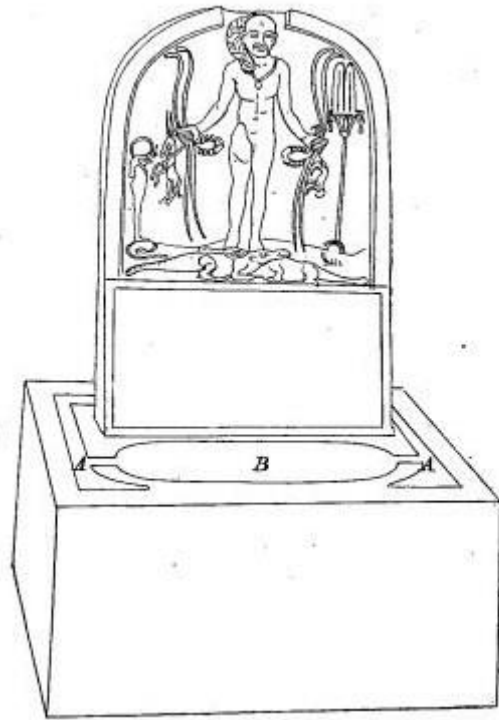


Fig. 3: Stele from the Egyptian Museum in Cairo,
Inv. No. CG 9402: Lacau 1921–1922, fig. 4.

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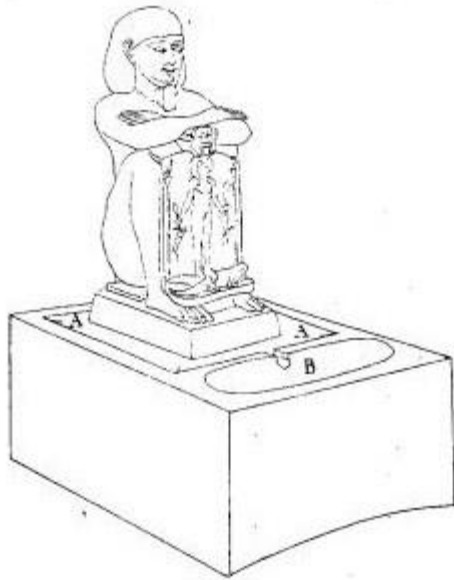


Fig. 4: Healing statue of Djedhor from the Egyptian Museum in Cairo,
Inv. No. JdE 46341: Lacau 1921–1922, fig. 1.