

MAGICAL LEFTOVERS FROM A DEMOLISHED HOUSE OF THE THEBAN NECROPOLIS

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1. Human settlement at the necropolis¹

The area of the Theban necropolis on the West bank of the Nile opposite Luxor was occupied by a peculiar settlement for hundreds of years. The beginnings of the vernacular settlement are obscure, but it seems certain that the tombs of the necropolis served as refuges for people from ancient times. Permanent settlements in the area evolved before the rise of Islam, when Coptic communities established colonies in the foothills, but these were later dispersed and deserted.² In the course of time, the necropolis became populated again, and according to the first reports regarding its inhabitants, it was occupied by a somehow fierce, unruly people.³ On the other hand, apparently also the villagers of the nearby hamlet called Qurna extended their living spaces to the tombs of the necropolis at certain periods. According to descriptions from the beginning of the nineteenth century, Qurna was a poor, rudimental village built in the immediate vicinity of the temple of Pharaoh Seti I in the plain at the foot of the Theban mountains. Its folk frequently took refuge in the tombs of the necropolis from vicissitudes caused either by natural or political factors, like the inundation of the Nile or the invasion of troops, respectively. For the beginning of the nineteenth century, human settlement in the necropolis had become permanent, and the tombs were used as dwelling spaces. Later mud constructions were added, serving mostly as storage spaces with other domestic functions as well. The inhabitants of the necropolis were aware of the valuable ancient finds in the tombs, which they exploited in fact as a source of income, and they were much associated with the activity of treasure-hunting. European treasure-hunters, or early excavators usually characterized them as hostile people, ascribing their attitude to the fact that they considered the Europeans as rivals with respect to the exploration

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² See Van der Spek 2011:58–60.

³ *Ibid.*, 65, 71, 81.

of the tombs.⁴ In the long run, European excavators gained the upper hand, and the locals were employed as excavation workers or even as guards of the concession areas. In the meantime, the simple tomb-dwellings developed into mudbrick houses at first with one, and later with usually two storeys. The settlement structure of the village was unique, since the hamlets were organized around the tombs, each family occupying a quite extended space, without having necessarily another house in its immediate vicinity. The village never had a water-system; water was carried in barrels to the houses, while electricity was introduced at a certain point. The livelihood of the inhabitants was intimately connected to the archaeological aspect of the area: they worked at the excavations, they produced and sold artefacts for the tourists, and were also engaged in the trade of antiquities. The burial chambers with mummies and precious grave-goods served as a source of income and were considered as a natural source belonging to the occupants of the tombs and to the owners of the houses built in front of or around them. Naturally, the Antiquities Authorities tried to control the locals' access to the monuments by closing certain parts of the tombs and displacing the dwellers. However, a part of the tombs remained in the use of the families, and others were inaccessible due to the houses and courtyards built over them. On the other hand, the villagers pursued agricultural activities as well, primarily connected to stock raising. The domestic animals lived together with the people, in the imminent vicinity of the tombs or even inside these. The functions of the domestic spaces in the houses, and in the tombs that these included, changed periodically according to the succession of the seasons and meteorological conditions: rooms occupied by people may have been turned into lodgings for animals and vice versa; or both species would share the same place in case of necessity. Both the consequences of stock-breeding and conscious human activity aimed at the removal (and sale) of antiquities evidently jeopardized the future of the settlement built on the archaeological site. Several plans were conceived to remove the population of the necropolis and to relocate them in settlements built especially for that purpose (New Qurna), and after various partly successful attempts of resettlement the village was practically destroyed and bulldozed at the beginning of the 21st century.

When the houses of the village that once had stood in the area of the Theban necropolis had been finally demolished, their debris, including the personal belongings of the inhabitants, filled the concession areas of the archaeological excavations which were carried out in the area. From the excavators' point of view, the removal of the village was a joyful event long hoped for, and the remnants of the houses were promptly cleared away – without documenting them first. Vestiges of the modern life that flourished in the necropolis had no value in the eye of archaeologists and Egyptologists specialized in the history of Antiquity. Recently, a

⁴ *Ibid.*, 74, referring to Frederick Norden's report on his visit to the Theban west bank in 1737.

certain change can be observed in the approach of the researchers who study the necropolis: an increasing number of them regard the modern settlement that evolved in the ancient funerary site as the latest phase of the site's history worth documentation and research.

2. Sufi attachment and popular beliefs among the inhabitants of the necropolis

The tomb-dwellers of Qurna had been accused of religious laxity for long. According to the recurring accusations of early European travelers and excavators who visited the area, they had no mosque, they did not pray and did not show the signs of religious devoutness.⁵ Certainly these allegations would not apply either to the present conditions of the villagers of (New) Qurna, or to the people who lived in the necropolis in the 20th century. It is enough to mention in this respect that the current grand imam of al-Azhar, Aḥmad Muḥammad aṭ-Ṭayyib was born in Qurna (in 1946), and his attachment to the village, just as the attachment of the villagers to him, is very strong. He is a hereditary Sufi sheikh of the Ṭarīqa Ḥalwatiyya, and upkeeps in New Qurna a complex with several communal functions (*sāḥat aṣ-ṣayḥ Ṭayyib*), which he visits regularly. In these occasions, the villagers flock to the place to meet him and receive his *baraka*, to partake of a collective meal, to participate in a Sufi *ḍikr*,⁶ and furthermore, to arrange all kinds of private and public issues, like marriage, asking for legal opinion, or for cure (*mu'ālaḡa*) from a local sheikh expert in writing protective amulets.⁷

The villagers' long-established attachment both to Sufism and to popular religiosity including magical practices is also evidenced by the modern finds unearthed during the excavation of their demolished dwelling places. Among the personal documents, photographs and similar material found in the debris of the houses, invitation cards to *ḍikr* ceremonies and objects of magical bearings frequently turn up. The local excavation workers – the former inhabitants of the area – are ready to provide information about the significance and the use of such vestiges. However, since strict orthodox views started to gain ground in the last decades, especially the young tend to ignore the role of magical acts or popular customs that have such connections. The elder, however, promptly explain the use and importance of objects related to popular beliefs. Despite the overt refusal, or apparent indifference of the younger generation towards such objects, their candid belief in the effect of amulets and spells becomes obvious in case they are anxious about the suspected harmful power of a magical device. Such a case was reported

⁵ Cf. Van der Spek 2011:115–118.

⁶ *Ḍikrs* representing divergent spiritual traditions (and following different norms) are performed regularly at various religious institutions and private houses in Qurna.

⁷ I have visited the place on 31 January 2020, Friday afternoon, when the grand imam of al-Azhar was present, and I had the opportunity both to meet him personally and to observe the functioning of this institution from inside.

for example by Andrew Bednarski, the archaeological field director of the Qurna Site Improvement Project of the ARCE (American Research Center in Egypt). When clearing the debris and recording the remains of the demolished hamlets in the Šayḥ ‘Abd al-Qurna and Ḥōḥa areas, they found a magic spell destined to render a man impotent. The spell included several primitive representations of phalli, and also a scorpion, which presumably increased its dreadful effect among the workers, who not only insisted on neutralizing it by a magical procedure performed by a local sheikh, but requested to destroy it physically, as well. After the documentation of the find, their demand had to be granted.⁸

The local excavation workers of the Hungarian excavation missions working in the Theban necropolis are ready to share their knowledge on popular beliefs and customs related to magic. Their attachment to these ancient practices became manifest to me, when a few years ago, after my inquiries about amulets, several, especially elder workers promptly took out simple-looking amulets (*ḥiḡāb*) from their pockets or purses (but none of them showed an amulet worn around the neck). Of course, these could not be opened, and their content could not be studied. However, they all showed similar peculiarities: they were written on cheap, ordinary paper folded up several times, usually had a symbol (e. g. pentagram) drawn on the outer surface, and they were never kept in a case. Either the method of folding, or an adhesive tape prevented them from unfolding. At the time, I failed to ask them whether these amulets were permanent protective devices or “disposable” objects written especially for a certain occasion with a determined purpose. Now I tend to believe that the latter was the case, since a permanent amulet would be guarded with more caution, and since the temporary use of amulets effective only for a fixed period or on a sole occasion was, and still is widespread. The workers named several sheikhs who wrote amulets, and two of these I had the opportunity to visit personally. One of them lives in Armant (some 10–15 km southwest of Qurna) where he runs a kind of consulting room that combines the functions of a medical centre, a psychologist’s office, a group therapist, and a magical supplier. The other could be consulted in New Qurna, at the above-mentioned complex operated by the sheikh Ṭayyib, where in one of the lateral buildings a sheikh sat behind a table surrounded by dozens of locals jostling around it. The sheikh offered traditional healing based on the Quran and Prophetic tradition in the form of amulets, spells or naturopathic medicine. Most of the magical practices the workers talked about occasionally or answering my questions are related to fertility, like the *baraka* of the ancient monuments and especially tombs; whether of Muslim saints or of ancient Egyptian rulers and high officials.⁹ Direct contact with a mummy (stepping over it seven times) is regarded

⁸ Bednarski 2017:133–134.

⁹ As it is well-known, marks of scratching on the walls and columns of ancient monuments, even statues evidence the custom of using the powder scraped from these for fertility practices. The excavation workers did not mention this custom, although apparently it still exists.

especially effective, but it is ever more difficult to carry out. Some practices include fear-inducing elements, like giving a fright to a woman descending to the obscure Nilometer at the nearby mortuary temple of Ramses III (Maḏīnat Hābū). The small shrine of the local saint ʿAbd al-Qurna is customarily visited by women (accompanied by children) before the wedding feast and may be resorted to subsequently in case of delayed conception. Rituals include rolling themselves seven times in the dust at the shrine.¹⁰

3. Modern finds of magical relevance in the concession of the Hungarian Mission working around Theban Tomb 184

3.1. Miscellaneous objects

The workmen also willingly explained magical connotations of objects found during the excavations carried out in the concession of the Hungarian Mission working around Theban Tomb 184. Here a modern house used to stand, the greater part of which was demolished in 2009, while a smaller part is still standing abandoned. The house has a relatively long history: it developed from two tombs (TT 184 and TT 185), in front of the façades of which first mudbrick constructions were erected, then enclosures were built, resulting finally in a house comprising both tombs. The dimensions of the house by the time of the First World War were similar to those at the time of its demolition, although the second storey added to some parts of the house was a later development, no signs of which can be observed in a photograph of the house published in 1913, in the *Topographical Catalogue of the Private Tombs of Thebes*.¹¹ In the second half of the 20th century, the house was in the property of the Boḡdādī family, whose private documents including photographs, letters, and other documents were unearthed during the excavations. The family was not unknown to the Hungarian excavation teams working in the area since 1983 in intimate proximity with its members.¹² Although several generations used to inhabit the house, it became depopulated gradually, and by the end of the 20th century only an elderly couple lived there, who did not have any children. The last owner, Hāḡḡ ʿAdlī Maḡmūd (who worked as the head of workmen under professor László Kákósy for over a decade and half) died around the year 2000, and her widow, Sakīna in 2007. Some objects found among the debris of their house do not have self-evident magical connotations at first glance, but remarks made by the local workmen proved

¹⁰ These beliefs and practices are described in Van der Spek 2011:300–306, although he connects the ritual of rolling in the dust to another nearby area, while the workers expressly related it to nothing else but the ʿAbd al-Qurna shrine. Most probably the ritual is performed at both places.

¹¹ Gardiner and Weigall 1913, plate VIII.

¹² A Hungarian excavation team headed by Prof. László Kákósy started to work in the area in 1983, excavating TT 32 (Djehutimes). The excavation of TT 184 (Nefermenu) began in 1995 with the direction of Zoltán Imre Fábián.

otherwise. For example, they attributed magical functions to any representations of children (either rag-dolls or doll-shaped small containers of kohl);¹³ to a certain type of thick-toothed comb (*fallāya*);¹⁴ to mixtures of incense against the “evil eye”, or a mixture of herbs against snakes.¹⁵ The components of one of the bags of incense were identified by a worker as “*‘ayn al-ḡamal*” (small seeds having black and red colour, but not “walnut”, which is the usual meaning of the word), coriander, a kind of salt called *šabba*,¹⁶ *ḥabbat al-baraka* (nigella sativa) and an aromatic wood. The mixture should be burnt twice a day: just before sunrise and just before sunset, and no special spell or text is recited over it except for the *basmalah*. The mixture against snakes primarily contained *šīḥ* (white wormwood, artemisia herba-alta), and was found inserted into a deep crack on the wall of the first chamber of TT 185 (tomb of Seni, Old Kingdom / First Intermediate Period), between a huge mud granary and a nest for pigeons. It was wrapped into a piece of paper, a page torn out from an elementary school textbook. According to the workmen’s explication, it is usually inserted in the wall, or hung above what (or whom) one wishes to protect, may that be household animals or children. Wormwood as a herbal medicine is used as an antiseptic, and since its leaves are very aromatic, it may be considered as having a repellent effect. Eggshell fragments on the wall next to the entrance of the same tomb were explained to have either protective function, or to ensure fertility. A pentagram painted next to the door leading from the tomb of Seni (TT 185) to the tomb of Nefermenu (TT 184) likewise had a protective function.

3.2. Amulets

A relatively great number of modern amulets were also found during the excavations. The simplest form of amulet is a piece of paper on which some verses of the Quran are written, folded up and frequently laid flat in a case, usually of leather. Normally a cord is attached to the case to hang it on the body. Since the whole Quran is regarded as a powerful amulet, miniature printed copies of it are widely available, which may be disjointed into smaller portions containing the special verses the protection of which are sought for. One such small, printed page (25 x 35 mm), containing Quran 16:1 (*sūrat an-naḥl*, “The Bee”) was found in the debris of the house (M2016.413). The magical effect of the Quran may be increased by disjointing

¹³ M2016.461–462 (rag dolls), and M2017.573–575 (dolls with small kohl-containers in their insides). According to Van der Spek, ‘*arūsa*’ bridal dolls served as a typical decorative design on mud storage bins constructed by the bride at the beginning of her married life (Van der Spek 2011:167–168).

¹⁴ M2017.576. Such combs can also be seen in the Ethnographical Museum of Cairo among protective magical devices.

¹⁵ M2016.496 and M2017.529.

¹⁶ According to the Dictionary of Egyptian Arabic, *šabba* (alum) has magical uses: it is burnt “for the purpose of divining (from the shape into which it cools) the identity of one with the evil eye.” Cf. Hinds-Badawi 1986, sub voce “*Šabba*” (p. 449).

the letters of the text, eliminating the diacritical signs, adding sequences of numbers, letters, or magical symbols.

Another amulet (M2000.185, **figs. 1–3.**) exemplifies this type. It is written with black ink, on oriental paper, which was folded vertically three times and horizontally ten times and kept in a double case. The outer is a dark brown leather case, sewn with the same leather from every side, with a leather loop serving to hang up the amulet. The inner is a textile case made of a piece of cloth folded several times. Dimensions of the amulet inserted in both cases: height: 430 mm, width: 340 mm, thickness: 110 mm. Dimensions of the paper: 195 x 50 mm. The recto begins with 9 x 10 lines of disjoint letters *šād*, resulting in 90 letters (which equals the numerical value of the letter). The continuation is Quran 59:21–24 (*sūrat al-ḥašr*, “The Gathering”), which contains several of God’s beautiful names (*Raḥmān*, *Raḥīm*, ‘*Ālim al-ḡayb*, *Malik*, *Quddūs*, *Mu’min*, *Muḥaymin*, ‘*Azīz*, ‘*Ġabbār*, *Mutakabbir*, *Subḥān*, *Ḥālīq*, *Bāri*’, *Muṣawwir*, *Ḥakīm*). The person carrying the text evokes all the names, i.e., all divine aspects enumerated in the verses, which endows the amulet with especially strong magical power; its function is not limited to operating through one divine aspect represented by a sole name. The letters are connected, written without diacritical marks, apparently by an untrained hand, with some minor orthographical errors. The verso of the amulet contains only four lines: one and a

half are the conclusion of the Quranic text written on the recto, the rest are disconnected letters, some of them not distinguishable. Several letters *hā’*, one letter *šād*, and a simple geometrical figure, no doubt a magical symbol concludes the text. The 90 repetitions of the letter *šād* on the recto serve to multiply the inherent powers of the letter. According to letter mysticism, the nature (*ṭabī’a*) of the letter *šād* is “female” and corresponds to “earth” from among the four elements.¹⁷ “Earth” letters are connected to patience (*ṣabr*), logical capacity (*quwwa manṭiqiyya*), alertness (*yaqza*), etc.¹⁸



Figures 1–2.

¹⁷ aṭ-Ṭūḥī, *al-Bidāya wa-n-nihāya*, 12.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 13.



Figure 3.

The popular mystical-magical handbook of Aḥmad al-Būnī (d. 1225), the *Šams al-ma'ārif* enlists several uses of the letter: He who writes it down 14 times on Friday and takes it with himself, would be successful in fishing or hunting (*ṣayd*). Another, more complicated recipe also ascribes to the letter power related to fishing; according to that recipe one should create a numerical square, write it on a lead tablet, draw a fish on the other side of the tablet (with 14 letters *ṣād* around it), and hang it on the bank of the river. It will attract fish in such a manner that one would be able to collect them with his bare hands, without using even a net. According to another recipe, one should write it in a square 95 times, which corresponds to the numerical value of the name of the letter: *ṣād* (90) + *alif* (1) + *dāl* (4). Then a circle should be drawn around the number, and 14 further letters *ṣād* should be written around it. He who carries this amulet (*ṭilsam*) with himself, would be protected from the thieves (*luṣūṣ*), and in general it would defend him from the malice of men and jinn.¹⁹ Apparently, these somewhat naïve and unsophisticated practices are connected to the emphatic sound of the letter (*ṣ*) and the same characteristic phonetical feature of the words *ṣayd* and *luṣūṣ*. However, the *Šams al-ma'ārif* reports other specialties of the letter as well, which have mystical connotations. *Ṣād* is one of the letters that occur at the beginning of some chapters of the Quran: it is one of the so-called mysterious letters of the Quran. The number of these letters happen to be 14, that is, half of the letters of the Arabic alphabet, which is consequently divided into two groups: luminous (*ḥurūf an-nūr*) and obscure letters (*ḥurūf az-zulma*).²⁰ The mysterious letters of the Quran are luminous letters, and the unintelligible sequences in which they occur in the Quran are widely considered as mystical divine names, or are regarded as abbreviations that stand for the corresponding attributes of God. Thus, *ṣād* corresponds to *Ṣādiq*.²¹ Each name has its own specialties that may vary in the different magical manuals. For example, according to the *Šams al-ma'ārif*, the name

¹⁹ al-Būnī, *Šams al-ma'ārif*, 398.

²⁰ Ibid., 265.

²¹ Ibid., 265, 267.

ṣādiq relates to knowledge, whether exoteric or esoteric. It has an effect both on memorizing, learning science (*‘ilm*), and both on gaining intuitive, mystical knowledge (*ma‘rifa*). It facilitates intimate conversation with God (*munāḡḡāt*) and the purification of the ascetics’ hearts (*taṭhīr qulūb az-zuhhād*).²² However, the letter *ṣād* also represents the divine name *malik* (“king”), for it corresponds to its numerical value ($M+L+K = 40+30+20 = 90$). This name is connected to the idea of dominating sensual desires and suppressing all kinds of temptations.²³

Although I did not come across an exactly matching description of the amulet found at the excavation either in medieval or modern magical manuals, the text’s underlying rationale is quite clear. It combines the power of the Quranic passages, the divine names these passages contain, the specialties of the letter *ṣād*, including the divine names it represents, and some other disconnected letters written on the amulet (among them, five letter *hā’*-s written in one line, corresponding to the numerical value of that letter).²⁴ The effect of all these is enforced by repetitions of the letter (written in a 9x10 quadrate form), and magical symbols. As it is evidenced by the recipes of the *Šams al-ma‘ārif*, the physical object of the amulet constitutes only one aspect of the whole magical procedure related to it: several instructions must have accompanied its use. In general, it fits perfectly to the medieval tradition of letter mysticism and magical use of divine names.

Among the debris of the house, a metal box was unearthed that contained letters (written between the years 1947–1977), official and other documents (mostly from the 1950s’), and three further amulets. Two of the amulets (M2016.426 and 427, **fig.**

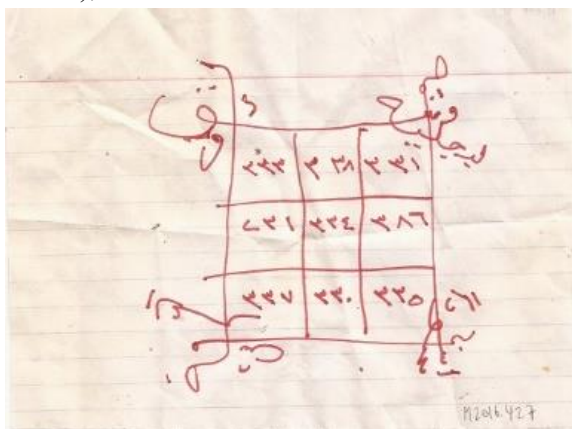


Figure 4.

4) kept in the box are essentially identical. Both are written with red marker pens, on lined paper with margins, detached from a modern exercise book. Both contain the same 3x3 magic square. The sides of the square are constructed from the elongated lines of four letters belonging to four words of a poem.

²² Ibid., 272.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Such repetitions of the letter *hā’* are found in several manuals that explain the effect of this magical device in different manners. For example, according to *al-Kibrīt al-aḥmar*, attributed to no one else than Ibn ‘Arabī, it serves for escaping from prison. Cf. Ibn ‘Arabī, *al-Kibrīt al-aḥmar*, 22.

A magic square (*wafq al-a'dād*), “harmonious disposition of numbers”, is a diagram composed of numbers (or letters representing their corresponding numerical values), in which every row, column and diagonal adds up to the same number.²⁵ The first magic squares were constructed in India²⁶ or in China,²⁷ but they attained to the widest popularity in the Islamic world, from the 9th century onwards. The first known occurrence of a magic square in Islamic context is in the medical encyclopedia *Firdaws al-ḥikma* by the Persian physician ‘Alī ibn Sahl Rabbān aṭ-Ṭabarī (d. ca. 860). The square is presented as a device to ease giving birth: its description, content and style are very close to the almost contemporary Indian sources.²⁸ Thus, it seems that both the concept and its medical context were borrowed from the Indian culture where the magic squares are essentially connected to the medical tradition. The simplest square consists of three rows and three columns, containing the numbers from 1 to 9. It appears in various early texts of magical character, like a treatise by Ḡābir ibn Ḥayyān (beginning of the 10th century), the *Ḡāyat al-ḥakīm* by Maslama al-Qurṭubī²⁹ (d. 964) and the encyclopedia of the Brethren of Purity (beginning of the 10th century)³⁰ – all these attribute to it the function of easing labour. In the latter text, the square is expressly considered a talisman (*ṭilasm*).³¹ Mathematical treatises on the squares were written much later, by the mathematicians al-Anṭākī (d. 987) and Abū l-Wafā’ al-Būzḡānī (d. 997/8), explaining the mathematical regularities of both the simple and the complex squares, like the so-called bordered magic square in which “the removal of its successive borders leaves each time a magic square”;³² or the pandiagonal squares in which not only the main diagonals, but also the broken diagonals produce the magic sum of the square; and the composite squares in which the main square is composed of subsquares which are themselves magic squares.

In the Islamic culture, the squares were associated with medical-magical purposes from the outset, and precisely this aspect prevailed in their subsequent uses. They became widespread by the 12th-13th centuries; the *Šams al-ma‘ārif* enlists hundreds of squares without even basically explaining the underlying rationale that makes them operate. This fact proves that the squares, their construction and operative

²⁵ For a more precise definition, see Sesiano 2017:3: “A magic square is a square divided into a square number of cells in which natural numbers, all different, are arranged in such a way that the same sum is found in each horizontal row, each vertical row, and each of the two main diagonals.”

²⁶ Cf. Tolsa 2020:8-9 and the references there to the research of the Indologists Roşu and T. Hayashi.

²⁷ Cammann 1960:116.

²⁸ Tolsa 2020:8, 12–13.

²⁹ The *Ḡāyat al-ḥakīm* has been attributed to al-Maḡritī traditionally.

³⁰ For a discussion of the texts, see TOLSA 16–18; on the squares in the Encyclopedia of the Brethren of Purity see also Zsom 2017:235–237.

³¹ Cf. Bustānī (ed.), *Rasā’il iḥwān aṣ-ṣafā’*, I, 114

³² Sesiano, 2017:3. For the definitions of further complex squares, see *ibid.* 4–5.

method were widely known and perfectly common by then. Būnī, who dedicated a long chapter to the 99 beautiful names of God and to their corresponding 99 squares (in fact, more), did not feel it necessary to explain the significance of the magic square as such, or to dwell on the import of the use of this mathematical method. Conversely, three centuries before, the authors of the Encyclopedia of the Brethren of Purity did explain the peculiar rationale behind the squares: “After having explained to you briefly the characteristics of geometrical shapes, and before that the properties of the numbers in the Tractate of Arithmetic, now we wish to explain to you something about the combination of both, since if you combine certain numbers with certain geometrical forms, that brings about qualities that could not be caused by one without the other.”³³ This means that the geometrical form of the square adds to the effect of the numbers, letters or words it contains. That conviction explains the frequent occurrence of false squares in manuscripts, which look like magic squares apparently, but do not meet the minimal number of required conditions to be considered as such in fact. According to magical handbooks, the squares should be prepared observing several rules regarding the time, place and circumstances of their writing. They should be written on the appropriate material (paper, animal skin, etc.), without having any blemish interfering with the lines and signs drawn and thus spoiling their effect. The colour of the ink or the substance used instead of the ink is also meaningful: spells and magic figures are frequently written with blood, or red ink resembling blood. The lines which compose the square may be drawn in a predetermined order, and frequently also the numbers or letters should be written in the cells of the square in a fixed order. All this may be performed at the astrologically appropriate time, while burning the prescribed incense, wearing the proper dress and being in the required physical state (e. g. fasting). Naturally, the magic procedures described in the handbooks are of diverse complexity, they do not necessarily determine all these details.³⁴

The square in the amulets found at the excavation is a 3x3 square, but not all lines add to the same sum, which is a frequent phenomenon and is due to the mistake of the copyist. The square contains the following numbers (the numbers in bold are erroneous; and the original is written, of course, with Arabic numbers):

333	338	331
231	334	386
337	330	335

³³ Bustānī (ed.), *Rasā'il il iḥwān aṣ-ṣafā'*, I, 109.

³⁴ For a comprehensive and very didactic introduction to the *ṭarīqat al-awfāq*, see the modern magical textbook by the Egyptian 'Abd al-Fattāḥ as-Sayyid at-Ṭūḥī, *al-Bidāya wa-n-nihāya fī 'ulūm al-ḥarf wa-l-awfāq*. [Cairo, ca. 1960 – it mentions “*ar-ra'īs* Ḡamāl 'Abd an-Nāṣir”, on p. 10], 117 ff.

The sum of the lines and of the diagonals is 1002, except for the second, erroneous line. The correct square can be reconstructed easily:

333	338	331
332	334	336
337	330	335

Now, this is in fact a square based on the simplest 3x3 square containing the numbers from 1 to 9 – the same which appears in the earliest texts dealing with magic squares. The simplest way of constructing new magic squares is to add an optional number to the numbers 1–9 (to each of them the same number), keeping the original distribution of the numbers in the square. In this square, the number 329 is added to the numbers 1–9, and the distribution is that of the so-called *budūḥ* seal plus the odd numbers: the numbers corresponding to the letters BDWH (2, 4, 6, 8) are written in the four angles of the square, while the odd numbers are inserted in the remaining positions, with number five always and compulsorily in the centre. 329 is the numerical value of the divine name *ar-Raḥmān*, including the definite article, and counting the letters corresponding to the usual defective script of the name (الرحمن), i.e., without the *alif* ($1+30+200+8+40+50=329$). Thus, the name “hidden” in the square is “the Merciful”, and it evokes the special powers of that name. The 1–9 square serves as a structure holding the content proper, or as a mechanism making the name operate. The square is the deep structure of any word or utterance; it constantly generates the combinations of the constitutive elements resulting in exactly the intended content. It is not a static visual representation (as an image or even script), neither a single, isolated speech-act (as an utterance), but a dynamic reality constantly adding up the elements from all directions, and consequently constantly generating the content corresponding to the deep structure.

Of course, several magic squares can be constructed with the name *Raḥmān*. The *Šams al-ma‘ārif* describes a 5x5 square (corresponding to the *plene* script having 5 letters, رحمان). The square must be written at the time of the exaltation of Saturn. The effect of the square is connected to the meaning of the name (as usual): it brings mercy and grants God’s favour to man. It has also medical use: the person who has fever should put it in water (to wash down the letters) and drink it, and his fever would disappear in no time. The antifebrile effect is attributed to the name most probably due to the nature of the letters it contains. According to common concepts of letter mysticism, the nature (*ṭabī‘a*) of a name is determined by the nature of the letters it is composed of. The 28 letters of the Arabic alphabet are divided into four groups, each group corresponding to one of the four basic elements (fire, earth, air, water). To identify the nature of a name one should consider its letters: the basic element to which most of the letters corresponds determines the name’s nature. Thus,

the name *Raḥmān* corresponds to the element of water, and for that reason it can be applied as a kind of magical Priessnitz's wrap in case of necessity. The *Šams al-ma'ārif* details several other speculations based on the numerical value of the name both in the *plene* and in the defective forms, and on other divine names having the same numerical value according to the intricate rules of letter mysticism.³⁵

The sides of the square found at the excavation are composed of the elongated lines of four letters. These letters belong to four words of a poem by Ḥassān ibn Ṭābit (d. 674), a poet from among the companions of the Prophet Muḥammad. The first lines of the poem beginning *aḡarru 'alayhi li-n-nubūwwa ḥātam min Allāh mašhūd yalūh wa-yuṣhad* go as follows:

The most splendid seal (*ḥātam*) which he wears for the sake of prophecy
 a seal from God to which God bears witness, it glitters, and it is witnessed
 For God attached the name of His Prophet to His own name
 for the muezzin says five times a day "I bear witness" [that there is no God but
 God and Muḥammad is His messenger]
 And He split for him [a part] from His name to honour him
 For the One sitting on the throne is called *maḥmūd* (محمود, praised).
 And this one is called *Muḥammad* (محمد, praiseworthy)³⁶

The poem identifies Muḥammad as the seal of the Prophets, whose special importance is evidenced by the fact that the Muslim declaration of creed mentions his name in immediate proximity to that of God. Moreover, his name is derived from one of God's names, being a short form "cut out" from the full form of the divine name: محمد (*MḤMD*) derives from محمود (*MḤMWD*) by taking away the letter *waw*. Annamarie Schimmel in her book *And Muhammad is His Messenger. The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety* dedicates a chapter to the mystical concepts connected to the Prophet's name, and (based on the above quoted poem) even raises the possibility that the veneration of his name goes back to the lifetime of the Prophet.³⁷ What is more (and not mentioned by Schimmel), Muslim tradition also records views according to which God and the Prophet essentially bears the *same* name (the magical connotations of such a view would be that they are in effect identical): "[Muḥammad b. Yūsuf aṣ-Ṣāliḥī] aṣ-Ṣāmī [d. 1535/6] said: One of the names of the Prophet is Maḥmūd, and that is justified since he is praised due to his many praiseworthy characteristics. [...] And this [name] is one of God's names, as Ḥassān [ibn at-Ṭābit] said: "And He split for him from His name in order to honor him". And he is right, since it is a name that is shared between God and His Prophet (*ism muṣṭarak*), and I haven't seen anyone to declare it openly except for aṣ-Ṣāmī."³⁸

³⁵ Būnī, *Šams al-ma'ārif*, 213.

³⁶ Ibn Ṭābit, *Dīwān*, 54.

³⁷ Schimmel 1985:127.

³⁸ 'Abd al-Qādir ibn 'Umar al-Baḡdādī (1620–1682), *Ḥizānat al-adab wa-lubb lubāb lisān al-'arab*, 227.

The four sides of the 3x3 square are composed of the first four words of the line “And He split for him from His name” (*wa-ṣaqqā lahu min ismihi*), and the continuation is written in the angles of the square: “in order to honour him, for the One of the thrones is *maḥmūd* (praised)” (*li-yuḡillahu [fa]-dū l-‘arṣ maḥmūd*). Again, the text as it is copied on the amulet contains some imprecisions and orthographical mistakes: it omits the conjunction *fa-*, and more significantly, adds a superfluous letter *yā*’ to *li-yuḡillahu* (يجلله) resulting in *li-yuḡliyahū* (يجلييه), meaning “to eliminate him” instead of the intended “to honour him”. The use of this verse in magical squares is not unique: I have found several examples of squares constructed in the same visual manner, the sides made of the elongated letters of the first words of the verse, and the rest of the line bordering the square exactly the same way as in this amulet.³⁹ Besides the magical connotations of the verse identifying God’s name with that of Muḥammad, revealing thus a hidden secret, the poem may be seen fitting to encircle an amulet due to the word “seal” it contains (in the first line). In the poem, “seal” refers to Muḥammad, the “seal of the Prophets”, i.e., the last of them, while for magic-oriented intuition the word “seal” (*ḥātām*) is an allusion to the magical potency of the poem, for amulets are commonly called “seal”, *ḥātām* in Arabic. Since the name hidden in the numbers of the square is *ar-Raḥmān*, the secret message of the amulet is that these three names are identical.

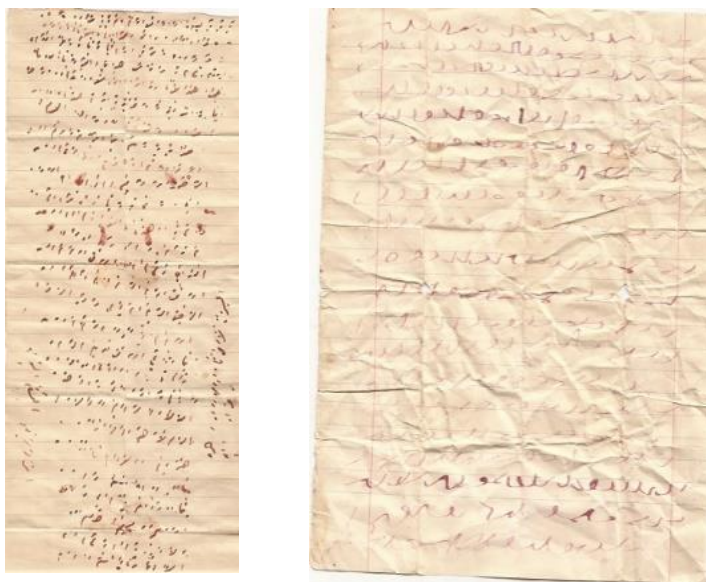
As it has been mentioned above, an amulet is only one aspect of a full magical procedure the constituents of which cannot be reconstructed in this case. The fact that the amulet was preserved in two copies suggests that each copy had its own function. For example, magic squares written on paper are frequently immersed in water to wash down the writing, and the water in which the numbers or letters are dissolved is drunk. Sometimes this procedure should be repeated several times, very much as one should take a medicine for a prescribed period. These details cannot be deduced from the amulet itself, which is only a fragmentary vestige of the whole magical procedure. However, at least the intrinsic connection between the magic device and its user can be stated: the name of the last owner of the house among the debris of which the amulets were found is ‘Adlī Maḥmūd, and the amulets were in a box containing several letters written to ‘Adlī Maḥmūd Ḥusayn in the 50s’-70s’ (from 1967: al-Ḥaḡḡ ‘Adlī Maḥmūd Ḥusayn, before that without the honorific title). Since a central feature of the amulets is that they contain the name Maḥmūd, undoubtedly, they were considered as especially effective for the use of a man bearing the same name (may it be Ḥaḡḡ ‘Adlī Maḥmūd, or his father, Maḥmūd Ḥusayn).

The third amulet found in the metal box (M2016.499, **fig. 5**) is more difficult to interpret. It is written with red ink on three strips of paper (dimensions: 305x130mm, 190x120mm, 90x60mm) torn out from a lined exercise book. The strips of paper

³⁹ [Attributed to] Ibn al-Ḥaḡḡ [al-‘Abdarī] at-Tilimsānī al-Maḡribī (d. 1336), *Šumūs al-anwār wa-kunūz al-asrār*, 97, 106.

were intricately folded into each other so that the writing would remain concealed, except for the signs written on the outer surface of the amulet. In fact it is an exaggeration to talk about “writing” in this case, since the signs written on the sheets are mainly dots and some very short lines (both horizontal and vertical), and their overall appearance reminds the reader both of the consecutive rows of dots written in order to create the signs of geomancy, and of the signs themselves.⁴⁰ However, it is clearly not geomancy, but it is more probable that the combinations of dots and lines stand for letters. In that case, the amulet would contain a coded text, may it be passages from the Quran or some spells. It is also possible, however, that the signs do not have any meaning, and they simply imitate writing, or more precisely, magic signs with signification.

The same may be the case of another amulet (M2016.398. **fig. 6.**) written with red ink, on a lined page torn out from an exercise book (dimensions: 225x160mm). It contains either illegible text or imitation of a legible text. The page was folded and inserted into the wall of the house, where it was found after its demolition.



Figures 5–6.

⁴⁰ Geomancy is a complex divinatory method based on randomly written dots from which signs composed of dots and dashes are formed.

The most complex amulet (M2007.845, **figs. 7–9**) found at the excavation comprises a love charm and a protective incantation.⁴¹ It was unearthed in a shaft tomb used by the inhabitants of a demolished house that once stood on the top of the hillock, above the house of the Boğdādī family. It consists of four sheets, two of which were folded separately and the other two were intertwined (dimensions: 40x340mm, 67x335mm, 105x335mm, 105x338mm). The sheets were placed into a red linen case sewn up from every side. Although the case contained two types of texts, these were written by the same hand, for the use of the same person. The texts were written with red and black ink, with disconnected letters lacking diacritical marks. The magic features the texts include are the following: *nomina barbara*, that is, unintelligible divine names; Hebrew divine names (*Adonay Tzevaot El Shadday*, “Lord of Hosts, Omnipotent God”); magic squares; the Seven Seals of Solomon; mysterious letters of the Quran; Quran passages used as spells; magical formulas. The love charm contains an incantation that incites love between “‘Adīla, the daughter of the second wife, and Ismā’īl, the son of the bondmaid of God, the daughter of Ḥawwā (Eve)”. In magical procedure, the parties involved are identified by matrilineal genealogy, and if the mother is unknown, the name Ḥawwā is used. The elder excavation workers were enthusiastic about the love charm and did their utmost to identify the couple. Finally, they agreed that Ismā’īl lived in a nearby house about fifty years ago and was well known in the area due to his skills in producing touristic artefacts and making mudbricks. Some of the workers even seemed to remember that the name of his wife was ‘Adīla, but these claims must be regarded with discretion. The love charm contains also the so-called *budūḥ* square, which is a 4x4 magical square composed of the letters *BDWH* having the numerical value 2, 4, 6, 8.



Figures 7–8.

The two intertwined sheets of the amulet contain a protective incantation consisting of the Throne verse (Q 2:255); the “protector verses”, i.e., verses that contain words deriving from the root ḤFẒ, “to protect” (*āyāt al-ḥifẓ*, Q 12:64, 15:9, 15:17, 37:7, 41:12, 42:6, 50:4, 85:20–22, 86:4) some of them repeated alternatively

⁴¹ Since I have already published an article on this amulet that contains the transcription of the Arabic text, its English translation and detailed explication of the magical features and devices it employs, here a very short summary will suffice. For more details, see Zsom 2017, 222–244.

five and seven times; a 4x4 magical square combining the letters of the divine name *Hafiz* (Protector); the verses of refuge beginning “I seek refuge...” (Q 113: 1–5, 114:1–6); and seven magical signs commonly known as the Seven Seals of Solomon (seven signs interpreted either as pictograms or letters, among them a pentagram).

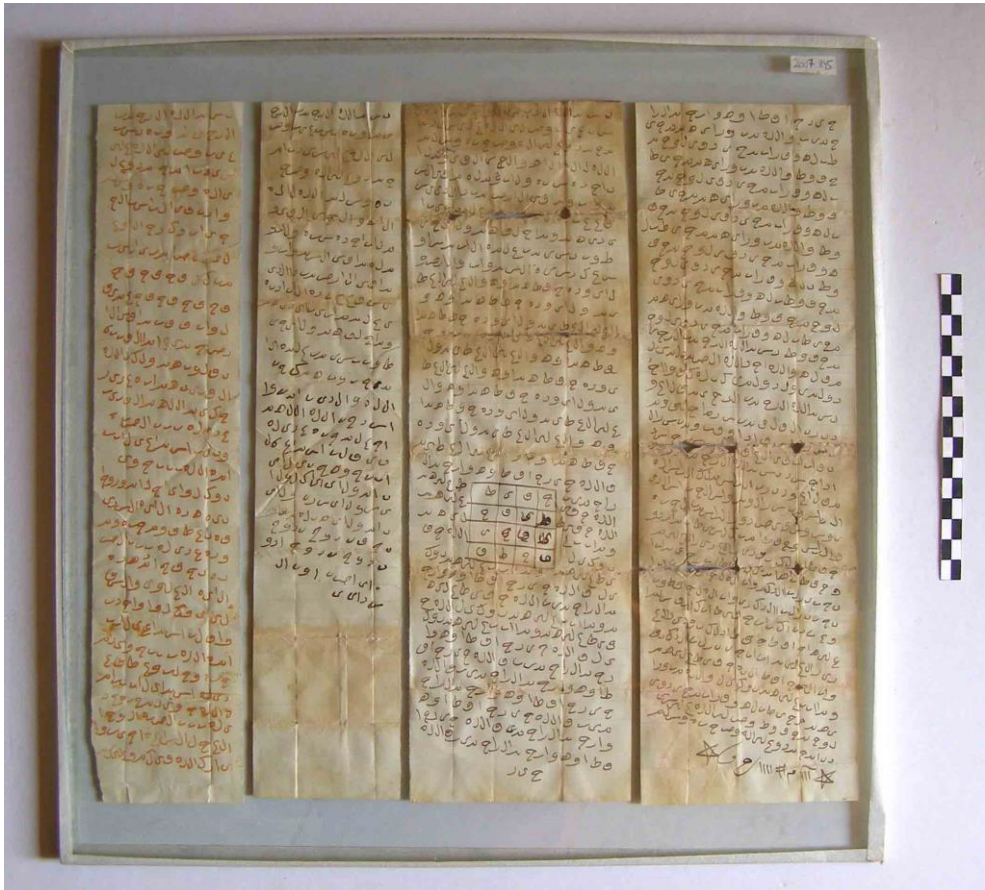


Figure 9.

Conclusion

The disappearance of a traditional way of living was evidently accelerated by the dislocation of the community that inhabited the Theban necropolis. The physical annihilation of their living spaces, the disintegration of the original communities are (among other factors) partly responsible for the gradual extinction of their inherited customs. Although the cultural heritage of the modern settlement in the necropolis has been regrettably destroyed, its vestiges still can be recovered. One of the characteristics of traditional popular culture is the extensive presence of magic in

every aspect of human life both in the individual and in the communal spheres. Magic is a highly conservative art, which adheres to concepts and practices deeply rooted in the past. The modern amulets found at the excavations in the area of Theban Tomb 184 evidence this aspect: the magical devices they employ can be easily traced back in medieval magical manuals; some of them date back to the rise of Islam, and some even much earlier. Popular beliefs and customs with magical bearings form part of the cultural heritage of the people of Qurna and are among the intrinsic values and qualities of local identity. As such, their reminiscences should be collected, studied, and recorded.

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