

# THE ORIENTALISM OF *HEKA*

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## **Introduction**

Before Ptolemaic Egypt, Egyptian magic (*heka*) existed as an incorporation of temporal and spiritual elements into Egyptian culture.<sup>1</sup> Deified in the form of the Egyptian god *Heka* it pervaded Egypt as an intrinsic part of everyday life: from healing to harming.<sup>2</sup> *Heka* was not only magical in the westernized sense of the word but was a significant cultural element in Egyptian society. To understand *heka* is to first divorce the modern mind from the separation between science, magic, and religion.<sup>3</sup> *Heka* was all three and yet none as it existed only in the application of understanding Egyptian culture. The evolution of *heka* as a label changed with the influence of Greco-Roman thought due to the polarization between religion and science in those civilizations. *Heka*, as it is understood in the modern context, contains magic that is not associated with monotheistic faith or science. This is ultimately a product of *Orientalism*<sup>4</sup> derived from a lack of understanding and advancing the Greco-Roman narrative of ontological and epistemological thought.<sup>5</sup> During Ptolemaic and later Roman rule, Egypt was a

1. Robert Kriech Ritner, *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice* (Chicago: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 1995), 1-28. For further definition and the role of *heka* see also: James H. Breasted's *Development of Religion and Thought in Ancient Egypt*, Bob Brier's *Ancient Egyptian Magic*, *The Ancient Coffin Texts* translated by R.O. Foulkner, Siegfried Morenz's *Egyptian Religion* and Geraldine Pinch's *Magic in Ancient Egypt*.
2. E.A. Wallis Budge, *Egyptian Magic* (New York: Dover Publications, INC., 1971), 219. Discusses a story where upon a man was distressed over his wife's *ka* visiting him three years after her death. To reconcile the situation he visits her grave and ties a papyrus with his complaints to a figure of his wife so that she will read it and leave him alone. Although Budge's translation is outdated, the basic premise of the story is an example of *heka* in everyday life.
3. Derek Collins, "Nature, Cause, and Agency in Greek Magic." *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 133 (Spring 2003): 18. "Part of the reason magic has yet to be dissolved as a concept-in the same way that the concepts of kinship and gift-exchange, for example, have been dissolved by anthropologists-and reformulated in terms of social, institutional, symbolic, or other categories, is that there is a fundamental conceptual division between scholars who see the basis of magic as objective and material and those who see it as subjective and psychological; there is no unified concept to dissolve." Collins does not specifically focus on Greek magic, but magic as a whole in this context. Magic as a label is wholly unsuited to the study of *heka*.
4. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 12.
5. Jacco Dieleman, *Priests, Tongues, and Rites* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2005), 7-10. This largely describes the first writers to introduce *heka* to a western audience, such as Manetho and Chaeremon. Both were Egyptian priests, but intentionally catering to the Greco-Roman audience and are part of the Greco-Roman narrative of *heka*.

conquered land, which affected national identity for Egyptians and placed the Greeks and Romans in a position where the narrative of Egypt stemmed from Greco-Roman thought.<sup>6</sup> While Said's *Orientalism* applies primarily to post-colonialism the concept remains similar. Translations of the papyri began in the early nineteenth century after Napoleon's invasion of Egypt and the discovery of the Rosetta stone. The translators themselves carried the biases of the time towards the East that culminated in Social Darwinistic thought in the late nineteenth century. Western writers created a distinction between Egypt and the West by a written discourse on *heka*. Conversely, Daniel Martin Varisco argues *Orientalism* detracts from true scholarship,<sup>7</sup> but one cannot ignore the bias of the Greco-Roman texts nor from those following the same Oriental ideology.

### *The Western view of heka*

The pejorative view of Greek and Roman writers on *heka* influenced Egyptian culture through the emergence of religious and scientific structures that followed after Alexander's conquest of Egypt in the fourth century BCE and continued until the Muslim conquest of Egypt in the seventh century

CE. In terms of historical study, the assessment of what modern historians term as magic equates to the beliefs and practices not associated with either western empirical thought or hierarchal

***“What modern historians term as magic equates to the beliefs and practices not associated with either western empirical thought or hierarchical religious institutions.”***

religious institutions.<sup>8</sup> Essentially, *heka* was such a significant part of Egyptian culture that in order for the Greeks and Romans to rule Egypt it was necessary to Orientalize *heka* in order to supplant it with Greco-Roman views of philosophy and medicine and further divide *heka* between the temporal and spiritual world. This is not to say the process of dismantling *heka* was conducted on a conscious systematic scale – it was the result of individual Greek, Roman, and Egyptian writers, from whom modern historians are directly influenced.

The term *heka* evolved linguistically as the western world began to interpret and understand how *heka* operated in Egyptian culture. In Coptic, *heka* became *hik* which became the Greek word *magia* and Latin *magica*, eventually translating to magic, which has a negative connotation as fraudulent.<sup>9</sup> In *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice*, Ritner provides a discourse on “Religion, Magic and *Heka*” substantiating the negative connotations to the word magic and *heka*.<sup>10</sup> His work does not claim

6. Said, *Orientalism*, 204.

7. Daniel Martin Varisco, *Reading Orientalism: said and the unsaid* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007), 304.

8. Marvin W. Meyer and Richard Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic: Coptic Texts of Ritual Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 13.

9. Ritner, *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice*, 9.

10. Ritner, *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice*, 236-249.

the Orientalizing of *heka*, but the evidence provided by Ritner clearly illustrates western bias and that magic is a term not wholly applicable to Egyptian culture.<sup>11</sup> Primarily the argument is based on religion

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and magic, but it is necessary to incorporate science, not mentioned by Ritner, since *heka* consisted of all three. Empirical thought or methods of trial and error are undocumented simply because the evidence

is dispersed throughout Egyptian history; however, it is naïve to assume Egyptian priests did not rely on some form of testing especially in healing. Therefore, magic as a label cannot be applied to Egyptian culture since western perception defines magic. In order to study and understand Egyptian science, magic, and religion, the term *heka* is a fitting label for this framework of study since it is the culmination of all three.

### ***The Egyptian view of heka***

As religion and science became institutionalized, *heka*'s became increasingly distant from Egyptian culture. The Egyptian priests lost power under Greco-Roman rule and the definition of *heka* became associated with antiquated rituals and rites considered ineffectual. Depending on the source, the Egyptian priest was viewed in either a positive or negative context.<sup>12</sup> For example, Imhotep was a priest, sage, scribe, astronomer, and architect but was primarily viewed by Egyptians positively as a magician-physician. He represented the positive view of *heka* through his knowledge of medicine by saving the life of Pharaoh Khasekhem's wife during childbirth, and while there was invariably a certain mythos surrounding Imhotep, he clearly used his knowledge of medicine in conjunction with *heka* to impress himself upon the Pharaoh.<sup>13</sup> Accordingly, he was estimated to be the author of the Edwin Smith, Berlin Medical, and much of the Ebers Papyri, and after his death was deified as the Egyptian god of medicine.<sup>14</sup> Egyptian sources tended to be positive towards *heka* and underscored its importance in Egyptian society. Conversely, non-Egyptian sources (such as Hippocrates and Pliny) were widely dispersed in the ancient world and utilized in empirical, or theological, teaching and were generally not positive.

### ***Greek influence on heka***

In Brian Copenhaver's recent translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum* he quotes Garth Fowden's view of the *Hermetica*, stating, “The technical and philosophical books are...related aspects of...a

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11. Ritner, *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice*, 236. Of specific mention is footnote 1092 in which Ritner quotes H.I. Bell's view, “But magic is after all no more than the disreputable basement in the house of religion.”
  12. Dieleman, *Priests, Tongues, and Rites*, 239.
  13. Jamieson Boyd Hurry, *Imhotep* (London: Oxford University Press, 1928), 77.
  14. Oriana Yu and Sze Ling Wong, “Secrets of Medicine in Ancient Egypt.” *The Proceedings of the 13<sup>th</sup> Annual History of Medicine Days* (Calgary: Faculty of Medicine at the University of Calgary, 2004), 14.

practical spiritual ‘way,’”<sup>15</sup> which is a summation of Greek philosophical methodology to rationalizing *heka*. The *Hermetica* is not purely a discourse on *heka* but rather an inquiry into the nature of the cosmos. The emergence of hermetical thought in Hellenistic Egypt was influenced by the multi-cultural

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nature of this society, which the *Hermetica* is a product of. In the seventeen Greek treatises of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, evidence exists to substantiate how Greeks in Egypt attempted to understand *heka*.<sup>16</sup> This evidence does not

specifically mention *heka*; however, the text is syncretistic including philosophy derived from Egyptian cultural influences. For example, in the *Corpus Hermeticum XIII*, the “Secret Sermon on the Mountain,” a sunset worship was performed to the south instead of the west, which Egyptians viewed as the direction of death.<sup>17</sup> Exposure to Egyptian culture elicited questions by the Greeks on the nature of the cosmos, which culminated in the sixth tractate of the sixth *Nag Hammadi Codex*, the “Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth.”<sup>18</sup> The combination of magic, religion, and philosophy discussed in “Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth” was part of the very nature of *heka*, which Greeks attempted to understand and subsequently on which they formed their own conclusions.

The Greek perception towards *heka* developed negatively in the sense that emerging scientific thought, particularly in the field of medicine, viewed *heka* as ineffectual and fraudulent. A strong bias against *heka* can be found in the *Corpus Hippocraticum* and specifically in the discourse of Hippocrates, *On the Sacred Disease*, written between the late fifth or early fourth century BCE.<sup>19</sup> It is not known whether Hippocrates himself wrote it or one of his students; regardless, it is an early example of the attitude western physicians felt towards utilizing *heka* in healing the sick even before Alexander’s conquest of Egypt. This is significant as it shows that Egyptian medicinal practices and treatments influenced Greek physicians whose opinions were largely negative within Greek institutionalized education. The Egyptians viewed epilepsy as sacred due to the uncontrollable nature of epileptic episodes although the Egyptian treatment that Hippocrates commented on was lost. Hippocrates stated:

[Egyptian healers]...pretend to be very reverent of the gods and to have superior knowledge. They hide behind the idea of the divine and disguise the fact they have nothing with which to fight the disease and bring relief. To make sure that their ignorance does not become evident, they spread the belief that this disease is “sacred”.<sup>20</sup>

15. Brian P. Copenhaver, *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a new English translation, with notes and introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), xxxvi.

16. Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, xxxii.

17. Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, 49.

18. Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, xxxix.

19. Georg Luck, *Arcana Mundi* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 98.

20. Luck, *Arcana Mundi*, 98.

The problem with this view was the generalization of all Egyptian healers as intentionally deceiving their patients. This is not to say that deception did not exist on the part of Egyptian healers. Corruption within the Egyptian healers tended to exist in the upper classes of society rather than the lower classes where healers tended to people in exchange for

bartered goods.<sup>21</sup> Egyptian healers used *heka* exclusively because of the belief that the initial cause of epilepsy was supernatural in nature.<sup>22</sup>

The use of magic was a common method of treatment as discussed in the Ebers, Hearst,

Berlin, Brooklyn snake, Chester Beatty, Edwin Smith, and Kahun papyri.<sup>23</sup> Numerous examples of diseases and treatments are discussed within these papyri – some purely magical, some natural (as is the case with the Edwin Smith papyrus), but most reflect a combination of the two since they incorporated *heka*. Epilepsy to the Egyptians ran in tandem to the belief that evil spirits were pervading the body contrary to a more scientific explanation by modern western medicine. Modern medicine refutes the efficacy of magic and religion, but cannot discount a placebo effect that plays a role in the healing process.<sup>24</sup> To state that Egyptian healers categorized a disease as sacred because they did not know how to cure it is a broad generalization and disregards Egyptian methodology. This speaks to a level of deceit that, at least within the Egyptian concept of *maat*<sup>25</sup>(as outlined in the negative confessions of the Papyrus of Ani), was not, in theory, acceptable within society.<sup>26</sup> It is unclear how widespread or applicable this code of ethics was in Egyptian society, but it does speak to, at the minimum, the existence

**“Egyptians viewed Greeks and Romans with equal disdain.”**

of concepts between right and wrong. In *Setne and Sa-Osiris* the battle between a Nubian and Egyptian demonstrated the morality of magic to be tied with “good” and the nature of *heka* to be in standing with an incorporation of faith and belief, which produced positive effects for Egyptians, whether through the

use of healing or battling a foreign magician.<sup>27</sup> Thus, the writings of Hippocrates on epilepsy spoke to a larger negative feeling of Greek physicians towards Egyptian medicine to substantiate their own

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21. Worth J Estes, *The Medical Skills of Ancient Egypt* (Canton: Watson Publishing International, 1989), 136.
  22. Oriana Yu and Sze Ling Wong, “Secrets of Medicine in Ancient Egypt.”, 10.
  23. John F. Nunn, *Ancient Egyptian Medicine* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996), 25.
  24. J.A. Turner, R.A. Deyo, J.D. Loeser, M. Von Korff, W.E. Fordyce, *The Importance of placebo effects in pain treatment and research* (Seattle: The Journal of the American Medical Association, 1994), 1609.
  25. Nicholas Lazaridis. (2008). Ethics. UC Los Angeles: UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology. Retrieved from: <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/4q20j8mw>
  26. E.A. Wallis Budge, *The Papyrus of Ani: Egyptian Book of the Dead*, 2003), Negative Confession.
  27. Dieleman, *Priests, Tongues, and Rites*, 237. “The magical tricks and the glorious past should therefore not be dismissed as mere folklore motives, but be regarded as the stake of a serious priestly effort to define Egypt’s uniqueness and supremacy. For the author and his audience magic was not a silly and improper category, but a means to compel admiration and respect: magic as national pride”

explorations in healing as more effective. This is not to say that the negative attitude against Egyptians and *heka* was one-sided. Egyptians viewed the Greeks and Romans with equal disdain.<sup>28</sup> The Egyptian priests themselves were not blameless; their attempts to cover their knowledge in code helped engender such a negative reaction from the Greco-Roman world.<sup>29</sup>

### *Roman influence on heka*

The Roman view on *heka* can largely be obtained from Pliny the Elder's *Natural History* written in the first century CE, in which he attempted to cover all of ancient knowledge in an encyclopedic work that is of significant historical value, but it is also an example of the negative Roman attitude

towards *heka*. *Natural History* is a large body of work specifically written to educate and inform a wide audience and contains negative connotations to *heka*. Pliny's core beliefs on the nature of the separate existence of body and soul<sup>30</sup> were a detriment to

understanding *heka*. The most telling aspect of his work was his comments on magic as an institution segmented from society and instituted by a singular authority rather than an integral cultural part of Egyptian society.<sup>31</sup> He even goes so far as to remark that Egyptian magic was abominable and included the drinking of human blood and ceremonies with corpses.<sup>32</sup> No doubt this is based upon a misinterpretation of Egyptian cultural practices that established the narrative from which subsequent historians followed.

***“Bias is ultimately a product of the availability and circulation of sources.”***

### *Sources and bias*

Bias is ultimately a product of the availability and circulation of sources. The historical record has been dominated by Greco-Roman writers simply because of the quantity of material produced by them. Neo-Pythagorean and Neo-Platonic philosophers commented on magical books influenced by *heka*, but all that remains are the quotations dismissing magic as ridiculous.<sup>33</sup> Comparatively, Egyptian sources are limited with variable interpretations and a Pre-Ptolemaic narrative that covered a large

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28. Dieleman, *Priests, Tongues, and Rites*, 3.

29. Dieleman, *Priests, Tongues, and Rites*, 185-203.

30. Lynn Thorndike, *History and magic and Experimental Science Part 1* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1923), 47.

31. Thorndike, *History and magic and Experimental Science Part 1*, 59.

32. Thorndike, *History and magic and Experimental Science Part 1*, 61.

33. Hans Dieter Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), xlii.

stretch of time with fragmentary evidence on *heka*.<sup>34</sup> An article dealing with magic and the assassination of Ramesses III was published in 1963 reinterpreting the original translation to conclude that magic was not used.<sup>35</sup> If magic was not used during Ramesses III's assassination this suggests a bias towards *heka* by the original translator assuming magic was used exclusively when it is but a part of Egyptian society, not the entirety of it.

There is a definitive bias towards *heka* by western scholars such as Hans Dieter Betz's view recorded in the Preface of *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation*:

Why is magic so irrepressible and ineradicable, if it is also true that its claims and promises never come true? Or *do* they? Do people never check up on the efficiency of magicians? The answer appears to be that, in general, people are not interested in whether or not magicians' promises come true. People want to believe, so they simply ignore their suspicions that magic may all be deception and fraud.<sup>36</sup>

The same argument can be made for religion in general, essentially challenging faith and belief. There is no way to validate claims by religion. Underpinning his argument is the theory of cognitive dissonance based upon Leon Festinger's *When Prophecy Fails*.<sup>37</sup> Cognitive dissonance is best epitomized by Aesop's sixth century fable of *The Fox and the Grapes* wherein a fox wants to eat grapes hanging out of reach on a tree, unable to reach the grapes the fox surmises the grapes are not worth eating.<sup>38</sup> If Festinger's theory pervades western scholarly outlook regarding the translation of papyri and the bias towards general notions of Egyptian charlatanry, then is the accuracy of translation affected due to the bias of the translator? Are alternate translations available that can view papyri with societal and cultural pragmatism rather than placing historical records in context with *heka*? The answer seems to lean towards misperception of *heka* based upon its association with the western definition of magic.

Amulets and the way in which they progressed from their association with *heka* to their use by the Coptic Church are prime examples of the evolution and borrowing from *heka*, which spoke to Egyptian culture and the fragmentation involved. Prior to Alexander's conquest of Egypt, Egyptians utilized amulets inscribed with words of power or *hekau* which were the written embodiment of *heka* upon a material object.<sup>39</sup> Scarab amulets were extensively worn and found in great numbers at a variety

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34. John F. Nunn, *Ancient Egyptian Medicine* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996), 6.

35. Hans Goedicke, "Was Magic Used in the Harem Conspiracy against Ramesses III?" *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 49 (December 1963): 90.

36. Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation*, xlvi.

37. Leon Festinger, *When Prophecy Fails* (Twin Cities: University of Minnesota Press, 1956)

38. Aesop, *Aesop's Fables* (Philadelphia: Courage Books, 1999), 10.

39. Budge, *Egyptian Magic*, 27. Budge's translations are outdated, but the description and function of amulets still pertains.

of archaeological sites.<sup>40</sup> These amulets were used as a form of protection and healing by Egyptians incorporating the *hekau* written on the base of the amulets as a symbol of *heka*. Of particular interest is the recounting of a tale about Alexander the Great during the construction of Alexandria by an Arab historian.<sup>41</sup> Sea monsters were attacking workers in the city from the sea and in order to deal with the situation, Alexander constructed a glass box by which he and two draughtsmen went into the sea to view the monsters. Upon viewing the monsters, he returned to the surface and placed talismans inscribed with *hekau* and pictures of the monsters upon pillars surrounding the city in order to protect it. If the recounting of this tale is assumed to be somewhat accurate, it speaks largely of the initial use of *heka* by Alexander where upon he borrowed a specific element from *heka* in the form of talismans in order to protect workers constructing Alexandria. While not malicious in nature, the inclination of Alexander was probably rooted in appeasing the Egyptian workers' concern over monsters from the sea, rather than a genuine understanding or belief in *heka*. The Coptic Church would later use amulets replacing *hekau* with biblical references as is the case with *Oxyrhynchus 1077* utilizing Matthew 4:23-24 (written to form a cross with the words).<sup>42</sup>

***“Whatever did not fit into canon law was labeled as ‘magic.’”***

### ***Later Christian influence on heka***

The emergence of Christianity in Egypt in the first century C.E. with Saint Mark<sup>43</sup> and later in the form of the Coptic Church during the fifth century C.E. with the Council of Chalcedon in 451 C.E. separated *heka* from Egyptian culture, labeling whatever did not fit into the canon law as ‘magic.’<sup>44</sup> The influence was decidedly unilateral, with the Coptic Church borrowing exclusively from *heka* to establish ritual and dogmatic belief. The dual nature relationship between *heka* and the *miaphysitism* of the Coptic Church incorporated both the spiritual and material world when addressing core belief. The Coptic Church believes that Jesus is divine and human while *heka* combines both spiritual and materialism.<sup>45</sup> This duality carried over from *heka* probably to maintain some form of continuity of belief in order to convert Egyptians more readily into a monotheistic faith. Christianity in Egypt was largely the continuation of this belief in duality suggesting fundamental cultural beliefs rooted in Pre-Dynastic Egypt. The church also translated *hekau* to biblical names in order to enact the same

40. Budge, *Egyptian Magic*, 41.

41. Budge, *Egyptian Magic*, 155-6.

42. Marvin W. Meyer and Richard Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic: Coptic Texts of Ritual Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 33.

43. Stephen J. Davis, *The Early Coptic Papacy* (New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2004), 6.

44. Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, 13.

45. Thorndike, *History and magic and Experimental Science Part 1*, 9-14; Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic: Coptic Texts of Ritual Power*, 2-4.

function,<sup>46</sup> but what was once *heka* became adopted by the Coptic Church.

### **Conclusion**

Is *heka* a lens with which one may be able to view Egyptian culture despite modern definitions of Egyptian magic? The answer is undoubtedly yes. Approaching *heka* as its own select scholarly pursuit informs historians about cultural aspects of Egyptian society prior to the *Orientalism of heka*. Greco-Roman influences deconstructed *heka* from a unified part of Egyptian culture to the three separate structures of magic, religion, and science. The fragmentation of an integral part of Egyptian culture led to a social consciousness absent of the important role *heka* played in defining Egypt as a society.

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46. Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic*, 56-7.