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## Identifying the Magical Function of Script in Ancient Cultures – a Comparative Perspective

### ABSTRACT

There were many different manifestations of magic involving written signs in ancient civilisations. Ancient Egyptians used writing as an art form and also in magical practices, but the most extraordinary are the examples of hieroglyphic mutilation similar to execration magic. In opposition to this, Mesopotamia was a place where single wedges of script were not considered to cause a magical effect when they were not intentionally composed as a spells. The Maya glyphs were a polyvalent writing system in which one sign could have been depicted as the head or full body of the creature or human being. The Chinese Daoists believed that talismans and amulets written with special characters were inhabited by the spirits. The Germanic people used runic magic on the basis of the acrophony principle in their writing system. They believed that they could summon the power of the gods through rituals involving the carving of runes. All these examples suggest either a belief in the force hidden in the single characters of the script or that the signs were treated as living beings. This preliminary comparison of magical practices with connection to different forms of writing is an attempt to answer the question if the category of the magic of single characters of the script can be established on the basis of similarities between these cases.

### KEY WORDS

magical script, writing systems, mutilation of signs, Egyptian hieroglyphs, Maya hieroglyphs, Chinese talismans, Daoist ritual, runic magic, Norse literature, magical amulets

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## INTRODUCTION

The main issue of this paper – already suggested in the title – is the question whether belief that characters or letters of script might themselves have a magical power existed in some ancient cultures. In order to trace possible evidence for this particular type of magic, there is a need for a comparative perspective. By comparing cases of diverse writing systems it can be shown that ancient cultures had developed different attitudes towards characters of their script. This preliminary investigation was based on a few examples, due to the fact that a description of every instance where written characters were linked to magical practices would form a study well beyond the limits of this short article. The chosen examples are that of Egyptian hieroglyphs, Mesopotamian cuneiform, the Maya glyphs, Chinese writing and Northern European runes as well. In each case the main characteristic of the belief is given along with how it is linked with the writing system. In the case of Mesopotamia, possible reasons for the absence of such a belief are discussed. The circumstances surrounding the usage of magic involving script are described for each case too, provided they are known from the sources. The last part of this paper lists the similarities and differences between examples previously presented in an attempt to answer the question if the term magic (of the characters) of script exists at all, is it just the magic of written spells or in each case something completely different.

## EGYPT

Perhaps one of the most common features of all early writing systems is that the characters they utilised used to depict objects in a highly realistic manner. One of them is what we call “Egyptian hieroglyphs” and the name given to it came from the ancient Greeks. This monumental form of writing is characterised by a highly “pictographic” look, which Jan Assmann explains in terms of its political and commemorative function.<sup>1</sup> In other words it was used not only merely as a script but also as a form of art. “There is no clear-cut line of demarcation between hieroglyphic writing and representational art” – he wrote.<sup>2</sup> There are two ways of interpreting Egyptian works of art

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. J. Assmann, *Pamięć kulturowa. Pismo, zapamiętywanie i polityczna tożsamość w cywilizacjach starożytnych*, tłum. A. Kryczyńska-Pham, wstęp i red. R. Traba, Warszawa 2008, p. 184–186.

<sup>2</sup> J. Assmann, *Preservation and Presentation of Self in Ancient Egyptian Portraiture*, [in:] *Studies in Honor of William Kelly Simpson*, ed. P. der Manuelian, Vol. 1, Boston 1996, p. 67.

depicting the human body in funerary context which Assmann called “somatic” and “semiotic.”<sup>3</sup> That means they can be seen as a representation of the deceased person (“reserve body”) or they have some semantic meaning – serving as three-dimensional hieroglyphs.<sup>4</sup> The latter can be interpreted in both ways as the Egyptian writing system was composed of phonograms, ideograms and determinatives. There is evidence of the existence of a belief in some potential magical power of hieroglyphs in ancient Egypt. This can be observed both in the Old Kingdom period (c. 2750–2200 BCE) in the “Pyramid Texts” and in the Middle Kingdom period (c. 2050–1750 BCE) in the “Coffin Texts,” where signs were deliberately changed graphically to disable their potential force. Nicholas S. Picardo called that custom “semantic homicide,” because in the process hieroglyphs were severed from their dangerous meaning, but their linguistic and phonetic layer remained intact.<sup>5</sup> The earliest examples of that can be found with the beginning of tradition of inscribing the “Pyramid Texts” inside the pharaohs’ monuments, thus in the end of the Fifth and during the Sixth Dynasties (e.g. “Pyramid Texts” of Unas, Teti and Pepi I).<sup>6</sup> The “neutralisation” of the hieroglyphs could have been made by drawing incomplete or segmented signs depicting living beings, like animals and human figures, or later stabbed with knives.<sup>7</sup> More detailed examples of graphical mutilations of hieroglyphs include: dogs/jackals’ and lions’ bodies cut in two parts (e.g. E15, E23 in Gardiner sign list), humans and animals without legs, humans without bodies (with only the head and arms shown), birds with their heads cut off, serpents without tails and knives inserted into the bodies of snakes and crocodiles.<sup>8</sup> One of the variants of segmenting the signs into parts was to place three pellets of sand (Gardiner sign list: N33) between two cut halves of the body of animals, i.e. snakes. That recalls the

<sup>3</sup> Ibidem, p. 61; N. S. Picardo, “*Semantic Homicide*” and the So-called Reserve Heads: *The Theme of Decapitation in Egyptian Funerary Religion and Some Implications for the Old Kingdom*, “Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt”, Vol. 43 (2007), p. 233.

<sup>4</sup> “The images function in the context of hieroglyphic writing as *determinatives*”: cf. J. Assmann, op. cit., 1996, p. 67.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. N.S. Picardo, op. cit., p. 236–237; see also: F. L. Griffith, *A Collection of Hieroglyphs. A Contribution to the History of Egyptian Writing*, London 1898, p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> N. S. Picardo, op. cit., p. 234; P. Wilson, *Hieroglyphs. A Very Short Introduction*, New York 2004, p. 58.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. N. S. Picardo, op. cit., p. 234.

<sup>8</sup> F. L. Griffith, op. cit., p. 7; P. Wilson, op. cit., p. 58; W. van Peer, *Mutilated Signs: Notes toward a Literary Paleography*, “Poetics Today”, Vol. 18, No. 1 (Spring 1997), p. 36; W.V. Davies, *Egipskie hieroglify*, tłum. M. G. Witkowski, Warszawa 1998, p. 22.

ancient Egyptian story of Setne Khaemwese (“Setne I”) known from Greco-Roman period papyrus.<sup>9</sup>

And now Nefer-ka-ptah was face to face with the snake that no man could kill, and it reared itself up ready for battle. Nefer-ka-ptah rushed upon it and cut off its head, and at once the head and body came together, each to each, and the snake that no man could kill was alive again, and ready for the fray. Again Nefer-ka-ptah rushed upon it, and so hard did he strike that the head was flung far from the body, but at once the head and body came together again, each to each, and again the snake that no man could kill was alive and ready to fight. Then Nefer-ka-ptah saw that the snake was immortal and could not be slain, but must be overcome by subtle means. Again he rushed upon it and cut it in two, and very quickly he put sand on each part, so that when the head and body came together there was sand between them and they could not join, and the snake that no man could kill lay helpless before him.<sup>10</sup>

That means the sand was considered by the Egyptians even more severe way of “killing” the hieroglyphs.

The other method to “neutralise” signs was by substitution. This could have been done by writing a hieroglyph which was potentially dangerous phonetically or replacing it by another one. The former is seen in the example of the god Seth’s name. While it was written with his animal symbol (E20 or E21) in the “Pyramid Texts” of pharaoh Unas, it was later rendered by phonetic means alone.<sup>11</sup> Substitution was used especially to omit human figures – by using a single vertical stroke (Gardiner: Z1), diagonal stroke (Z5) or grain of sand (N33).<sup>12</sup> The “Seth animal” is most probably a fantastic creature, but its tail was designed in a very unusual way suggesting that it is actually an arrow piercing Seth’s hindquarters.<sup>13</sup> As the examples of this originate from the Old Kingdom period, it can be treated as a prototype of a later form of mutilation of hieroglyphs. In the Middle Kingdom, the knife was used for the first time to cripple animal and human figures and became the symbol of this

<sup>9</sup> R. K. Ritner, *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice*, “Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilization”, No. 54, Chicago 1993, p. 157; T. Andrzejewski, *Opowiadania egipskie*, Warszawa 1958, p. 250–251.

<sup>10</sup> M. A. Murray, *Ancient Egyptian Legends*, London 1920, p. 33–34, [online], <http://www.sacred-texts.com/egy/ael/ael07.htm> [accessed: 20.08.2013].

<sup>11</sup> H. te Velde, *Egyptian Hieroglyphs as Signs, Symbols and Gods*, “Visible Religion. Annual for Religious Iconography”, Vols. IV–V: “Approaches to Iconology”, Leiden 1985–1986, p. 67.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. A. H. Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar*, 3rd edition, London 1973, p. 534–537.

<sup>13</sup> R. K. Ritner, op. cit., p. 164.

action as the hieroglyph for “mutilation” or “damage” was a human leg with the blade ready to cut it (D57).<sup>14</sup> In the Late Period (c. 1070–332 BCE) Seth’s name was written again in his animal sign, but this time with the ears of an ass and his body struck with a knife.<sup>15</sup> The same was applied to another god seen as an evildoer and shown in the form of a serpent – Apophis, who sometimes appears depicted as a tied up corpse pierced with blades.<sup>16</sup>

The main question remains – why did this actually occur? There is no one simple answer to that. It was proposed that depictions of living beings – be it humans, animals, mythical creatures or gods – could be harmful to the deceased person, especially in burial chambers or sarcophagus, because they may eat the offerings for the dead or even damage the body.<sup>17</sup> Other scholars suggested the idea that hieroglyphs were deprived of their feet so they could not move from their place and confuse the spells for the dead or group themselves into dangerous phrases.<sup>18</sup> It is also possible that they simply should be in the same state as the buried person since the so called “reserve heads” were mutilated in a comparable context.<sup>19</sup> One fact is however clear – that all the examples come from burial chambers or sarcophagi and never from places accessible to the living.<sup>20</sup> Yet there is another problematic matter. It was suggested that none of the images could act as a living entity without being “animated” previously and this could have been done during the ritual called “opening the mouth” and such circumstances would be unlikely to result in hieroglyphic creatures “attacking” the dead person as it had to be performed with positive intentions.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, J. Assmann stated that “according to Egyptian beliefs, the idol does not represent the body of the god but is the body of the god.”<sup>22</sup> The names of gods were placed on the temple walls to evoke them during the proper ritual and this was done by reading their names (written in hieroglyphs), what could be interpreted to some extent as magically bringing them to life according to Penelope Wil-

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem, p. 165; A. H. Gardiner, op. cit., p. 457.

<sup>15</sup> H. te Velde, op. cit., p. 67.

<sup>16</sup> W. V. Davies, op. cit., p. 22.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. ibidem, p. 22.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. H. te Velde, op. cit., p. 67; see also: F. L. Griffith, op. cit., p. 7.

<sup>19</sup> N. S. Picardo, op. cit., p. 234.

<sup>20</sup> H. te Velde, op. cit., p. 67.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. ibidem, p. 67; N. S. Picardo, op. cit., p. 235.

<sup>22</sup> J. Assmann, *Ancient Egypt and the Materiality of the Sign*, [in:] *Materialities of Communication*, eds. H. U. Gumbrecht, K. L. Pfeiffer, Stanford 1988, p. 27; see also: W. van Peer, op. cit., p. 38.

son.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore H. Te Velde pointed out that hieroglyphs were sometimes depicted with features of the living such as hands, eyes, etc.<sup>24</sup>

There is also evidence of the opposite belief in the positive influence of hieroglyphs that are not necessarily in a funerary context. Ancient Egyptians made three-dimensional likenesses of them and used them as amulets.<sup>25</sup> They were worn on the body to protect against evil and illness and bestow magical power on the owner.<sup>26</sup> Out of hundreds of them, the most often mentioned in publications are: *ankh* (“life”), *djed* (“stability”), *wadjet* (“soundness”, “hale-ness”), *sa* (“protection”), *was* (“dominion”), and *wadj* (“freshness”, “green-ness”).<sup>27</sup> In those examples it is clear that they could be read as if they were two-dimensional writing. In a similar context, hieroglyphs representing parts of the human body – like the hand, foot or face – were also used. They were supposed to enhance and ensure the proper function of those organs in the afterlife.<sup>28</sup>

## MESOPOTAMIA

The beginning of the Mesopotamian script was similar to other early writing systems. This can be seen from early examples of clay tablets written in pictographs with a pointed stylus. But the fact that the main media of recording writing was clay and that the system itself was developed for administrative and economic needs caused the tendency to simplify picture-signs to wedge-like abstract forms written using a flat stylus and the monumental inscriptions also followed this principle.<sup>29</sup> For some time it was written with mixed combinations of sign pictographs and wedges but soon it became a completely cuneiform script for the most of recorded history of the region.<sup>30</sup> This meant that the Mesopotamian writing system had lost its pictorial character and its signs did not represent anything close to real animals or

<sup>23</sup> P. Wilson, op. cit., p. 58; also in: B. McDermott, *Decoding Egyptian Hieroglyphs. How to Read the Secret Language of the Pharaohs*, London 2001, p. 64.

<sup>24</sup> H. te Velde, op. cit., p. 66.

<sup>25</sup> W. V. Davies, op. cit., p. 23.

<sup>26</sup> B. McDermott, op. cit., p. 65.

<sup>27</sup> H. te Velde, op. cit., p. 65–66; W. V. Davies, op. cit., p. 23–24.

<sup>28</sup> W. V. Davies, op. cit., p. 24.

<sup>29</sup> C. B. F. Walker, *Reading the Past: Cuneiform*, London 1987, p. 7.

<sup>30</sup> Ibidem, p. 7; M. W. Green, *Early Cuneiform*, [in:] *The Origins of Writing*, ed. W. M. Senner, Lincoln and London 1989, p. 43.

humans. Although the script itself was created by the god Enki according to some myths – it was just a tool that could have been used for writing magical texts by combining wedges into words to form a spell like any alphabetic system. Therefore, to my knowledge, there is no actual belief in magical power hidden in the single wedges of the Mesopotamian script.

## MESOAMERICA

The two examples mentioned before show that there could have been completely different attitudes toward characters of the script in the Old World. The next logical step would be to see if one of these attitudes applied to Mesoamerican writing systems. The first problem that could be observed here is that the most of the scripts used in the New World in Pre-Columbian times have not been deciphered yet or even not considered as a “true” writing system at all. The situation is different with the Maya script which was deciphered in 1952 by the young Soviet linguist Yuri V. Knorozov. Although many scholars had contributed to this process since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was Knorozov who proved that the Maya used also phonetic signs beside ideograms and that the complexity and sophistication of this system could match any other developed writing of the Old World.<sup>31</sup> Graphically it was described by the 19<sup>th</sup> century French orientalist Léon de Rosny as “calculiforme” or “pebble-shaped” which is generally accurate but does not show the whole picture.<sup>32</sup> This term could be used to describe only geometrical or symbolic variants of the glyphs and as J. Eric Thompson explained they are not of a “normal” form in the sense that it is their basic rendering.<sup>33</sup> The system was not standardised: one sign could be presented in many different variations – including so called “head variants” and “full figure” glyphs. “Head variants” are the glyphs shaped like the human head and “full figure” are those representing the whole body of the person depicted by the sign. The first identified “head variants” were numerical signs – most of which were recognised by J.T. Goodman and Ernst Förstemann at the end of 19<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>34</sup> It was established since then that the “head

<sup>31</sup> M. Coe, J. Kerr, *The Art of the Maya Scribe*, London 1997, p. 53.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 50.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. J. E. S. Thompson, *Maya Hieroglyphic Writing: Introduction*, Washington 1950, p. 44.

<sup>34</sup> M. Macri, *The Numerical Head Variants and the Mayan Numbers*, “Anthropological Linguistics”, Vol. 27, No. 1 (Spring, 1985), p. 49–50.

variants” of numerical and day glyphs in the calendar were personifications of gods who were patrons of a particular number or day of month, etc. In 1985 Martha Macri suggested, however, that the identifications of glyphs with their patron gods by the Maya were not random, but in fact connected with the pronunciation of a particular number in its original language.<sup>35</sup>

One of the most interesting examples of signs in Maya script are the “full figure” forms of glyphs. The most famous examples can be found in Copan (Stela D), Quirigua (Stela D, Monument 2, Monument 16) and Palenque sites.<sup>36</sup> It would seem that J. Assmann’s opinion that there is no clear difference between hieroglyphic writing and representational art in ancient Egypt is also suitable for the Mesoamerican context. Not only numerical and calendar signs had their “personified” form. The full-figure images and associated glyphs also showed the rulers’ names and the local gods associated with them.<sup>37</sup> Probably all of the glyphs had their “animated” variant. “Head variants” and “full figure” forms were often written with some “attribute” of a geometrical glyph.<sup>38</sup> This and other graphical manipulations, like the fact that all the Maya glyphs were designed as three-dimensional characters that can cover parts of another one in the same glyph block, suggest that potentially they might have been seen as living beings. “Animated” characters of the script as well as the drawing of the hieroglyphs as transpositions of three-dimensional spaces into two-dimensional surfaces is another similarity with the Egyptian beliefs. But there is a lack of evidence that the Maya glyphs were thought to be active somehow and interacted with the earthly, human realm. There is also a possibility that it was done only for aesthetic reasons to make the inscriptions appear more dynamic as if it was an animated story. Indeed, common for other Mesoamerican writing systems is the “comic-like” style where signs interact with each other or are drawn with “speech bubbles” (or scrolls). This is present in the Aztec script as well as in earlier Central Mexican writing systems. “Speech bubbles” were also used in Maya iconography, but dialogues were written in ordinary glyphs without those features.

<sup>35</sup> Ibidem, p. 46–85.

<sup>36</sup> M. Coe, J. Kerr, op. cit., p. 131–133; A. Stone, *Variety and Transformation in the Cosmic Monster Theme at Quirigua, Guatemala*, [in:] *Fifth Palenque Round Table 1983*, eds. M. G. Robertson, V. M. Fields, San Francisco 1985, p. 44; M. G.Looper, *Lightning Warrior: Maya Art and Kingship at Quirigua*, Texas 2003, p. 111; M. Macri, op. cit., p. 67.

<sup>37</sup> W. L. Fash, *Dynastic Architectural Programs: Intention and Design in Classic Maya Buildings at Copan and Other Sites*, [in:] *Function and Meaning in Classic Maya Architecture*, ed. S. D. Houston, Washington 1998, p. 260

<sup>38</sup> J. E. S. Thompson, op. cit., p. 44.



## CHINA

The indigenous Chinese writing system is composed of very distinctive characters with rectangular or square-shaped features. The reason for this is in connection with tools that were used and are still used today by calligraphers to write them. It is also the only logo-phonetic script in use today and on a massive scale (i.e. the vast population of China and Chinese emigrants all over the world as well as Japanese writing which is of Chinese origin for the most part). It is not surprising to find here beliefs that are connected with the power of written signs. This is especially visible in Daoist magical practices where special hand-written talismans or amulets were created for the purpose of contacting or expelling spirits. One of the first Westerners to be deeply interested in this topic was the French scholar Henri Doré. He published in Shanghai in the years 1911–1938 his gigantic 18-volume study under the title “Recherches sur les superstitions en Chine” (“Research on superstitions in China”).<sup>39</sup> The Chinese talismans were derived from tokens used in military campaigns to ensure that the orders were correct. These tallies were broken in two by the commanding officer and one part was sent with his deputy, the other being delivered to the marshal of the other flank.<sup>40</sup> According to Livia Kohn, Daoists believed that the “original” half of the talisman was in Heaven.<sup>41</sup> In the Chinese language the word for talisman is *fú* (符) and in fact in the modern dictionary the first meaning of this character is explained as: “tall (with two halves, made of wood, bamboo, jade, metal, issued by a ruler to generals, envoys, etc., as credentials in ancient China).”<sup>42</sup> The other two being: “symbol, mark” and “magic figures drawn by Daoist priests to invoke or expel spirits and bring good or ill fortune.”<sup>43</sup> The reason why this term was used in the context of Daoist magic can be explained by the fact that written tallies were sometimes also written contracts. In similar manner talismanic charms attributed to their inventor Zhang Daoling, the founder of the Heavenly Master Sect, were considered to be contracts made with spirits.<sup>44</sup>

It is worth noting that there is some confusion among Western scholars how to translate *fú* (符) into English – some of them use only the word “tal-

<sup>39</sup> W. P. Cienkowski, *Poligłoci i hieroglify*, Warszawa 1967, p. 111.

<sup>40</sup> L. Kohn, *Introducing Daoism*, New York 2009, p. 120.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 120.

<sup>42</sup> Wu Guanghua, *Chinese Characters Dictionary with English Annotations*, Shanghai 2002, p. 300.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 300.

<sup>44</sup> L. Legaz, *Tao Magic: The Chinese Art of the Occult*, New York 1975, p. 24–25.

isman” others exclusively and consistently refer to it as “amulet.” I can guess that the main reason for this situation is the fact that in Chinese “amulet” is called *hù shēn fú* (護身符) – which literally means: “body protecting talisman.”<sup>45</sup> In other words, in the Chinese language “amulet” is only one kind of *fú* – an indigenous term translated as “talisman” – so both can be referred to as “talismans.” The language in which the talismans and amulets were made is that of ghosts and spirits and is known only to initiated Daoist masters.<sup>46</sup> It is an independent form of language outside Chinese and the written characters used in that ghost speech are also very special. They resemble the Chinese script and similarly take a vertical rather than horizontal form.<sup>47</sup> Sometimes they are simply old or deformed Chinese characters of the ordinary writing system, while at other times completely invented signs. They were written in a “free” style, not restricted by the rules of traditional Chinese calligraphy or treated in an extremely flexible way.<sup>48</sup> In the text *Baopuzi* written by Ge Hong (281–361 CE) there was even a dictionary of them.<sup>49</sup>

It was also believed that these talismans evoked whatever condition was expressed on them and this is the reason why there are so many different “magical” variants of the signs *fú* (福; “good fortune”) and *shòu* (壽; “[long] life”).<sup>50</sup> Other things written on talismans and amulets included the names of protective spirits or spells to hurt, kill or expel demons.<sup>51</sup> Their look and methods of preparation varied accordingly to the purpose in which they were used but most of them were written on strips of paper, as it was easily obtainable and the cheapest media in China available in five basic colours: red, yellow, blue, white and black.<sup>52</sup> The characters of this “magical script” could not be written like ordinary ones and special conditions had to be fulfilled for the purpose of giving them a magical function, for example: it has to be written in a secluded and clean place, in ritual purity, at night time, in perfect accordance with the phases of the moon or the precise hour of the day,

<sup>45</sup> Wu Guanghua, op. cit., p. 300.

<sup>46</sup> W. Eberhard, *Symbole chińskie. Słownik*, tłum. z niem. R. Darda, Kraków 2001, p. 15.

<sup>47</sup> L. Legaz, op. cit., p. 20.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 21.

<sup>49</sup> W. Eberhard, op. cit., p. 15.

<sup>50</sup> L. Legaz, op. cit., p. 29 (also on the p. 73–74 are presented 100 talismanic forms of each of those two characters).

<sup>51</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 29.

<sup>52</sup> Miura Kunio, *Magic*, [in:] *The Encyclopedia of Taoism*, ed. F. Pregadio, Vol. I, London and New York 2008, p. 117; L. Legaz, op. cit., p. 27–28.

etc.<sup>53</sup> Another thing which was important was careful control of breathing when drawing the signs on the talisman/amulet.<sup>54</sup> However, it was believed that the magic power of these objects existed thanks to the permanent presence of spirits inside them and that is why communication between the Dao priest and the spirits did not need any medium as the talisman itself to serve this function.<sup>55</sup> In *Daofa Huiyuan* (道法會元; “Corpus of Daoist Ritual”) the special conditions for making an amulet are described in these words:

You use speedily the writing brush to write down the amulet. Having done [the writing] you let the splendour of your heavenly eye enter [the amulet], and all the generals and emissaries that you summoned enter the centre of the amulet. [...] In your meditative vision you see the general and emissaries who were summoned and are [now] inside the amulet that you wrote.<sup>56</sup> If the breath in your mouth leaks out, during time when the amulet is being written, or if your mouth does not enclose the breath and an amulet is still being written, such an amulet does not have any divine force.<sup>57</sup>

Fragments of the text presented above directly state that not all of the characters have some magical power, even in this special language of the spirits, but only those written during special rituals.

## NORTHERN EUROPE

The last example in this short overview of a script-related magic comes from Europe. Although sources for runic magic are generally late – i.e. from the Middle Ages – the writing system itself is known to be much older with the oldest rune-inscribed object dating back to c. 200 CE.<sup>58</sup> As this topic has been discussed in the past in great detail by many scholars, I therefore reduce the scope of the introductory part only to mentioning the main sources and focusing on the role of the single sign in runic magic.

The evidence for using runes in magical practices comes from the three groups of sources: sagas, eddas and inscriptions on different objects. The sagas were written in the 13<sup>th</sup> century but they recall events from the past

<sup>53</sup> L. Kohn, op. cit., p. 121; L. Legaz, op. cit., p. 25–26

<sup>54</sup> F. C. Reiter, *Basic Conditions of Taoist Thunder Magic*, Wiesbaden 2007, p. 41–42.

<sup>55</sup> L. Legaz, op. cit., p. 18.

<sup>56</sup> F. C. Reiter, op. cit., p. 41 (TT 1220: 69.14a).

<sup>57</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 42 (TT 1220: 69.14b).

<sup>58</sup> R. I. Page, *Pismo runiczne*, tłum. J. Strzelczyk, konsult. nauk. J. Strzelczyk, Warszawa 1998, p. 25.

c. 10<sup>th</sup> century. Also the eddas were written around the same time but they record much older traditions. Those runic practices, which were recorded in the first two groups of sources and have parallels in inscriptions, are considered to be the most reliable by the scholars. Mindy MacLeod and Bernard Mees gave an example on this from “Egil’s Saga.”<sup>59</sup> In this text there are two well known passages dealing with the magical usage of runes. In one of them Egil saves a girl who was exposed to a runic love charm carved by someone incompetent on a whalebone which was put in her bed. Three verses of this saga were almost literary inscribed on a rune stick from Trondheim which was dated to 1175–1275 CE.<sup>60</sup> The second one, which recounts how Egil discovered poison in the horn he was given to drink, is according to them questionable as original runic practice for two reasons: firstly – using blood in runic magic remains uncertain, and secondly – it has parallels to Christian stories, e.g. the tale of St. Benedict in Pope Gregory’s the Great “Dialogues,” where the only difference is making the sign of the cross instead of carving the runes.<sup>61</sup>

There is no doubt that the runes were used in a magical context in earlier times than that of recording the sagas and eddas. The rune-stones were even sometimes deliberately overturned, in order to hide the contents of the magical spells from the eyes of the people.<sup>62</sup> The main question, however, is if the single runic letters had their independent magical meanings. The eddas give several listings of different types of runic magic, e.g. runes that help to win the battles, heal, or cause affection to someone using them. The most important here is an example from the stanza 6 of the “Lay of Sigdrifa”:

Victory runes you must know if you will have victory,  
and carve them on the sword’s hilt, some on the grasp  
and some on the inlay, and name Týr twice (*ok nefna tysvar Tý*).<sup>63</sup>

The last verse of this fragment mentions the god Týr whose name was also given to the rune with the sound “t”. His original name was reconstructed as Tīwaz or Teiwaz.<sup>64</sup> This verse could mean two things: writing the “t”-rune

<sup>59</sup> Cf. M. MacLeod, B. Mees, *Runic Amulets and Magic Objects*, Woodbridge 2006, p. 234–235.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 234–235 (footnote 2).

<sup>61</sup> Cf. *Ibidem*, p. 235.

<sup>62</sup> P. Horbowicz et al., *Runy*, ed. W. Maciejewski, “Acta Sueco-Polonica: Monografie 2”, Warszawa 2011, p. 180–181.

<sup>63</sup> S. B. F. Jansson, *Runes in Sweden*, Stockholm 1987 (translations: P. Foote), p. 15.

<sup>64</sup> R. I. Page, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

twice and reading it out loud. Both actions served one purpose – to evoke the god’s might into the letters – as it was “not the carving of runes per se that works wondrous effects but the invocation of a mysterious power through the runes.”<sup>65</sup> There is some evidence for writing Týr’s name on the amulets – as the one from Lindholm in Sweden made from fish bone in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, which also bears a mysterious inscription: *aaaaaaaaRRRnnn* that cannot be interpreted in any context other than magical.<sup>66</sup> For strengthening the petition to the god, side lines were sometimes added to the “t”-rune making it visually similar to the spruce tree.<sup>67</sup> Another method was to write it several times one next to another as in the Gummarp runestone from Sweden with an “F”-rune – an acrophone for *fehu* which meant: “money,” “cattle,” “prosperity.”<sup>68</sup> Both might be meant using the expression to “name Týr twice.” Likewise, worth noting is the fact that acrophony in runic context was sometimes even pushed further as the rune letters were even used as determinatives like in the Anglo-Saxon poem “Solomon and Saturn” in which the scribe used the combination: “m SALO,” where “m” states for “man,” to avoid using the full name Salomon.<sup>69</sup> Taking this into consideration, it can be shown that the magical use of a single rune was possible.

## FINAL REMARKS

After this short survey, we can see that there are both similarities and differences between the examples presented. The most common feature of these writing systems is a belief in their divine origin in each case. However, as is evident from the Mesopotamian cuneiform it does not imply that any written character was believed to have a magical power. Although Richard Kieckhefer wrote that “in a culture where writing is uncommon, it may well appear magical” and “even ordinary script may seem to bear extraordinary power,” this does not translate to a single sign.<sup>70</sup>

Another important feature is the fact that with the most of the remaining writing systems (excluding Mesopotamian) was associated a belief in ani-

<sup>65</sup> R. Kieckhefer, *The Specific Rationality of Medieval Magic*, “The American Historical Review”, Vol. 99, No. 3 (Jun., 1994), p. 834.

<sup>66</sup> R. Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, Cambridge 2000, p. 48.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. P. Horbowicz et al., op. cit., p. 180.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. ibidem, p. 94; R. I. Page, op. cit., p. 16.

<sup>69</sup> R. I. Page, op. cit., p. 17.

<sup>70</sup> R. Kieckhefer, op. cit., 2000, p. 47.

mated aspects of the signs. It can be argued that in Egypt the notion according to which the hieroglyphs could come to life may be linked with the ideas behind the Egyptian art that “the idol does not represent the body of the god but is the body of the god” as Jan Assmann put it.<sup>71</sup> It is also possible that the Mayan glyphs were viewed as “living beings” – especially in their personified forms – although there is no further proof that they had any magical power at all. Therefore we have to exclude Mesoamerica from deeper analysis and further comparisons because of lack of written evidence that could explain any indigenous beliefs in connection with the written characters. In China, on the other hand, it was believed that an amulet or talisman written in a special script was inhabited by spirits and in most cases these magical objects were made using single characters.<sup>72</sup> But as the Germanic runes were an alphabet and each letter had a very abstract appearance, then it is hard to find any similar belief there.

Signs of script have to be activated somehow within plenty of these examples as well. They do not manifest their power by themselves – as in the case of Germanic writing system: it was “not the carving of runes per se that works wondrous effects but the invocation of a mysterious power through the runes.”<sup>73</sup> Using and ensuring that the characters of the script had some magical power required specific circumstances. These conditions were achievable only for some specialised groups of people, i.e. priest, etc. – as the drawing of magical writing or magically activating it was part of a wider ritual.

It is worth mentioning that many of these cases are linked with the context of funerals or death. The examples of hieroglyphic mutilation in burial chambers, Chinese amulets for contacting, expelling and destroying the ghosts and spirits, or rune-stones inscribed with magical spells and then overturned to hide their special content in order to ensure the dead people would stay in their graves.<sup>74</sup>

On the other hand, they could be used as talismans and amulets – Egyptian hieroglyphs and runes could serve this function as well as magical script from China.

But it should always be remembered that these examples came from different parts of world and borrowing from or influencing one another was highly unlikely. These written signs are not only different in their look but

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<sup>71</sup> J. Assmann, *op. cit.*, 1988, p. 27; see also: W. van Peer, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

<sup>72</sup> L. Legaz, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

<sup>73</sup> R. Kieckhefer, *op. cit.*, 1994, p. 834.

<sup>74</sup> Cf. W. P. Cienkowski, *op. cit.*, p. 101; P. Horbowicz et al., *op. cit.*, p. 180.

also in all these cases they were utilised for magical purposes according to the characteristics of the writing system they were part of. Egyptian hieroglyphs depicted real objects in great detail (miniaturised reality) – the feature cuneiform lacked. The single character of the script could be used as a full magical spell or charm in the case of China and runes because in both systems one sign could stand for the whole word – one using the logograms, the other employing the acrophones.

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