

# THE MAGICIAN'S HANDBOOK: "SITZ IM LEBEN" OF A TEXT TYPE

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”أنا الكاتب الحاسب المنجم أكتب الكتاب وأحكم الحجاب  
وأحسب الحساب وأخط بأقلام الطالب فأين الطالب  
(من ألف ليلة وليلة)

## 1 Introduction

This paper wishes to deal with the “Sitz im Leben” of a magical handbook. Due to the lack of an appropriate translation of the expression I shall try to explain it in a few words. The “Sitz im Leben” of a text can be defined as the intended purpose or exact use of a text when it was written or transmitted<sup>1</sup>. In order to elaborate this purpose and the functions of the text in everyday life one must determine which type of literature a magical handbook represents and examine the motives and intentions for writing and using this kind of literature.

These problems are to be investigated by analyzing an example of a magical handbook which is a manuscript from the 18th century. A description of this manuscript will be presented in the second part of this paper. In the third and main chapter the contents will be summarized and examined. This will help us to find provisional solutions, presented in the fourth and concluding part, for the array of problems listed above.

The state of research of this subject is still in its initial stages. Modern scholarship in the field of Islamic studies has devoted little attention to the widespread magical literature in the sense of literary studies. And although magical phenomena like amulets, djinn, invocations etc. have been widely examined, in some cases they seem to be taken out of their context. In magical practice, shown *inter alia* in the magician's handbook, such phenomena are interdependent and only effective as a whole.

There are only few studies, e.g. by El-Gawhary (1968) and Pielow (1995), that deal with magical literature. While these centre on the more “scientific” or “sophisticated” magical treatises (see below) and are characterised by a comparative approach, this study tries to analyse a limited corpus of text which enables one to acquire a deeper insight into its structure and into the specificity of its magical practices<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> For the expression “Sitz im Leben” see Brackert & Stückerath 1992:135. See also Gunkel 1933:10-12; Seibert 1967:13-15 and Koch 1989:34-48.

<sup>2</sup> For a similar approach, see e.g. Hamès 1987.

## 2 The description of the MS Sprenger 1933, 10, fol. 123-139, (Ahlwardt Nr. 4170)<sup>3</sup>

The manuscript analysed here is kept in the "Staatsbibliothek Preußischer Kulturbesitz zu Berlin". It forms part of the "Sprenger" collection<sup>4</sup>, which was acquired in 1857.

This anonymous magical handbook is an untitled fragment. Omissions, misreadings and corrupt forms affect the whole text and some chapters are completely missing. The handwriting of the scribe is clumsy and careless. The number of lines varies considerably from page to page.

The language displays Middle Arabic features. We meet here the typical characteristics of the mixed language of mediaeval texts containing Standard Arabic, Neo-Arabic and pseudo-correct forms<sup>5</sup> that show the scribe's uncertainty in orthography and grammar.

The manuscript has been identified as a copy from the 18th century. The place of writing is uncertain. In view of the contents and the language it is most probable that it originates from Egypt.

## 3 The contents

This section is divided into three parts. First the different aims of the chapters will be presented and analysed. After a summary of the magical instructions of the handbook, I shall demonstrate the underlying structure of every single chapter by giving two examples of magical recipes.

### 3.1 The magical aims<sup>6</sup>

The text comprises 55 more or less complete chapters, each discussing a different magical practice. The chapters are numbered<sup>7</sup> and vary considerably in size. The precise aims are introduced by the first phrase of the text "If you want to" (*idā aradta an*). At the end of the chapter the aims are usually repeated, so that whenever the first part of the chapter was missing I nevertheless was able to reconstruct the intended aim.

The aims can be classified in six categories. These will be presented according to their frequency. This categorization, however, should be regarded as provisional and heuristic.

#### 3.1.1 Aggressive action or reaction:

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<sup>3</sup> See Ahlwardt 1891: III, 530.

<sup>4</sup> For the "Sprenger" collection see Sprenger 1857 and also Kurio 1981.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. the definition of Fischer 1982: I, 91: "Die zwischen Hochsprache und gesprochenem Dialekt stehende Sprache solcher Texte, die in buntem Wechsel klassische, pseudoklassische und vulgäre, d.h. neuarabische Formen bietet, nennt man seit H. L. Fleischer 'Mittelarabisch'." See also Blau 1988.

<sup>6</sup> See Hamès 1987:311-314; Doutté 1908:220-306; Pielow 1995:55-67 and El-Gawhary 1968:91-117.

<sup>7</sup> The chapters are numbered from 1 to 68. Chapters 2, 21 and 22 are completely missing. Number 57 is followed by 68, probably a *lapsus calami* for 58.

Twenty-two chapters belong to this category, each of them giving recipes for causing harm to somebody or something. The motivation for such attacks lies either in the pursuit of personal advantage or in the need to take revenge. The latter occurs more frequently; most of the chapters instructing how to damage somebody or somebody's property stipulate explicitly that this should be directed towards one's opponent, an evildoer, or an oppressor. Such acts include:

- Inflicting a fever on somebody.
- "Degrading" somebody in order to take over his position.
- Inhibiting somebody's urinating functions.
- Inflicting flatulence on somebody.
- Destroying the building of a public bath.
- Inflicting a colic on somebody's riding animal.
- Preventing a woman from marrying.

### 3.1.2 Restoration of the health of people and animals:

This category consists of 14 chapters. They concern the means to cure illnesses caused by djinn, magical practice etc. Aims of this type are for example:

- Treating a possessed person.
- Healing a non-specific illness.
- Curing a person "bound" by magic.
- Relieving a woman's labour pains.
- Making possible a woman's pregnancy.
- Curing a sluggish and a vicious horse.

### 3.1.3 Apotropaic recipes:

The 11 chapters of this category provide the means to protect somebody or somebody's property from attacks by other persons, animals, and djinn. The following examples belong to this type:

- Clearing someone's place of scorpions, snakes, geckoes, and wolves.
- Protecting somebody's vineyard, orchard, or plantation from thieves, wild animals, birds, or worms.
- Protecting children from evil djinn.
- Expelling locusts from someone's orchard, plantation, or vineyard.

### 3.1.4 Recipes which cause somebody or something to act compulsively:

There are six chapters concerning this matter and these deal with, for instance:

- Making men take a woman in marriage.
- Gaining somebody's affection.
- Moving an object to someone's place.
- Bringing a bird to a given place or to an aviary.

### 3.1.5 Divination:

This category comprises only five chapters, for instance:

- Solving a theft through reconstruction of the act in a dream.

- How to practice *darb al-mandal*<sup>8</sup>.

### 3.1.6 Discovery of treasures:

Two chapters deal with the problem of how to discover a treasure and how to protect it against unauthorized persons.

One chapter is general and comprehensive. Therefore, it could belong to any of the above mentioned categories. It deals with the handling of a difficult matter of any type.

In general, there are no sharp borders between the different categories. Some magical aims could be classified in more than one category. Chapter 44, for example, that tells us how to protect children from evil djinn also describes how to treat the children if they are already possessed. Therefore, this magical advice could be classified as "apotropaic recipes" or as "restoration of the health of people and animals", as well.

There is no apparent order although some chapters dealing with similar subjects seem to have been grouped together. But these blocks of chapters never contain more than five chapters at a time. For instance after a series of chapters that belong to the category "aggressive action or reaction", the scribe noted down a chapter concerning "divination" which is followed by another block of chapters classified as "apotropaic recipes".

I observed that the magical practices described in some of the chapters have only one specific aim. Others, however, can be employed for a variety of purposes<sup>9</sup>. Let me clarify this with the following examples: Chapter 47 deals with the destruction of a public bath. The aim is clear and unmistakable. In contrast the recipe described in chapter 20 can be used for the capture of an opponent or a thief and for the destruction of a mill, a ship, a public bath and a lucrative trade. The instruction concerning the handling of a difficult matter (Chapter 40) can be called multi-purpose. It could be labelled a universal recipe.

The first three categories "aggressive action or reaction", "restoration of the health of people and animals", and "apotropaic recipes" constitute three quarters of the aims whereas types 4, 5, and 6 are not represented in large numbers. It is noticeable that the descriptions of magical practices with negative or harmful effects make up 22 of the 55 chapters of the entire manuscript.

## 3.2 The elements of the magical instructions

In the following the elements of the magical instructions will be discussed. It is possible to distinguish between basic or main components and secondary elements<sup>10</sup>. The two main constituents of the magical recipes are, firstly, an invocation or conjuring that has to be recited at least once in every chapter and, secondly, the writing-down of a text. Therefore, the most frequent orders are *utlū* and *uktub*. As the text of the

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<sup>8</sup> This is a magical practice in which a fortune-teller, or a medium, prophesies while contemplating a mirror-like surface.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Hamès 1987:311 and El-Gawhary 1968:93-94.

<sup>10</sup> See Hamès 1987:314.

invocation is not revealed it seems to have been taken for granted that the magician was familiar with it.

The second central element, the writing-down of a text, occupies large parts of the chapters. The instructions given in the texts are very explicit, above all the various writing materials are specified very accurately. Mentioned are, for example, pieces of pottery, paper, shreds of cloth, a person's hand, pieces of wood, snakeskin, bones of a dog, sheets of lead, a branch of a pomegranate tree, and so forth. The different types of ink do not play such an important role in the recipes. Whenever this is pointed out, the magician usually has to use ink that is made of dissolved saffron. Other inks consist, for instance, of the blood of a mole mixed with the ash of a bird or of liquid tar. Only in one case the required pen is specified as a copper pen.

The texts to be written down contain two recurring elements: firstly, a seal, namely the "Solomonic Seal", which has been described in detail<sup>11</sup> and is depicted at the incipit (see plate 1), and secondly, the names of *ar-ru'ūs al-arba'a*. These four chieftains of djinn, already mentioned by Doutté (1908:166), play an important role in this magical handbook. If an invocation has to be recited they are summoned and they have to be written down many times for different purposes. Their names are Māzir, Kumṭum, Qaṣūra and Ṭaykal.

Another important component of the writings are Qur'ānic *sūras* and verses. Due to their sacred character they are considered to be very powerful in magical practice. Their content is taken literally by the magician and is connected directly or by analogy with the magical aims of the recipes<sup>12</sup>.

The written recipes quite often require the naming of the person with whom the magical practice is concerned. Unlike the conventional application of the first name in connection with the father's name it is usual in magical affairs to rely on the mother's name<sup>13</sup>. In magical practice the name of a person has a special value. It is connected with this person by spiritual forces. If, therefore, a person's name is "bound" magically, the person himself is "bound" too. Generally speaking, the part (the name) represents the whole (the person) (= *pars pro toto*)<sup>14</sup>. This rule also applies to the part or particle of the person (*al-aṭar* 'trace') that serves the same purpose in magical practice. Several chapters speak of the need to obtain a part of persons. Usually such parts are not specified; only in some cases instructions demand specific parts like hair.

Further elements turning up in the texts are magical formulas containing mysterious names, names of gods, angels, and djinn, and groups of letters. Some instructions require the writing of the components in reverse order, like for instance the names of *ar-ru'ūs*

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Winkler 1930; Kriss & Kriss-Heinrich 1962: II, 74-80; Doutté 1908:155-159 and El-Gawhary 1968:155-165.

<sup>12</sup> See Hamès 1987:317.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Ohtsuka 1995: III, 18.

<sup>14</sup> See further El-Gawhary 1968:9-10.

*al-arba'a*. This recipe corresponds with the magical aim<sup>15</sup>. In order to achieve the "degradation" and so-called reversal of somebody it is imperative to write down the names of the four chieftains in reverse order.

An indispensable constituent in many chapters is the burning of incense. The ingredients may be olibanum, sandarac, monkey's hair, excrement of a lizard, and so on. A necessary condition for some magical practices is to perform them at the right time. Usually for each magical recipe the time of performance is fixed by astronomical or astrological means. This time is related to the magical aim or to one or several elements of this recipe<sup>16</sup>. The handbook contains only a few of these instructions, which, moreover, give a confused impression. As far as the magician is concerned, he is sometimes expected to fast for a certain time and to purify his body and clothes before being able to carry out a magical practice.

### 3.3 The chapters' structure

I shall now translate two chapters of this magical handbook in order to provide a general idea of the chapters' structure.

Chapter 14 (see plate 2):

If you want to inflict a fever upon a transgressor or an enemy, write down the names of the four chieftains on yellow paper and recite the invocation seven times above it. Hang it into the smoke and recite it seven times for seven days at the end of each daily prayer. Then hang it into the smoke of a seal. He will get fever and will not regain health until you remove it.

Chapter 27 (see plate 3):

If you want to "tie a knot" onto a weapon which is directed at you or at anybody else, take the skin of a wild ass and write upon it the word of the Sublime<sup>17</sup>:

"And why should we not rely on Allāh" until His word "the reliant" (Q 14:12); "Do you then think that We have created you in vain, and that you will not be returned to Us?" (Q 23:115); "Deaf, dumb, (and) blind, so they return not" (Q 2:18); "And we have set a barrier before them" until His word "so that they see not" (Q 36:9); "O assembly of djinn and men, if you are able" until His word "but with authority" (Q 55:33); "The flames of fire and sparks of brass will be sent upon you, then you will not be able to defend yourselves" (Q 55:35); Ayūhin Hayūhin Ahyūbin Mahyūbin<sup>18</sup>; "And stop them, for they shall be questioned" (Q 37:24); Šamḥā Šamāḥ<sup>19</sup> who is above all *barāḥ*; Hold back and knot all weap-

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Hamès 1987:318.

<sup>16</sup> See also El-Gawhary 1968:176-183.

<sup>17</sup> The translation of the Qur'ānic verses has been taken from °Alī 1951.

<sup>18</sup> These are most probably names of gods, angels or djinn. El-Gawhary (1968:221) pointed out that names of djinn often end with *-āš*, *-ūš*, *-as* or *-us* whereas names of angels end with *-īl*.

<sup>19</sup> El-Gawhary (1968:225) verified the names Ašmaḥ (here: Šamḥā) and Šamāḥ as names of Syrian gods.

ons, oh Mâzir, Kumṭum, Qaşūra and Taykal, and turn them away from the bearer of these names, in the name of Sâdim 2<sup>20</sup>; "He is the First and the Last" until His word "and He is Knower of all things" (Q 57:3).

Write down the seal, fumigate it with incense and while the incense is burning recite the invocation 21 times for seven days after each daily prayer 21 times. While doing so your body and your clothes should be pure and the ink should consist of musk, saffron and rosewater. Roll up the written (amulet) and carry it with you. End.

The structure of these chapters is representative of the whole volume. The aim is quoted at the beginning of the chapter and is repeated after a description of the rites. I was able to distinguish four constituent elements<sup>21</sup>:

- 1) the announcement of the magical aim;
- 2) the written text that is to be used;
- 3) the rites to be conducted;
- 4) the expected results.

Those chapters that belong to the category "aggressive action or reaction" contain a fifth element:

- 5) the neutralization of the practice.

#### 4 Conclusions

In order to determine the "Sitz im Leben" of this handbook and its functions in everyday life it is necessary to identify the type of text. Obviously this text can be classified as non-fictional. It represents a type of utility literature which is defined as primarily non-artistic literature, composed for use or consumption with a definite purpose<sup>22</sup>. Furthermore I observed that the structure of a magical handbook is comparable to a recipe or cookery book.

It has been argued that the magical aims reflect the daily needs and concerns of the magician's clientele<sup>23</sup>. Therefore let me ask the following question: Do the magical aims paint a picture of the magician's cultural environment or can they be regarded as reflecting universal tendencies?

The handbook contains, on the one hand, magical aims that seem specific for a magician's and his clientele's particular context and, on the other hand, aims that seem to refer to a different cultural surrounding. Those chapters that deal with the protection

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<sup>20</sup> The number after a name indicates how often it has to be recited or written down. See El-Gawhary 1968:221.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Hamès 1987:322.

<sup>22</sup> See Best 1989:172 and Wilpert 1989:324.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Hamès 1987:307-308 and El-Gawhary 1968:91.

of plantations from pests and wild animals may possibly allude to a rural environment. By contrast, other chapters refer to an urban surrounding.

However, in order to determine the geographical origin and the cultural context of the magical practices the analysis of the magical aims alone is not sufficient. It will be necessary to analyse the different elements of the recipes, like the vegetable, animal, and food ingredients. I have found out that in the contents and the structure there are far-reaching parallels with, for instance, magical practices of the Soninké in Western Africa<sup>24</sup>. Reliable statements on the spread of these magical practices, however, can only be made after this handbook has been compared with similar texts.

In comparison to other magical treatises, like the works ascribed to the well-known al-Būnī<sup>25</sup>, this handbook seems to be simplified and less systematic. As it only consists of practical instructions it differs from the rather "scientific" or "sophisticated" magical literature which explains for the most part complex systems like planetary constellations and their connection to different magical elements. By contrast, the confused instructions in the handbook about the proper time to perform magical acts reveal by contrast the scribe's uncertainty and ignorance about these complex systems.

In analogy with the different types of magical literature, it is possible to distinguish different types of magicians. The scribe of this handbook is characterized by an inferior level of education as revealed in his handwriting, in the language, in the contents, and in the fact that he remains anonymous.

It can be assumed that the scribe was not a professional one. It seems plausible that the secret knowledge of magical recipes was passed on from teacher to apprentice, from father to son, or from a magician to his colleague<sup>26</sup>. In order to preserve this secret character outsiders were not involved. Therefore, it is most probable that the scribe was at the same time the magician using this handbook. Moreover, it stands to reason that this handbook is an incomplete copy of a more comprehensive work. These assumptions are supported by the fact that the scribe omitted some parts like the invocation's text as he was familiar with it.

In summary the "Sitz im Leben" of this magical handbook can be preliminarily assessed as follows: It is not a complete theoretical textbook but is intended as a guide for practical use by an individual in an unofficial context. This individual may have been a rather lowly educated magician, who used it in daily practice as a kind of reference book or mnemonic aid.

These preliminary assessments will have to be reconsidered and scrutinized by further research.

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<sup>24</sup> As described, for example, in Hamès 1987:305-325.

<sup>25</sup> Muḥyī d-Dīn Abū l-ʿAbbās Aḥmad b. ʿAlī b. Yūsuf al-Būnī al-Qurašī. For his works see El-Gawhary 1968 and Pielow 1995.

<sup>26</sup> See El-Gawhary 1987:20.

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Plate 2: Fol. 127 a

Chapter 14

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 الجواب الرابع عشر اذ اردت ان تسلط الهمة  
 على احد الظلمة او عدوا كتب على ما غذا من  
 اسماء ربه وانزل عليه الدعوة ٧ مرات  
 وعلته ~~.....~~ واتكلمت ~~.....~~ اياها ~~.....~~ على طلاه  
 لمرارة وتغلق في الدخان من كفايم فاجتمعت ولا  
 يطيب حتى تشبه البان الخامس عشر اذ اردت  
 تحريك ~~.....~~ اكتب الخاتم واسما الروح الا  
 على جلد خلد يد ~~.....~~ الدم خفاش ويطير او يدور  
 خفاش وبالصدقة وانزل عليه الدعوة ٧ مرة وانجز  
 عماره ان الخلد في حرقه حوي صغوا او اوطرها في يدك  
 اذ اردت حرمها والذبي توبه وكتب عليه اسم الروح  
 الاربعه بادم المذكور وسماد الطير وانزل عليه  
 ولتراليه في الذي في يده وتقول يا حوام بما فيم ~~.....~~  
 جرد هذا الحامد من مكانه الى عنده في مكانه هذا جرد  
 الا ربه عليكم فان يجن من ساعته البان السادس عشر  
 اذ اردت ان تنزع احد من الاعداء ومن الظلمة او مؤذي خوذي  
 معن ودجن احد وطلع الجدي من بطنها قبل ان تلد البطل

