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HIEROGLYPHS IN GREEK MAGICAL TEXTS?

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Abstract: The paper examines hieroglyphs and magic signs resembling hieroglyphs attested in Greek and demotic magical texts.

Keywords: hieroglyphs, charaktêres, Greek magic

Greek magic underwent significant changes at the beginning of the 2nd century AD. Drawings, *voces magicae*, and magic signs called *charaktêres* appeared in some curse tablets especially in Egypt, Rome, and North Africa. These signs (or at least some of them) were traced back to hieroglyphs, yet this hypothesis has proved to be untenable. However, symbols resembling hieroglyphs did show up in curse tablets and amulets.

Charaktêres

Charaktêres is a technical term used for magic signs facilitating communication with demons, appearing in curse tablets and other magic texts from the beginning of the 2nd century AD primarily in Egypt, the Greek cities, Rome, and North Africa.² Although many *charaktêres* are slightly modified elements of the Greek alphabet (with tiny circles at the edge of strokes, thus they are called ‘ring-letters’), some scholars have proposed a hypothetical Mesopotamian or Egyptian origin of the signs.³ The Egyptian origin of certain (rare) *charaktêres*,

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² This study forms part of OTKA [Hungarian Scientific Research Fund] programme no. K 119979 (Research on Ancient Magic II: Magical Gems), and the Zaragoza Project titled Procesos de aculturación religiosa en el mundo antiguo y en la América colonial: un análisis comparativo de la retórica y la construcción de la alteridad. 2015- (HAR2014-57067-P). In the case of certain border provinces (e.g. Dacia or Britannia), we find *charaktêres* only on a handful of amulets.

³ Pieper 1934, 119-143.

such as sn,⁴ is undeniable, and there are sign groups that may imitate hieroglyphs, though they cannot be recuperated as such.⁵ Campbell Bonner believed that the tiny circles at the ends of the strokes derive from the loop of the sn sign.⁶ This sign indisputably appears on a Graeco-Egyptian magical papyrus of the 4th century AD, but in no other similar text, and the papyrus does not contain ring-letters at all. The earliest ring-letter on a curse tablet dates from the 2nd century AD, and the appearance of *charaktêres* on amulets and magic gems from an archaeological context is also dated to the 2nd century AD.⁷ However, ring-letters are attested on magical papyri only from the 4th century AD,⁸ which makes their Egyptian origin and their derivation from hieroglyphs highly problematic. There were some priests in the 4th century AD who were capable of writing hieroglyphics, but their number was probably rather low. The last datable hieroglyphic inscription was produced in Philae on 24 August, 394 AD.⁹ The real point however is that the hypothesis is confused. What is it supposed to explain? The origin of ring-letters alone, or of *charaktêres* as a class? If the first, how could one seriously suggest that a priest who was conversant with hieroglyphic writing could have taken *part* of a single sign and used it to decorate the ends of completely different, non-hieroglyphic signs, and that quite irregularly? And if the second, why do more than 98% of *charaktêres* bear no resemblance to hieroglyphs real or fictitious, of the Middle Kingdom or the Late Period? The theory that *charaktêres* (and especially ring letters) in Greek magic spells are derived directly from Egyptian hieroglyphs, which seemed plausible to R. Wünsch and others,¹⁰ cannot be sustained.

⁴ Preisendanz – Henrichs 1973-1974. I, 22; Gordon 2011, 15-44, 23.

⁵ According to Agrell 1936, most of the signs of the Pergamon magical disc are derived from hieroglyphs, but this is a wild exaggeration – it is only true of a handful.

⁶ Bonner 1950, 194: ‘Others look like modifications of Greek letters, especially the rectilinear ones, such as ΑΓΔΕΖΛΞΕΥ, with extra strokes and loops, and little circles at the ends of the lines. These circles, which are so constant that the characters are sometimes called ring signs, give a clue to the origin of these strange designs. According to W. Max Müller, the hieroglyph for talisman, sa, is thought to represent a cord with numerous magical loops, and is thus connected with the common practice of tying numerous knots in a string for magical purposes.’

⁷ Marcillet-Jaubert 1979, 185-186, 185; Shear 1938, 311-362, 359 fig. 49, 360f; Zwierlein-Diehl 2015 (forthcoming): ‘Next comes an amulet of “black steatite” (H: ca. 2.15 cm) found in a deposit dated to the second century AD in the Agora of Athens (fig. 9 a-b). The image of the obverse is singular but understandable by analogy with other types. A God is sitting on a throne in front of a sort of wall decorated with characters.’ I thank Árpád Nagy for making the unpublished manuscript available to me.

⁸ Strelcyn 1955, xxvii.

⁹ IDemPhilae 436, Griffith 1937, Vol. I (Text) 126/127 (‘Ph. 436’). See also Sternberg-el Hotabi 1994, 218-248.

¹⁰ Pieper, 125.

The most implausible position of all is that of L.-H. Vincent, who scooped up all these theories and claimed that the *charaktêres* are a jumble of Babylonian cuneiform signs, Egyptian hieroglyphs, and elements of Pahlavi, South Arabian and Arabian writing.¹¹ However, Egypt unquestionably played a major part in spreading the *charaktêres* among Jews, Arabs and Ethiopians.¹²

Hieroglyphs and pseudo-hieroglyphs

Prescriptions found in Graeco-Egyptian magical papyri made references to hieroglyphs. ‘Come to me through the NN man or little boy and tell me accurately since I speak your names which thrice-greatest Hermes wrote in Heliopolis with hieroglyphic letters: ARBAKORIPH MENIAM...’¹³ Still, the 4th century AD text clearly reveals that the *voces magicae* were written in Greek letters, as was the magic spell itself.

The only genuine hieroglyph in Greek magical papyri from Egypt is attested in another spell from the 4th century AD: ‘To achieve a good memory. Write on a leaf of cinquefoil the following *charaktêr*, written with myrrh ink, and keep it in your mouth while you sleep. The *charaktêr* is sn.’¹⁴ There is no indication in the text that the scribe of the spell could understand the original meaning of the applied hieroglyphic sign. Another spell written on the same papyrus (after line 150) lists 20 different *charaktêres*, but none of them can be traced back to hieroglyphs, and most of them are simply ring-letters. Then a scarab was to be inscribed onto a door: ‘Below the door inscribe the scarab, as it stands here, having anointed it with the blood of a goat, outside your bedchamber.’¹⁵ Although the drawing of the scarab roughly corresponds to the xpr hieroglyph, it is not precisely represented, and nothing reveals if the author of the text knew that it was originally a hieroglyphic symbol.

A demotic magical papyrus (3rd century AD) preserved the following prescription: ‘Formula: Here are the writings which you should write on the wick

¹¹ Vincent 1908, 388: ‘La plupart de ces signes trouveraient des équivalents satisfaisants dans les alphabets pehlevi ou ceux de l’Arabie méridionale, enfin dans les plus vieux ouasems arabes.’ Strelcyn 1955, xxxvi.

¹² Strelcyn 1955, xxxvi. I devoted a detailed analysis to *charaktêres* in a volume under publication: Németh 2017, forthcoming).

¹³ PGM IV 885-887. Betz 1992, 55.

¹⁴ Preisendanz – Henrichs 1973–1974, I. 22. (PGM II 40-44); Betz 1992, 13.

¹⁵ Betz 1992, 17.

of the lamp: BAXYXSIXYX.¹⁶ The five ensuing figures all resemble Egyptian hieroglyphs but cannot be translated.¹⁷

[Figure 1]



A bronze lamella fixed to the cover of a Christian grave (3rd century AD) was found in the Novatianus catacomb in Rome. The tablet shows a standing snake-headed human figure facing left, swathed like a mummy, with an inscription field beneath his feet that contains unintelligible signs similar to hieroglyphics.¹⁸ The publisher of the bronze tablet, H. Lietzmann, was positively convinced about the amuletic function of the drawing and the pseudo-inscription, though it is unusual that a Christian used such an obvious pagan symbol. He probably expected some assistance at his journey in the afterlife.¹⁹

The kA sign appears in the text of a 2nd century AD silver amulet from Aquincum, accompanied by the Hebrew word ‘spirit’.²⁰ The amulet does not yield a continuous reading, and the kA hieroglyph (or similar *charaktères*) turn up on magic gems as well, thus we cannot ascertain if the Aquincum sorcerer in the period of Trajan was familiar with the original meaning of the magic sign resembling the hieroglyph or not.

If we are looking for hieroglyphs among the *charaktères* on magic gems, we find strikingly few examples. An engraved image depicts a phoenix standing in front of an obelisk inscribed with four signs one under the other, the third of which resembles xpr, though it has only four legs instead of six.²¹ A green jasper gem depicting a mummy is inscribed with three signs similar to hieroglyphs: a xpr, a zigzag line, and a lozenge.²² The mn and the xpr signs accompanied by *charaktères* are written on a dark grey gem, yet the scarab (?) again has only four legs.²³ The majority of magic gems were manufactured in Egypt,

¹⁶ Betz 1992, 202; 205. PDM XIV 126; 176. The *vox magica* is Egyptian, and can be translated ‘Soul (Ba) of darkness, son of darkness.’

¹⁷ Dzwiza 2013, 273.

¹⁸ Lietzmann 1934, 359-362, 359-360.

¹⁹ Lietzmann 1934, 362: ‘Dann war ihm der schlangenköpfige Gott ein Helfer auch im Tode, ein Führer auch im Jenseits.’ See Németh 2012, 53-61.

²⁰ Németh 2006, 63-68.

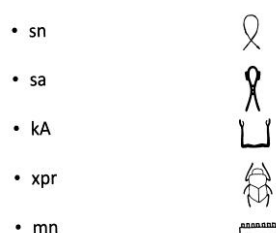
²¹ Michel 2004, 322. Table 24, 2.

²² Michel 2004, 312.

²³ Michel 2004, 296.

where gem engravers could see many hieroglyphic inscriptions – even if they could not understand them. As the circle of learned people familiar with the meaning of hieroglyphs diminished and ultimately disappeared at the end of the 4th century AD, these signs turned into magic symbols of exceptional power for the Egyptians as well.²⁴ And when no-one could read these marks any more, the magical use of images resembling hieroglyphs became safe, since the magicians knew very well that their customers (especially the Greeks) would never notice that they were deceived. Thus harmful and particularly protective spells continued to be furnished with hieroglyph-like magic signs for a long time.

[Figure 2]



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²⁴ Frankfurter 1998, 249: ‘Hieroglyphs themselves traditionally bore the numinous importance of being the actual writing of the gods and through the third century appear in such symbolic or even “magical” contexts as amulets, ritual texts (as on the wall of the temple of Esna), and even the names of beneficent emperors... They have become for all intents and purposes magical symbols.’

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