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Transitional Magic: Apotropaic Wands as an Allegory for the Middle Kingdom

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Abstract

Ancient Egyptian Middle Kingdom ‘magic wands,’ or so-called knives, having the dual attributes as a medium for childbirth magic and as an afterlife weapon, have long been objects of mysticism to art historians and Egyptophiles. This dual nature of domestic item and protector deserves a closer look at the iconography and theological implications connected to these artifacts. This paper addresses and expands on other art historians’ theories which suggest that magic wands are the missing link where there is a 600 years gap in material afterlife texts between the Old Kingdom and the New Kingdom. Looking at other mediums, such as Old Kingdom coffin texts and New Kingdom tomb wall paintings, fantastical animals that are found to dance a processional across the face of the wands – etched into the curved shape of a hippopotamus’ front canine – are the same figures seen as gate protectors to be overcome by the deceased in the New Kingdom Book of the Dead. The implications of one of the most deadly animals in Africa, the hippopotamus, being depicted as a pregnant goddess, but also a formidable ally in the afterlife, attests to a more significant role women played during the Middle Kingdom. In agreement with the tumultuous political history surrounding the period, this paper concludes that the magic wands and their imagery are a result of the changing religio-political dynamics between a central power and cult to individual nomarchs. Magic wands, through their iconography, material, and contemporary political context, can be seen as a microcosm of the uniquely transitional nature of the Middle Kingdom.

Keywords: Ancient Egypt, Magic Wands, Middle Kingdom

1. Introduction

Magic in Ancient Egypt has long been a bottomless well of curiosity and mystery. No artifact evokes the mystery of Egypt quite like Middle Kingdom ‘magic wands.’ Their peculiar shape and ambiguous function has inspired studies that have gifted attention to an oftentimes forgotten part of Egyptian history. Made out of hippopotamus ivory, these wands were apotropaic in nature and believed to have been used in the context of childbirth magic. From signs of wear and contextual clues etched in the form of spells on the back of some wands, they were used during life, as well as functioned as tomb items for the Egyptian deceased. As an apotropian, their main function was to protect the user, something much needed by the deceased in the afterlife according to the fearsome bestial guardians recorded in the New Kingdom Books of the Dead. At the fall of the Old Kingdom and during a period known as the First Intermediate Period, local governors known as nomarchs rose to importance in absence of a central royal power.¹ This shift in power meant a greater focus on local culture and local gods. The most powerful of these nomes was Thebes. Thebes conquered Upper Egypt and eventually bred a line of Theban kings who reunited Upper and Lower Egypt, officially ending the First Intermediate Period and heralding in the Middle Kingdom.² The cult god of Thebes was Osiris, the god of the afterlife and rebirth, who thus grew to national importance with the new Theban dynasty. This theological shift was a pivotal turn in Egypt’s focus to the gods of the underworld and the afterlife. The Middle Kingdom heralded

a revival of culture, trade, and religion in Egypt. It was a transitional period where proto-New Kingdom ideas about the afterlife simmered and would ultimately evolve into the Books of the *duat*. Art historians suggest that magic wands are the missing link between Coffin Texts, which show the earliest ideas of the geography of the underworld, and the New Kingdom works on the afterlife: the Book of the Dead and the Book of Gates.³ Since Coffin Texts dwindled out of popularity early into the Middle Kingdom, there is an observable gap in afterlife theology evident in the art during most of the Middle Kingdom. Magic wands house the missing text that bridges the theological chasm between the Old Kingdom and the New. The wands' iconography of local desert beasts show the growing importance of local culture and folklore, a strengthening connection to mother goddesses, and solidifying afterlife rituals.

2. The Magic of Women

For ancient Egyptians, there was no separation between religion, magic, and medicine. Egyptians readily turned to magical items for everyday ills and especially for dangerous procedures, such as child birthing. Women have always had a status of respect in ancient Egypt, they enjoyed the ability to travel freely, own businesses, and marry or divorce whomever they pleased;¹ the mother goddess Isis commanded unrivaled respect as the Great Magician. To the ancient Egyptians, the ability to give birth was a magical act in of itself, no other being can bring life into the world expect the gods and mothers. Seen in the wear of the blunted tip of the wands, they are believed to have been used to draw circles of protection around a newborn child or a mother in labor while reciting a spell that was either written down on papyrus or sometimes etched into the reverse side of the wand.² A wand now housed in the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art (Figure. 1) is one such wand that was inscribed with a spell on its concave side that confirms that the wands were for the protection of both the child and mother. It reads, “Recitation by the many protectors: We have come that we may extend our protection around the healthy child Minhotep, alive, sound, and healthy, born of the noblewoman Sitsobek, alive, sound, and healthy.”⁴



Figure 1. Wand showing spell on the reverse side. Image downloaded from Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, accessed 2019, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/544149>

Like all Ancient Egyptian magic, the magic of these wands worked by invoking the gods as well as intermediary beings with supernatural powers, the “many protectors.” Magic wands were etched with a procession of fearsome fantastical creatures and desert animals that could be summoned or embodied by the wielder of the wand. These drawings were believed to not simply be representations, but icons that physically housed these daemons.⁵

3. Fantastical Creatures from the Desert

On the fringes of the infinite emptiness of the Sahara and Arabian deserts, fantastical beasts were believed to be absolutely real and a dangerous threat to the ancient Egyptians. This can be seen from the inclusion of fantastical animals among real animals in a zoological-like hunting scene in the tomb of Khnumhotep II, at Beni Hassan (Fig. 2.1-2). The wall painting exhibits native animals such as leopards, dogs, and ibises, but there is also a fantastical griffin creature unceremoniously among the herd— a winged leopard with a human head emerging from its back.

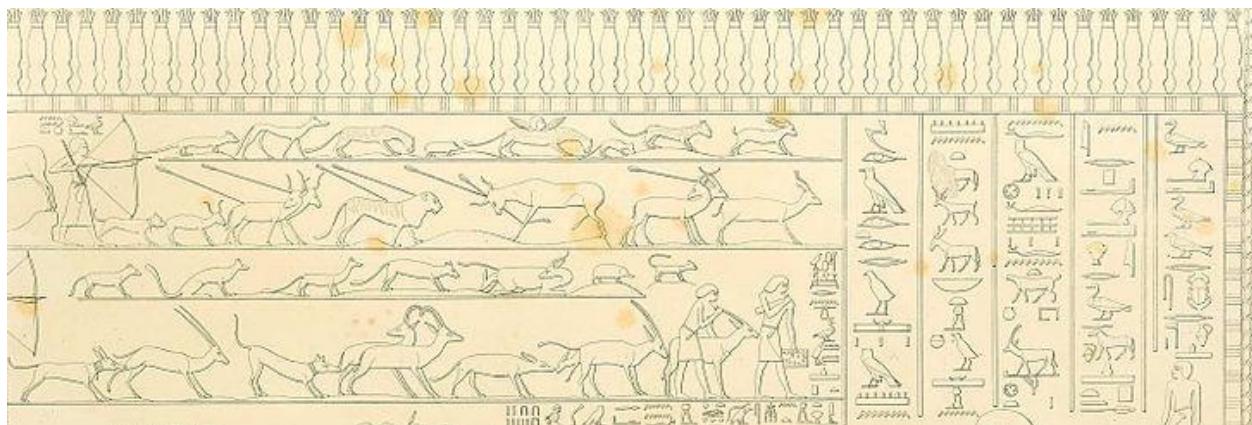


Figure 2.1. North Wall of the tomb of Khumhotep II (BH3), showing a hunting scene. Image downloaded from Wikimedia Commons, accessed 2019,
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Beni_Hassan_\(Lepsius,_BH_3\)_01.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Beni_Hassan_(Lepsius,_BH_3)_01.jpg)

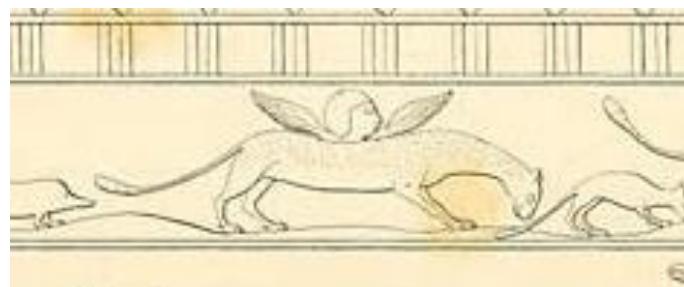


Figure 2.2. Close up of winged fantastical creature from North Wall, tomb of Khumhotep II (BH3)

Thebes was a major trade hub, centrally located in Middle Egypt. Trade routes into the desert had become ever more essential at the close of the Old Kingdom⁶ and were allowed to expand due to the nomes' independence to engage in international relations during the First Intermediate Period. Because of these strong trade routes to the desert, a following for folktales of fantastical creatures coming from the desert grew in popularity. The desert symbolized chaos that threatened the order of the Nile valley. Fantastical beasts represented that danger of chaos, but also the capacity for magical powers.⁶ The duality of all Egyptian magic deals with this juggling of the dangerous and the benevolent. These fantastical desert creatures were intended to protect and to frighten away, by reciting the right spell correctly, the user had the ability to harness these creatures safely and effectively.

In the Book of the Dead, composite creatures show up as gate keepers in the afterlife. Composite animals in the New Kingdom Book of the Dead overlap a considerable amount of times with the figures seen on magic wands. They are frequently pictured as “snakes, felines, hippopotami and various avians, including vultures.”⁷ Depicted on a wand from the Metropolitan Museum (Fig. 3), from left to right, shows a composite snake, hippopotamus, leopard, and vulture brandishing knives.



Figure 3. Wand depicting from left to right, a composite snake, hippopotamus, leopard, and vulture. Image downloaded from Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed 2019, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/544243>

The origins of some of the fantastical creatures on Middle Kingdom magic wands date to the Book of Two Ways, also known as the Coffin Texts.⁸ The Coffin texts depicted the earliest mentions of the geography of the underworld on the interior of wooden coffins. For centuries, there was no standard for afterlife theology until the New Kingdom. Middle Kingdom magic wands are the only link across centuries between the Coffin Texts and the emergence of more complex geography of the *duat* that appear in the New Kingdom Books of the Netherworld.

4. The Childbirth Magic

One of the most common composite figures that appear on magic wands is a hippopotamus brandishing knives to ward off evil (Fig. 4a). She is believed to be Taweret, the often pregnant hippopotamus goddess who watched over childbirths.⁹



Figure 4a. The hippopotamus figure wielding knives, Taweret. Image downloaded from Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed 2019, <https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/30.8.218/>

Taweret, like Osiris, started as a local cult in Thebes and only grew into prominence during the Middle Kingdom.¹⁰ The fact that most magic wands are made from the ivory of hippopotami lends more weight to the importance of invoking Taweret to access the magic within the wands. During the Old Kingdom, she is seen as both an aggressor, being one of the deadliest creatures in the Nile, but also a protective force in the way hippopotami fiercely protect their young.¹¹ Not only is Taweret associated with magic as a fertility goddess, hippopotami also invoke the image of the waters of Nun, the cosmic chaotic waters that predate creation. From a time even before the gods, when the only other thing that existed was *heka*—the source and essence of all magic.

The image of Taweret in fighting stance repeats itself as ivory inlays on the footboard of a child-size bed found in tomb k1053 in Kerma, Nubia.¹² This suggests that Taweret's protection, and by the wand's accompanying spell, extended throughout a child's life. The protective spell followed a person through their life and even unto the afterlife. The wand that was used to protect them as they came into the world was then placed into their tomb to help them be reborn into the afterlife.

5. Boundary Lines

The framing lines that enclose the procession of composite figures on wands are not merely decorative, but are theorized to be boundary lines that are meant to entrap the beings within their images (Fig. 6).¹³



Figure 6. A fractured wand showing frame lines around a procession of composite figures. Image downloaded from Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, accessed 2019, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/544149>

These boundary lines represent the boundary between the living world and the supernatural. Recall Narmer's Palette (Fig. 7) where registers acted as boundaries between the realm of foreigners (bottom registers), the king's realm (middle register), and the gods' realm (highest register).

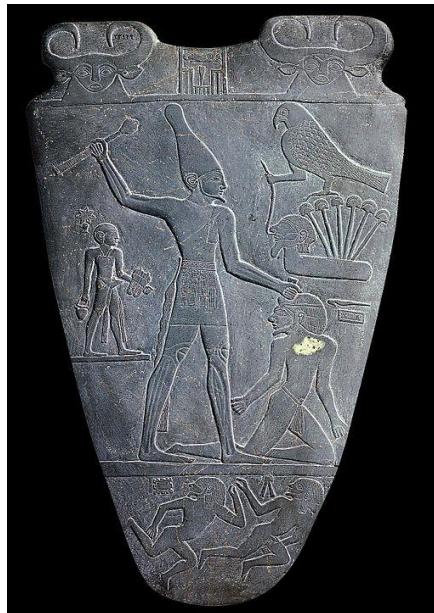


Figure 7. Narmer's Palette. Image downloaded from Wikimedia Commons, accessed 2019, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Narmer_Palette.jpg (Egyptian Museum, Cairo.)

Magic wands therefore act as a vehicle to cross these boundaries. Drawing a line or circle with a magic wand would disrupt the boundary between the mortal realm and the supernatural realm, in order to summon protective beasts. At the same time though, the boundary lines on the wands kept those beasts from fully manifesting and causing unintended harm.

The concept of crossing a boundary through magic is a theme that shows up in the New Kingdom Books of the Netherworld. On Ra's nightly journey, enthroned atop the sun barge as it sails through the underworld, he is accompanied by other gods who help him transverse the gates that separate each hour of the underworld, usually through magic skills attributed to each god. These gates are guarded by daemons that would need to be overcome by the deceased while traveling on their own barge through the underworld to reach the afterlife.

The hippo goddess Taweret shows up again in vignettes from the Book of the Dead, named as the guardian of the "western mountains," that are commonly used to represent the entrance to the afterlife, granting a deceased person safe passage as they are about to enter into the afterlife.¹⁴ The fact that Taweret is the main deity depicted on the wands and plays a role offering protection in the afterlife, is credible evidence that magical wands were not only a functional everyday object, but a piece of art that encompasses Middle Kingdom afterlife theology.

6. Conclusion

The wand's connotations of birth and protection are mirrored by the Egyptian theology of the soul's rebirth and journey through the afterlife. Magic wands were used in daily life, but served a second purpose after death. They first served the same apotropaic function as in life: protecting against evil as the deceased takes their journey alongside Ra through the gates of the *duat*. Second, the wands gave aid in the birth process: the rebirth of the deceased's *ba* – a part of the soul – into the afterlife. The less monumental nature of these religious objects can be attributed to the new importance of nomes and local culture at the beginning of the Middle Kingdom, as well as why the main medium for guidance through the afterlife shows up, not on intricately painted coffins solely for the royal elite, but on mundane, domestic objects anyone could access by means of less expensive materials. The theology behind magic wands serves as the only thread between the Coffin Texts of the Old Kingdom and the New Kingdom Books of the Dead. These apotropaic wands serve as an allegory for the transitional nature of religious practices during the Middle Kingdom. They tell the story of how the rise of nomarchs brought local folklore to Ancient Egypt's religious national stage and ideas of birth and rebirth afterlife theology now characteristic of Ancient Egyptian religion.

7. Acknowledgements

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9. Endnotes

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