Through a Glass Darkly: Magic, Dreams and Prophecy in Ancient Egypt edited by Kasia Szpakowska

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When the Apostle Paul wrote his famous ode to selfless love (ἀγάπη) in one of his letters to the Early-Christian community in Corinth (1 Corinthians 13), little did he know that his words would prove to be perfect one-liners applicable to a variety of contexts and situations two millennia later. Whoever attended a wedding must have heard the words 'And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love' (1 Corinthians 13.13[1]). Similarly, the phrase 'For now we see through a glass, darkly' (1 Corinthians 13.12[2]), a reference to the fact that humans in life can have only imperfect knowledge of the perfect world to come, has a long history of quotation and adaptation in popular culture. It has inspired the title of quite a few novels, books, films, and, record albums. And believe it or not, now there is also a book on magic, dreams, and prophecy in ancient Egypt that carries this title.

The editor of the book, Kasia Szpakowska, does not explain in the introduction why she chose this particular title and how the phrase (or the plethora of intertextual references) is supposed to illuminate the subject under study or to encapsulate the most important conclusions of the book. The volume collects the revised papers presented at an international conference organized by the University of Swansea in 2003. The aim of the conference was to highlight 'current investigations of phenomena related to magic, dreams, and prophecy in ancient Egypt' [ix]. These three concepts, so full of meaning and contention in contemporary scholarship, are not defined in any more detail in the introduction, so that the reader is left with guess-

[1] New Standard Revised Version.
[2] King James' Version.

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ing how they were related in ancient Egypt, why it is meaningful to study them in conjunction at a conference, and what the book's title has to do with this.

As background for non-Egyptologists, a short note may therefore be helpful. In ancient Egypt, dream interpretation, as one of many forms of divination, was a legitimate and well-developed means of obtaining knowledge about the future. Alternative methods, attested for the pharaonic periods, were the use of books of good and bad days (hemerology) and the interpretation of the shape of oil slick in a bowl of water (lecanomancy). For the later periods, evidence abounds and shows significant diversification in the means and media of divination, which some scholars take as reflecting changes in society and in the perception of the relation between men and the gods. In general, the aim of divination was to foresee misfortune; but it was also used as a legal instrument to expose someone's past misconduct and criminal behavior, or to legitimize political decisions with a label of divine consent. Misfortune was understood in mythological terms and viewed as a deviation from the cosmic and societal order, resulting either from human neglect to observe the proper rituals and social codes or from demonic influence. In the latter case, remedying the precarious situation amounted to interfering in the cosmic cycle of creation and regeneration and mobilizing *heka* or magic, the productive power that the gods used and continue to use to create and maintain the cosmos. To summarize, dream interpretation allowed Egyptians to foresee and anticipate crisis situations, while knowledge of *heka* allowed Egyptians to engage with misfortune actively, either by producing amulets as a means of protection or, in case these proved to be ineffective, by preparing drugs and performing healing rites. And that is why it is so relevant for Egyptologists to study in conjunction magic, dreams, and prophecy—to use the terms of the book.

The 13 articles collected in the volume deal with these phenomena (dream interpretation, divination, and *heka*) in one way or another. The articles are not organized according to these topics, as one would perhaps expect from the title, but follow in the alphabetical order of the author's name. In the introduction, the editor introduces the articles one by one in a different sequence without any apparent principle of classification. This is to be regretted, because, as is so often the case with conference proceedings, the articles form a mixed bag and the reader needs some guidance in order to come

to understand how the articles enrich each other and to discover the comprehensive conclusions of the conference, without which the book cannot be used in a productive way.

For the sake of this review—and as a reflection of my reading experience—I suggest grouping the articles according to the categories:

- ‘evidence for applied magic in material culture’,
- ‘formularies for divination’, and
- ‘form and function of magic and magicians in literary texts’.

The first group comprises the articles by John Baines (on the restrictive display of amulets in Old Kingdom monumental art), Maria Centrone (on the so-called corn-mummies and rites of the Khoiak festival), Carolyn Graves-Brown (on the meanings attributed to naturally-shaped flint stones with suggestive shapes in the New Kingdom workmen’s community Deir el-Medina), Robert K. Ritner (a survey and classification of serpent wands), and Willeke Wendrich (a discussion of the techniques of binding and knotting in Egyptian magic instigated by an intriguing knotted bracelet found at Tell el-Amarna).

‘Formularies for divination’ are discussed by Joachim F. Quack (a survey of still unpublished handbooks for divination, all dating to the Late and Greco-Roman periods) and Scott B. Noegel (an exploration of the device of punning to guide the interpretation of dreams in ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt).

The topics are addressed from a literary perspective in the articles by Leonard H. Lesko (on the intriguing statements about the end of time in Coffin Texts spell 1130 and Book of the Dead spell 175), Alan B. Lloyd (a survey of the motifs of *heka*, dreams, and predictions in Egyptian literature), Daniel Ogden (on the plot lines and motifs that Lucian’s famous story ‘The Sorcerer’s Apprentice’ shares with Egyptian and Graeco-Egyptian literature of the Hellenistic and Roman periods), R. B. Parkinson (on the meaning and intended effect of the simile of the dream in the variant versions of ‘The Tale of Sinuhe’), and Anthony Spalinger (on reading king Amenhotep II’s dream preceding a day of immolating prisoners of war as a form of pre-traumatic stress syndrome—if I understand the author correctly—instead of manipulative and ideological fiction).

John Ray’s contribution does not fit any of the three categories, but surely deserves mention. Using the dream records preserved

among the famous bilingual and bicultural archive of the *katochos* Ptolemaios and his brother Apollonios as source material, he portrays the social and intellectual milieu at the Serapeum in the mid-second century BC. It is a beautiful case study of how dreams were meaningful in the lives of actual people—even if Ptolemaios was not so ordinary in many respects.

The relevance of the book lies in the fact that it forcefully brings out, though never makes explicit in any of the articles or the introduction, the relative discrepancy between the three categories identified above. There is abundant physical evidence for the performance and application of magical rituals from ancient Egypt, be it for healing, protection, or destruction; but very few of the amulets, execration figurines, amuletic knives and rods, and serpent wands that are on display in museums all over the world have an exact correspondence in the formularies that give instructions and list ingredients for making amulets and healing substances. One wonders where the amulets prescribed in the handbooks are and, *vice versa*, where the instructions are for the objects that we have actually found in the archaeological record. The same holds true for the literary texts. Magic and magicians are common motifs in Egyptian narratives, but for very few of the magical feats performed by these fictional characters can we find instructions in the formularies or any sort of physical evidence in the material record. It is beyond dispute that the three categories share the basic notions about the nature and mechanics of *heka* and the means of divination. Nonetheless, the incongruities are obvious and invite us to reflect on the peculiar nature of our evidence, to outline in sharper relief their commonalities and idiosyncrasies, and to explicate where the gaps in our evidence are. In my opinion, some of the articles extend this invitation to us—and that is very relevant, indeed.

Maria Centrone's article could be read as the paradigmatic article of the collection. In her article 'Corn-Mummies, Amulets of Life' she can hardly hide her frustration with the obvious disparity between, on the one hand, the detailed instructions for manufacturing the corn-mummies of Khenty-Imentit and Sokar, described in detail in the famous compilation of Khoiak texts from Dendera, and, on the other hand, the realities of the archaeological record. The so-called 'grain Osiris figurines', small mummy-form grain packages provided with the usual Sokar-Osiris trappings and placed in a miniature coffin, are usually taken for the activated products of the Khoiak festi-

val. However, despite obvious similarities, the surviving specimens appear to disagree, on closer inspection, in material, accoutrements, and find locations with the textual instructions. Even if Centrone's alternative explanation, seeing them as the product of yet another ritual (for which there happens to be no textual evidence), fails to convince, her article is important in drawing attention to the discrepancies and putting the burden of proof on future scholars working on the Khoiak rites.

The same holds true for Willeke Wendrich's article on the significance of knotting in Egyptian magic. The article starts with a description of an intricately knotted bracelet found in a refuse dump in the workmen's village at Tell el-Amarna and continues as a useful survey of types of knotting and its usage and meaning in Egyptian ritual. The article relies heavily on the instructions found in the handbooks for healing and protection and concludes, on the basis of the positive and protective value placed on knots and knotting in these formularies, that the knotted bracelet must have been used as an object charged with power, most likely of a protective nature. This is quite convincing, if only for the fact that the bracelet scores high on the 'coefficient of weirdness' scale. Noteworthy, however, is that none of the adduced magic recipes give instructions for anything similar to the knotted bracelet. Yet again, theory and reality are slightly at odds with each other.

John Baines' article addresses the issue from a slightly different perspective. He zeros in on the incongruence between the abundance of amulets excavated in provincial Old Kingdom burials on the one hand and, on the other, the elite's apparent monopoly on the display of amulets in contemporary monumental art. Whereas archaeology teaches us that the use of amulets must have been widespread, the study of statuary and relief leads us to believe that only elite members of society had access to such means of protection. How to solve this apparent paradox? Baines argues that the absence of amulets on depictions of non-elite persons in monumental art demonstrates the social significance attributed to these objects; in the context of elite self-presentation, ritually charged objects were socially exclusive and their depiction submitted to rules of decorum. Only the tomb owner was depicted wearing such items, occasionally also family members, but certainly not servants, whatever those might have chosen to do in real life. In other words, esthetics of decoration and concerns for

social control inform the so-called 'scenes of daily life' in the Old Kingdom mastaba memorial chapels, not the practices of daily life.

Robert Ritner's contribution is a comprehensive publication of nine extant snake wands, the first of its kind. It is fair to say that attention to this object category was long overdue. Ritner must, therefore, be thanked and congratulated for providing scholars with a survey of the snake wands that he was able to identify in museums in the US, Europe, and Egypt. The extant wands are either made of bronze or wood and range in date from the Middle Kingdom (*ca* 2010–1640 BC) through the Late Period (664–332 BC). It remains unclear what their precise function was, but there can be no doubt that they were ritual objects. Depictions of snake wands being held by deities and demons suggest that the wands had an apotropaeic meaning. The article happens to be particularly relevant to the more general issue of the relative discrepancy between material culture, formularies, and literary texts in the study of ancient Egyptian magic. One of the wands was discovered in a Middle Kingdom tomb under the memorial temple of Ramesses II (the Ramesseum). It was lying next to a chest that held a number of formularies for protection and healing. Although none of the recipes prescribes using a snake wand of this sort, the wand and handbooks are archaeologically associated and were probably used—and cherished—by one and the same *hekau* or ritual expert.

Joachim F. Quack's survey of unpublished divination handbooks is important for presenting means of divination that were unknown for ancient Egypt heretofore, such as animal omens that give predictions on the basis of bodily contact between client and animal, and methods that are suggestive of numerology, drawing lots, and throwing dice.[3] It is a salient detail again that none of these methods appear in Alan B. Lloyd's survey of the motifs of *heka*, dreams, and predictions in Egyptian fictional narratives. Lloyd argues that

[3] In his article Joachim F. Quack refers to an unpublished icosahedron in the museum of Kharga Oasis. This object has now been published in Minas-Nerpal 2007. At the end of his article, he briefly discusses a Demotic divinatory text featuring Isis posing questions organized according to an intricate numerical system (P. Vienna D 12006). The reader should now also consult Martin Stadler's reply [2006,] to Quack's review of Stadler's publication of the text.

these motifs were mobilized primarily for comic and entertaining effect, in most cases as instruments to expose wrong-doing and thus to achieve justice in the fictional world, which fits the moral and didactic nature of Egyptian literary discourse well. When summarizing his conclusions, he writes,

> Nevertheless, our analysis of stories, when set against parallel data, yields a clear and convincing picture. ... It follows, therefore, that the references to *heka*, dreams, and prophecy in our stories will reflect in some degree the social reality of their use and function, and that our narratives can be expected to give expression, though in many different ways, to moral, political, religious, or nationalistic issues. [88]

This may very well be the case, but should one not give a bit more weight to the fact that the correspondence between the methods and media of divination and *heka* described in fictional narratives and those found in the formularies and archaeological record is, on closer inspection, not obvious at all? Issues of genre, decorum, and the ideological nature of our source materials should not be left out of our analysis—as is so convincingly demonstrated in John Baines' contribution.

To conclude my review, this collection of essays contains a number of valuable contributions to the study of *heka* and divination in ancient Egypt. Several articles raise important methodological issues when read in combination, and present materials that remained unpublished heretofore. It is hoped that the book will entice others to join the ever growing group of scholars studying the manifold ways in which ancient Egyptians tried to bend nature to their will.

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