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The Languages and Writing Systems of the Otherworlds

INTRODUCTION

People always liked to believe in life after death and some cultures of the past went even further trying to directly communicate with the realm of dead. What is more interesting they write down some of their attempts in doing so. The writing played important role in those practices and that was also connected with how it was seen by the native users very often believing in its divine origin and nature.

LANGUAGE OF THE GODS

According to ancient Egyptian beliefs (Memphite Theology) the world was created in the process of articulating the words by the god Ptah. The creator god first thought the world in his heart personified by the god Horus and than he said everything using his tongue which was personified by the Thoth. In reference to that myth Egyptian called their hieroglyphic writing *mdw ntr*, meaning “the words of god” [Boylan 1922:112].

LETTERS TO THE DEAD, LETTERS TO THE GODS

Ancient Egyptian thought that the dead can be contacted the same way as the living. They simply wrote letters concerning daily matters like sickness in the family or conflicts over inheritance and division of property. There is also an example of letter from person seeking permission of his deceased wife to get marry again. It was believed that the dead can assist living in solving all those issues because they can act in both realms [Rachet 2004:186]. The letter were either written on clay offering bowls so that the deceased would not miss it or just send to the home of the dead person – the tomb – on papyrus or linen. The oldest examples of such letters are from the end of Old Kingdom period (2686-2181 BCE). The tradition continued until the Late Period (664-332 BCE). At that time a change in beliefs occurred – now petitions were addressed to the gods instead of dead relatives. Only around 20 known examples of letters to the dead survived until modern times [Spencer 2007:201]. One of the last texts of this kind dated 650-600 BCE – so the time of pharaoh Psamtik rule – is written on a papyrus which is in the possession of the Brooklyn Museum in New York (P. Brooklyn 37.1799 E) and interestingly employ abnormal hieratic script instead of usual hieratic in which all older letters are written [Donker van Heel 2013:25]. Other interesting text is the so called Schmidt Papyrus which is a complaint to the gods – thus representing the period when dead were not contacted using letters anymore – written in Old Coptic language and in an early Coptic alphabet and is dated between 100-150 CE on the basis of these data [Satzinger 1975:37-38].



Letter to the dead (Papyrus Leiden I 371) [source: National Museum of Antiquities, Leiden: <http://img.rmo.nl/imageproxy/proxy.aspx?server=62.221.199.226&port=5297&filename=018482.jpg>]

CHINESE TALISMANS AND AMULETS

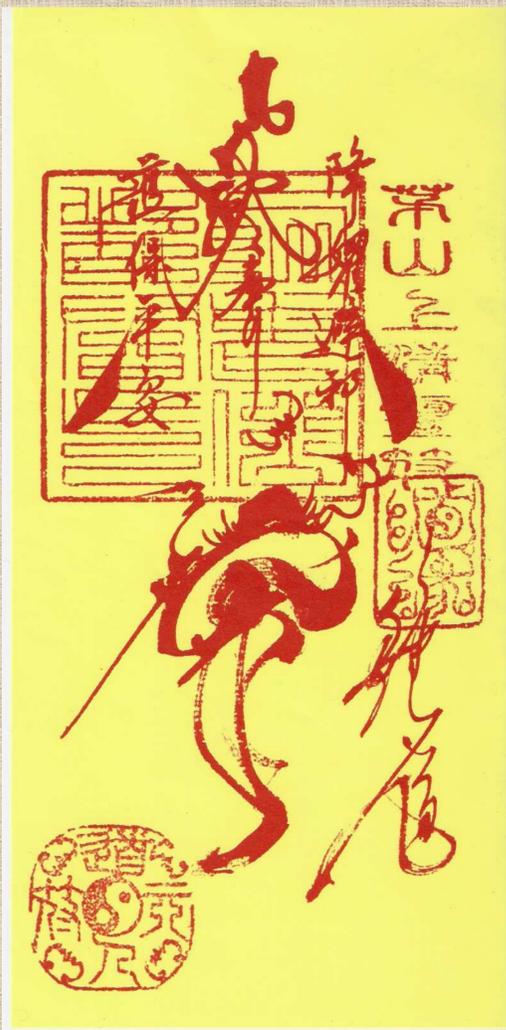
In Daoist magical practices special hand-written talismans or amulets were created for the purpose of contacting or expelling spirits. The Chinese talismans were derived from tokens used in military campaigns to ensure that the orders were correct. These tallies were broken in two by the commanding officer and one part was sent with his deputy, the other being delivered to the marshal of the other flank. According to Livia Kohn, Daoists believed that the “original” half of the talisman was in Heaven. In the Chinese language the word for talisman is *fú* (符) and in fact in the modern dictionary the first meaning of this character is explained as: (1) “tall (with two halves, made of wood, bamboo, jade, metal, issued by a ruler to generals, envoys, etc., as credentials in ancient China).” The other two being: (2) “symbol, mark” and (3) “magic figures drawn by Daoist priests to invoke or expel spirits and bring good or ill fortune” [Wu 2002:300; Kohn 2009:120]. The reason why this term was used in the context of Daoist magic can be explained by the fact that written tallies were sometimes also written contracts. In similar manner talismanic charms attributed to their inventor Zhang Daoling (c. 34–156 CE), the founder of the Heavenly Master Sect, were considered to be contracts made with spirits [Legaz 1975:24-25].

LANGUAGE AND WRITING OF THE SPIRITS

The language in which the talismans and amulets were made is that of ghosts and spirits and is known only to initiated Daoist masters [Eberhard 2001:15]. It is an independent form of language outside Chinese and the written characters used in that ghost speech are also very special. They resemble the Chinese script and similarly take a vertical rather than horizontal form. Sometimes they are simply old or deformed Chinese characters of the ordinary writing system, while at other times completely invented signs. They were written in a “free” style, not restricted by the rules of traditional Chinese calligraphy or treated in an extremely flexible way. In the text *Baopuzi* written by Ge Hong (281–361 CE) there was even a dictionary of them. It was also believed that these talismans evoked whatever condition was expressed on them and this is the reason why there are so many different “magical” variants of the signs *fú* (福; “good fortune”) and *shòu* (壽; “[long] life”) [Legaz 1975:29]. Other things written on talismans and amulets included the names of protective spirits or spells to hurt, kill or expel demons. Their look and methods of preparation varied accordingly to the purpose in which they were used but most of them were written on strips of paper, as it was easily obtainable and the cheapest media in China available in five basic colours: red, yellow, blue, white and black. The characters of this “magical script” could not be written like ordinary ones and special conditions had to be fulfilled for the purpose of giving them a magical function, for example: it has to be written in a secluded and clean place, in ritual purity, at night time, in perfect accordance with the phases of the moon or the precise hour of the day. Another thing which was important was careful control of breathing when drawing the signs on the talisman/amulet. However, it was believed that the magic power of these objects existed thanks to the permanent presence of spirits inside them and that is why communication between the Dao priest and the spirits did not need any medium as the talisman itself to serve this function. In *Daofa Huiyuan* (道法會元; “Corpus of Daoist Ritual”) the special conditions for making an amulet are described in these words:



You use speedily the writing brush to write down the amulet. Having done [the writing] you let the splendour of your heavenly eye enter [the amulet], and all the generals and emissaries that you summoned enter the centre of the amulet. [...] In your meditative vision you see the general and emissaries who were summoned and are [now] inside the amulet that you wrote. If the breath in your mouth leaks out, during time when the amulet is being written, or if your mouth does not enclose the breath and an amulet is still being written, such an amulet does not have any divine force. [Reiter 2007:41-42]



Chinese talisman [source: <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fulu#/media/File:道教符.jpg>]

TABULAE DEFIXIONIS AND THE RUNE-STONES

The Etruscans (as well as Greeks and Romans) used lead tablets to prepare information for the dead person. These tablets called by the Latin term *tabulae defixionis* (“curse tablets”) contained either curses or prayers and charms. They were rolled and put to the tomb as the message to the Underworld. Not far from that custom was later Scandinavian tradition. The rune-stones were sometimes deliberately overturned, in order to hide the contents of the magical spells from the eyes of the people and to keep the deceased in grave.



Roman curse tablet from London (1st-4th c. CE) [source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Curse_tablet_BM_1934.11-5.1.jpg]

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