THE ILLUSION OF WEALTH

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My friend Professor Fodor has been deeply interested throughout his scholarly career in popular Islam and in the survivals of Ancient Egyptian religion as well. This fascinating field of interest invites me to deal in the following with several motifs attested from Pharaonic ages onwards through to Late Antiquity even up to recent folklore.

Desire for growing rich had been at all times an omnipresent agent of human behaviour. This has been particularly true of Egypt where the soil, the rocky mountains and the immeasurable space of the desert concealed fabulous treasures of the Kings and nobles of a remote misty past.

Papyri containing the acts of tomb robberies in the Valley of the Kings and other areas of the west bank of Thebes during the 20th and 21st dynasty provide extensive evidence for the dimensions of the devastating activity of the well organized predatory bands (Peet 1930). Besides robbery a lucky accident could also lead to the discovery of valuable objects. An ostracon from the Ramesside period relates how a jar, carefully sealed, was found under the floor of a stable by a private individual. Being an honest man, he took care not to break open the jar, he learned yet from the list written on the side that it contained jewellery of gold and silver[1]. We do not know how the events evolved further.

Magical spells, names and rituals were expected to provide potent assistance in discovering hidden treasures. In this connection a remarkable story presents itself. It is a legendary episode of the life of Theophilus, patriarch of Alexandria at the end of the 4th cent. A.D. Returning from a funeral ceremony he and St Cyril arrived to a pagan temple decorated with three *thetas* on the lintel of the door. (The symbols interpreted as capital *thetas* Θ were obviously three sun disks, a common ornament in Egyptian temples.) Theophilus "filled with a holy prophetic spirit" found the clue to the riddle by saying that the first is for God (*theos),* the second for emperor Theodosius and the third for Theophilus himself. As he said these, the door of the temple swung open and a lot of gold streamed out of it[2]. The three *thetas* (or rather the triple sun-disk ornament) were regarded by the author of the narrative as talismans which lost their power as Theophilus revealed their secret. As a remote parallel the tale of Ali Baba of the Arabian Nights can be quoted with the word *sesame* acting as

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[1] Vernus 1989:36-37. (Ostr. British Museum 5631, Černý & Gardiner 1957: pl. 88.)

[2] Coptic manuscript Vatic. Copt LXII and LXIX. de Vis 1929:163-5; Zoega 1810:50; Kákosy 1982.

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a charm in opening the treasure-trove. This tale represents a connecting link between Late Antique-Coptic and later Arabic magical literature captured by the desire for finding hidden treasures. It will suffice to mention that even the great philosopher and statesman Ibn Ḫaldūn (*Muqaddima* 301-304) considered this topic important enough to include in his extensive historical work.

Until recently a bulky Arabic compendium of magical practices served as a handbook for treasure hunters who plundered numerous archaeological sites and monuments by illicit digging. Oddly enough, archaeologists tried to deprive it of its mystical aura by editing it in a book form in Arabic and French language (Kamal 1907). In spite of all efforts of scholars and state authorities, maniacs and swindlers still continue their criminal practices.

The Egyptian press in the past years published a number of reports about the notorious red substance or red mercury allegedly found in ancient Egyptian tombs and reputed to be the life-giving blood, a kind of elixir, of jinns because it helps to restore the youth of old jinns. If one is in possession of the substance, he will bring the jinn under his control and compel him to bring immense amounts of money. The trouble is that the impostors trading on gullible people's naiveté, ask astronomical sums of money for one gram of the substance thus plunging their clients into ruin[3]. The latest news published a story about three swindlers who pretended to be in contact with jinns which enabled them to locate treasures and heal illnesses. They began digging in a house in the province of Asyūṭ. The householder's family "could only hear them digging while murmuring unintelligible prayers and also smelt powerful incense allegedly used to communicate with the jinn that guards the treasure"[4]. The impostors cheated considerable sums of money out of their clients with their hocus-pocus.

The mystic atmosphere of hidden treasures is greatly enhanced by beliefs in guardian spirits. In Gurna village, the site of Hungarian excavations since 1983, on the west bank of the Nile opposite Luxor the people, living in the area of colossal mortuary temples and a necropolis of vast expanse, display a particularly vivid imagination when talking of the richness of the past.

I noted down the following story there in 1995 related by one of the inhabitants of the village, Aᶜzab Ismāᶜīl Aḥmad. A family living in the area of the mosque of the famous local saint Šēḫ Ṭayb one day somehow detected a hiding place with a treasure guarded by an afrit (or afrits). In spite of the spirit guards they managed to seize the gold, became rich and built a new house for themselves. The new wealth did not, however, bring blessing; on the contrary, they were hard hit with misfortune and at the same time strange incidents hinted at the wrath of supernatural powers. (The

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[3] *The Egyptian Gazette* 7 April 1998 p. 1; 27 October 1998 p. 7.

[4] *The Egyptian Gazette* 22 April 2001 p. 1.

house caught fire no less than three times in a year; the housewife was pushed down by an invisible power on the stairs of the house, etc.) Finally, the family, although Muslims, sent for help to a Coptic priest (*abūnā*) who exorcised the afrit. Those who were present at the ritual heard his dispute with the spirit who was finally compelled by him to leave the house. Although not related by the story-teller, they obviously had to get rid of the remnants of the treasure.

The remarkable, though vague concept of *raṣad* is also known in Gurna. One of the residents there is quoted to say "the treasure ...is guarded by a *raṣad*, a legendary creature that appears sporadically in the form of a snake"[5]. The same resident "has burned various types of Moroccan incense called *gast* and has recited magical spells. If he gets rid of the snake - he says - the treasure will be revealed, and we will be able to claim it for ourselves." The treasure he has hoped to find was a golden waterwheel supposed to be located in the courtyard of his house.

When talking on *raṣad* with one of my friends in Gurna, he expressed his view that *raṣad* is something like a spirit, as jinn or afrit, and it can manifest itself in various forms, and can also be killed. He knew also the derivative of this word, *marṣūd*. This term is applied by the villagers on the mysterious ancient Egyptian tomb in which five members of a family met their tragic death in 1905 (Weigall 1906). "Their deaths were registered as being due to asphyxia produced by poisonous gases which had accumulated in the lower parts of the passage (of the tomb)" (*Ibid.* 12). People held that the tomb was inhabited by an afrit who guarded a treasure there and strangled the five victims who entered the tomb. The case is unique, indeed, in the history of Egyptology, and it has been never satisfactorily explained so far what kind of gases could be the cause of the death of the five persons.

While Gurna is one of the places in Egypt where the craving for discovery of hoards of gold has a particularly strong hold on the residents' imagination, it can be found, as a manifestation of human greed, all over Egypt and, naturally, all over the world.

Rituals intended to bring hidden treasures to the light are described by Winifred S. Blackman the eminent anthropologist and one of the best specialists of Egyptian folklore who worked in the region of Asyūṭ and al-Fayyūm in the 1920s and 1930s (Blackman 1927). The protagonist of one of her stories is a Coptic priest who owned a book with the list of hidden treasures. He tried to find one of them believed to be buried under a large stone in the outskirts of a village[6]. He went to the stone at midnight, burned incense and recited incantations from his book. "Suddenly the great stone broke into two, the two halves banging together and making a sound like the roar of a lion." When the villagers came out to see what had happened, the priest,

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[5] *Al Ahram Weekly* 1-7 February 1996 p. 14 (Omayma Abdel-Latif and Rehab Saad).

[6] Blackman usually did not give the name of the villages where she worked.

terrified by the crowd, ceased burning and reciting and climbed up a palm tree. The "the two halves of the stone joined together again ... The people say that it would be useless for anyone to attempt to dig up the treasure, for the deeper you dig, the lower the stone goes into the earth" (Blackman 1927:189). A more intellectual group of such find-stories deals with concealed books and inscriptions of wisdom[7].

So far cases of hunting for real treasures or those existing only in the imagination of the people have been treated in this article. In any event, the aim was to grow rich through their discovery.

Another form of obtaining wealth by means of magic[8] displays a rather different aspect. The Graeco-Egyptian papyrus Berlin 5025 (Late Roman Period), a compendium of magical recipes, includes a prescription for acquiring a tutelary spirit (παρέδρος). This aerial spirit should be on service for the magician's client and perform whatever his master would command him. In the passage relevant to our subject (Preisendanz 1973: I, 8 /I. lines 96 ff/; Betz 1986:95-96) it is promised that if the master wants to give a dinner, the spirit will prepare chambers with golden ceilings, with walls covered with marble; he will bring costly wine and servant-demons will be at his command during the banquet. The magician, however, alludes cautiously the reader καὶ ταῦτα ἡγεῖ τὰ μὲν ἀληθῆ τὰ δὲ βλέπεσθαι μόνο[ν] "and you consider these things partly real and partly just illusionary"[9].

It should not go unmentioned in this context that the belief in acquiring a tutelary spirit can be traced back to Pharaonic Egypt. An ostracon from Deir el-Medine preserved a supplication of man to a God to create for himself a weret-demon (Černý 1939: IV, no. 251).

The remarkable passage quoted from papyrus Berlin 5025 invites comparison with an episode of the life of Apollonius of Tyana, the famous philosopher and thaumaturge. When one of the disciples of Apollonius fell in love with a Phoenician woman who was living in a suburb of Corinth, Apollonius tried to dissuade the youth from marrying her but his words were of no avail. Seeing the obstinacy of his disciple, Apollonius appeared himself at the wedding breakfast and looked around in the banqueting hall full of silver and gold. In the presence of all the guests he disclosed without delay the secret: the woman is one of the empousas (a kind of vampire) who fall in love with human beings to devour them on their feasts afterwards. After his disclosure of the truth, the splendid wealth immediately fluttered away and the retinue of the servants vanished too (Philostratos, *Life of Apollonius* IV, XXV). In this way

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[7] See e.g. Fodor 1970: esp. 337-345; Fodor 1976:157, 161, 169-170; Fodor 1974:97.

[8] On magical abundance in the next world in Pharaonic religion see Kákosy, Zauberei im Alten Ägypten, Budapest 1989, 95-100.

[9] Preisendanz 1973: I, 8 /I lines 110-111/; Betz 1986:6. Translation of Betz.

it became evident to everybody that the wealth of the woman was actually nothing more than the semblance of reality.

The motif that spirits (afrits, jinns) or magicians are capable of producing imaginary riches, still survives in Egyptian popular beliefs. H. A. Winkler's well-known book (1936) includes the story about a man who was served by a spirit-assistant who provided his master with gold coins. People readily accepted the gold as payment but found later only potsherds in their pockets (Winkler 1936:13).

A recent story heard during my excavation in 2001 speaks of a bridge made by an afrit which proved to be again an illusion. People who wanted to cross the canal over the non-existent bridge fell, of course, into the water

These stories are varied in their details, but the underlying idea remains the same. Magicians and later spirits were credited with the miraculous power to evoke in the eyes of the spectators the semblance of reality. With regard to their interpretation a variety of assumptions are available: play of pure fantasy; tenacity of folk-traditions handed down through subsequent generations; or may we venture the daring hypothesis that at least in the first two instances (the Graeco-Egyptian papyrus Berlin 5025 and the Life of Apollonius) we are confronted with hypnotic suggestion? Later on such stories survived as mere motifs of fairy-tales and fiction. In modern literature Thomas Mann's novel *Mario and the Magician* had elevated the motif of hypnotic deception with its tragic consequences to the highest artistic level. Egyptians had, by the way, rich experience in hypnotic trance which was a common practice in one of the prophesying methods, the vessel inquiry (lecanomancy).

The romanticism of treasure hunting seems to be an inseparable element of the excavations in Egypt in the eyes of the amateurs. These reveries are in actual fact, kept alive by the successive new discoveries. It will suffice to make an overview of the past decades of archaeological activity in Egypt (Reeves 2000) to see that the discovery of the dazzling treasures in the royal tombs in Tanis (1939) was not the last one in the series of sensational new finds. The treasure from Tell el-Maskhuta (1947), the burial of queen Takhut (1950), the unfinished pyramid of Sekhemhet (1952) with its golden objects, the jewellery in the tomb of princess Noferuptah (1956), the ear-pendant from Saqqara, (1975) (Reeves 2000:198-200, 204, 218) and the Valley of the Golden Mummies in the Bahariya Oasis (1999)[10] are all finds of prime importance. All of them was surpassed by the treasure from Dush in the Kharga Oasis (1989) including a superb gold crown, bracelets, a collection of plaques and numerous other objects (Reddé 1992; Reeves 2000:228).

Without doubt the cemeteries of Egypt do conceal further finds and new great discoveries are to be expected. Hopefully, they will come to light in scholarly excavations and not through tomb robberies.

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[10] Hawass 2000. Actually mummies with gilded masks and cartonnages.

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