When the Book of the Dead does not match archaeology: The case of the protective magical bricks (BD 151)

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The vignette of BD 151 illustrates the ideal burial chamber and its equipment from a physically impossible perspective (see Lüscher 1998; Régen 2000). According to the spell, four magical bricks need to be walled up in the funerary chamber in relation to the cardinal points. Each of these clay bricks is inscribed with a spell and decorated with an amulet:

- **Northern wall, facing South**: A mumiform figurine of *ima*-wood; it is supposed to repel aggressors of the dead.
- **Southern wall, facing North**: A reed-torch with a wick soaked in *sefet*-oil, to fight demons termed *sffw* or *sffw*.¹
- **Western wall, facing East**: A blue faience *djed*-pillar whose top is plated with electrum foil; the amulet is to chase away a malicious entity called *Kap-her* ‘Hidden of Face.’ The latter can be replaced by the famous *Neha-her.*²
- **Eastern wall, facing West**: An unbaked clay figurine of Anubis as a seated dog; the figurine is to be vigilant in protecting the dead from the attack of aggressors.

A rare set of such amulets are preserved in the British Museum, belonging to a Dynasty 19 priestess, Henutmehyt (Cover image).³ This ritual is intended to protect the mummy and the tomb. The rite of magical bricks offers the possibility to compare textual instructions and the archaeological application of a funerary practice. It is documented by papyri from the very beginning of Dynasty 18 to the Ptolemaic Period. The archaeological evidence for the ritual is demonstrated in tombs dating from the reign of Thutmose III to that of Nectanebo I. At the present time, less than one hundred persons are known to have used the ritual (kings, royal family, elite officials and sacred animals [Apis]; Regen 1999). This number is rather low for a practice demonstrated to have been in use for more than a thousand years, but many bricks may still be walled up in burial chambers.

Consideration of this funerary rite will show how and why the practical application of the ritual in tombs could differ from the tradition noted in manuscripts; in other words, cases where reality does not match the text. Beyond this specific spell, the study prompts questions about the connection between the Book of the Dead text and implementation of some of its concepts.

¹ The names only in appear in some of the preserved papyri, e.g., P. Torino inv. Suppl. 8438 (Khâ) and P. Louvre N 3092 (Neferubenef).
² In P. Busca (Dynasties 19–20; Crevatin 2008, 47). For *Neha-her*, see el-Sayed 1981.
³ British Museum EA 41544–41547 (Taylor 1999, pl. 15).
The ritual in its ideal application

A brief review of the ritual prescriptions of BD 151, that is those instructions known from papyri, is appropriate here. The version cited appears in P. Turin.

Northern spell
This spell is to be said over an unbaked clay brick on which this spell has been carved. Make a niche for it in the walls of the netherworld and set an image of ima-wood 7 digits high, whose mouth has been opened, firmly on this brick on the northern wall, its face toward the south, and cover its face.

Southern spell
This spell is to be said over an unbaked clay brick (on which this spell has been carved). Attach a lighted torch. Make a niche for it in the southern wall, its face toward the north, and cover its face.

Western spell
(This spell is) to be said over a djed-pillar amulet of faience whose top has been covered with electrum, wrapped in royal linen with ointment poured over it, set firmly on an unbaked clay brick. Make a niche for it on the western wall, its face toward the east, and cover its face with earth. (This is a means of) being under the ēru-tree and repelling the adversaries of Osiris, in whatever form (they) come.

Eastern spell
This spell is to be said over an Anubis of unbaked clay mixed with incense, set firmly on a brick of (unbaked) clay, with this spell carved on it. Make a niche for it in the eastern wall, its face toward the west, and cover its face.

When the Book of the Dead text does not match archaeology

Bricks
The instructions in BD 151 require that the magical spell is carved on a brick. Excepting papyri and representations of magical bricks, there is one case in which bricks are not directly used: upon the stelae of the early Dynasty 19 general Kasa, from Saqqara, now in Marseilles (Fig. 1; Naville 1880; Berlandini 1977, 38, 44; Meeks et al. 1990: 49–50). The surface of each stela features a cavity for each amulet and its brick, yet the spell was carved on the stela, not directly on the brick.

The BD text gives directions for the use of four bricks, but Carter discovered five bricks in the tomb of Tutankhamun. Four bricks were placed in the walls of the burial chamber; a fifth one—for the torch—was placed on the ground of the Treasury, at the feet of the famous Anubis statue, more precisely between the poles of the carrying shrine of Anubis. The king was provided with the standard amulets (figurine, torch, djed, Anubis) but also a new one, that of Osiris (Fig. 2; Cairo Museum JE 61377). This figurine is less than 20cm high, and its brick bears the eastern spell usually associated with Anubis; no text is found on the Anubis brick.
Carter discovered the niches still plastered, thus not visible upon discovery of the tomb. The presence of ‘small brown fungus growths’ on the tomb walls was absent where the niches lay behind (Reeves 1990, 72); on the western wall, the difference is particularly obvious between the areas with brown fungus growths and the plaster of the niche. It seems the niches were sealed after the walls had been decorated: according to Carter, ‘the niches, closed with suitable but quite rough splinters of limestone, were plastered over flush with the surfaces of the walls and were then painted over to match the colour decorating the walls.’

The yellow colour used for the sealing of the niches does not exactly match the rest of the decoration, whereas inside some of the niches, splashes of yellow paint (that used for the original decoration of the walls), were noted. On a photograph showing this wall before the opening of the niche (Reeves 1990, 73–74; Reeves and Wilkinson 1996, 39), the name of the ape, which is supposed to be inscribed precisely where the niche was sealed, seems to be missing but was never intended to be added. The absence of an inscription in front of this ape is rather to be expected, as the creature does not have a name in the Amduat. It is thus evident that the decorators of the tomb wisely located the niche in a free space in front of the apes of the first hour of the Amduat, precluding the need for any decoration to be executed twice. The same care on the part of the artists is evident on the other walls, where the niches are placed to avoid the legs of the individuals.

Why did the decorators choose to make the niches after the walls had already been decorated? As mentioned, five bricks instead of the usual four were discovered in the tomb of the king. The extra brick is that with a figurine of Osiris, but carved with the eastern text that usually relates to the Anubis figurine. Yet the Anubis brick of the king does not bear any spell. Is it possible that the significant size of Anubis on this brick did not leave enough space to inscribe the text? Is this a sufficient reason to create a new brick?

The fifth brick, the one discovered at the entrance of the Treasury, at the feet of the famous Anubis statue, bears the southern spell, associated with the protective flame. Beside the broken brick, a torch with a gilded top was found (Fig. 3). In addition, a ceramic pedestal was found; considering its position in relation to that of the brick, it may have been used to hold the torch (JE 62357+JE 87851; Carter and Mace 1963, pl. 52). Perhaps the brick was not strong enough to hold the torch, which is much larger than that provided for the priestess Henutmehyt (8.3cm high). The presence of charcoal fragments on the tomb floor beside the torch indicate that it had been used.

The protective role of the flame is illustrated by BD 137A, in which four torches are used (Luft 2009). This chapter is closely related to BD 151 in the papyrus of Nu (P BM EA 10477): the text relating to magical bricks is separated from the rest of the chapter, allowing it to be placed directly after the text of the four protective torches. The torch in the tomb of Tutankhamun was situated by one of the doors of the burial chamber, as if protecting the entrance. The Anubis statue also seems to keep watch over the deceased. Four torches on pedestals were found in the tomb, and all may be related to BD 137A. The torch discussed above, found next to the ceramic pedestal, was left lit when the tomb was being closed. Perhaps it was not placed in a niche to allow its use in a ceremony that took place at the closing of the tomb. This would explain why the niches were walled up at the last moment, after decoration was completed.

* [www.griffith.ox.ac.uk/gri/carter/258-c257-2.html](http://www.griffith.ox.ac.uk/gri/carter/258-c257-2.html) (30 September 2010).
According to BD 151, an unbaked clay brick had to be used for the ritual, yet in several cases, a fired brick was used. In some examples, the brick was fired after deposition in the tomb, perhaps during a fire when the tomb was opened for re-use, or in modern times (e.g., a Berlin Museum brick fired through bomb damage during the Second World War). Fired bricks have only been found in non-royal tombs (Silverman 1996, 732; Davoli 2004, 62 n. 7).

Each brick bears an amulet that is associated with a specific cardinal point. Most of the figurines are not preserved, given their fragile nature. Nonetheless, some bricks never supported amulets, but rather bore a drawing of the relevant object. The vizier Amenemhat (TT 82) used both systems, with a real amulet complemented by a drawing on the reverse of the brick (Scalf 2009, 294–95). It should be noted that, when found in its niche, the djed-pillar amulet was simply placed on the brick, not inserted into a cavity; the same practice is found on the western brick of Tutankhamun. An anonymous brick in a private collection (van Voss 1965, 315–16, pl. 17) bears an imprint of a djed-amulet on the upper part.

The eastern brick of the vizier User, who lived in the reign of Thutmosis III, displays another feature. On the reverse, an incised design depicts two eyes in a rectangle (Régen 2002, 998–99, 1002(A)). This represents the eyes of Anubis watching over the deceased; the eastern spell specifies the vigilance of this god. The framing rectangle can also be explained. When Carter discovered the tomb of Thutmosis IV, the eastern niche was still walled up, apart from a small aperture in the plaster. This aperture was directly in front of the eyes of the Anubis amulet, allowing it to see the sarcophagus and thus watch over the dead.

Examples of deviation from the prescribed types of amulet are also known. The Osiris figurine in the tomb of Tutankhamun is one such example. The Anubis spell on a brick of Paibmer, god’s father of Amun (Dynasty 19), is associated with a mumiform figurine usually related to another spell (Scalf 2009, 279). This kind of mistake can also be found, surprisingly, in royal burials. Amenhotep II owned two bricks with Anubis figurines. One was obviously included through error, as its text relates to the amulet of the flame.

BD 151 stipulates that the text is ‘carved’ (ḥḥf). Many bricks, including royal ones, however, have their text simply painted (see Régen 2010, 23–42). The whole Late Period set of bricks of Horemkhebit from Saqqara does not bear any text or inscription (Arnold 1997, 31–54; Davoli 2004, 67–68, 76 [Tav. XIII–XVI]). This may reflect a late development of the ritual. The north and south text of the mumiform figurine of Yuya are inscribed directly on the amulet. The feet of the figurine do not seem ever to have been fixed in a brick. It has the appearance of a shabti and was actually discovered among the shabtis of Yuya (Davis 1907, 29, pl. 22; Quibell 1908, 38, pl. 18; Davoli 2004, 67, 76 [Tav. XII]).

It should be emphasised that the spells developed in two ways, one for papyri and the other for the actual bricks. In the case of the southern spell, from the reign of Amenhotep III and IV, a new variant text became the canonical version for bricks (Régen 2009, 53). The papyrus version remained different until the Ptolemaic Period. A further development of this southern spell is attested on the stela of general Kasa, where it is associated with a new text

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5 An examination of the originals has revealed that the bricks of User are not baked, Davoli 2004, 62, n. 7.
6 Papers of Howard Carter kept in the Griffith Institute (G.I.I.A.133 (I)).
7 For the Anubis figurine fixed on the brick bearing the southern (flame) spell, see Hermann and Schwan 1940, 66.
8 See, in particular, the case of Hekaemsaf: Davoli 2004, 68, 77 (Tav. XVII–XIX).
about the power of the flame, reminiscent of BD 137A (Régen 2009, 54).

Once the amulet has been set in a niche, the spell stipulates ‘cover its face’ (or ‘cover over it’). Considering the archaeological evidence, this could correspond to one of two practices: the wrapping of the amulet (and brick) with linen (Monnet 1951, 152, n. 8), or more probably the sealing of the niche, making it invisible behind the wall decoration. A few niches were found unsealed, for example in the tombs of Amenhotep III (wooden panel), Tutankhamun (plastered and painted rough splinters of limestone) and Nefertari (stone slab). The four spells never refer to the wrapping of the bricks and amulets with linen, even though such a practice is attested from as early as the reign of Amenhotep II (e.g., Davoli 2004, 64, 74, KV 48 of Amenemipet). Only the western (djed) spell specifies the wrapping of the djed-pillar in royal linen. This instruction seems not to have been systematically applied. In 1929, Mond and Emery discovered an unviolated niche in a Theban tomb, TT 97 of Amenemhat; once the sealing plaster had been removed, a magical brick decorated with a djed-pillar was revealed, not covered by any piece of cloth (Davoli 2004, 65–67, 75). Furthermore, in the photographs taken immediately after the opening of the niches in the tomb of Tutankhamun, all the amulets appear covered with linen, with the notable exception of the djed-pillar (Desroches-Noblecourt 1963, 76–77, fig. 41 a–d); yet this amulet is the only one which should be covered according to the text.

In fact, the western spell prescribes that the covering (db3) has to be made ‘with earth.’ The sequence db3 hr=f thus clearly refers to the sealing of the niches. The practice of using linen to wrap the amulets and bricks is a divergence from the papyrus tradition, as this practice was only required for the djed-amulet but was applied to other bricks.\footnote{Usually Hbs, but the stela of Kasa employs the verb db3.}

Location
A stipulation ‘make for it [i.e., the brick with amulet] a niche in the wall’ forms part of BD 151, yet the cavities are not always present. The earliest known royal and private examples of bricks were not placed in niches, namely those of the vizier Amenemhat (TT 82) and Thutmosis III. Niches appear for the first time in a private tomb (that of User, vizier under Thutmosis III), and later in royal burials, beginning with that of Amenhotep II. Nonetheless, niches were not universally adopted: bricks were placed directly upon the floor of the burial chamber in some tombs.

Orientation
The final divergence between the textual tradition and the archaeological evidence concerns the orientation of the bricks. These rarely reflect true geographical orientation, and it is possible that a ritual orientation was re-created underground in the burial chamber. In that case, the orientation of the objects would correspond with the conception of the burial chamber, a point that cannot be developed further here.

\footnote{Similarly, incense particles are mentioned only for the Anubis amulet, but are found elsewhere.}
Why does reality not match the text?

In this paper, I have referred to ‘differences’ between the ideal application of the ritual, based on texts, and what archaeological evidence reveals as to the practical application of the ritual. Is it implicit in such a discussion that the text predates the application? A funerary corpus such as the Pyramid Texts is now recognised as a late codification of earlier oral traditions and practices (Mathieu 1999, 16), and I prefer to adopt the same reasoning in relation to BD 151.

The ‘differences’ encountered can be ascribed to error, or innovation. In both cases, it is the human element that is concerned, and divergences defined by us as mistakes may not have been recognised as such by the ancient Egyptians. Any innovation was presumably introduced to enhance the efficiency of the ritual.

Thus to ensure the ritual was effective for eternity, several innovations were introduced:

1) Make the equipment less fragile by (a) choosing a more long-lasting material to ensure the durability of the text, for example the limestone stelae of Kasa to hold the clay brick, or the use of fired bricks; or (b) replacing fragile amuletic figurines with depictions or imprints on the bricks.

2) Multiply the sources to enhance the chances of survival: the tomb of Sennefer was equipped with magical bricks and a vignette of BD 151 on one of the walls of the burial chamber (Gundlach et al. 1981, 49, fig. 33). Sennefer may also have owned a papyrus containing BD 151. Another example is the ‘doubling’ of amulets to include both amulet and drawing thereof.

3) Enhance security: in the tombs of the kings, niches were progressively placed higher up the wall. Early examples were level with the sarcophagus, while later niches were directly beneath the ceiling.

4) Combine different rituals: perhaps rites relating to magical bricks and a flame ritual were enacted at the closing of the tomb? The choice of a figurine of Osiris is a further guarantee of efficacy.

5) Combine different texts: the southern stela of Kasa features the new text of the flame, echoing BD 137A.

The term ‘interpretation’ is relevant here: each generation adapts and appropriates the text, bringing its personal touch, part of the process of the creation of a cultural heritage. Throughout their history, Egyptians continuously glossed, improved and corrected texts. They thus reconciled the ‘impératif de conformité’ and ‘impératif de surpassement’ (Vernus 1995, 90–92). Those imperatives apply not only to the ritual text, but also to its archaeological performance.

The relationship between textual tradition and related practical applications of the rituals deserves more consideration, particularly in relation to the Book of the Dead.

*Cover image:* magical bricks and amulets, British Museum EA 41544–41547, courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.
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Fig. 1: Northern stela of Kasa, Marseilles inv. 240 (from Naville 1878, pl. 12).
Fig. 2: Osiris brick of Tutankhamun, Cairo Egyptian Museum JE 61377, copyright Alain Lecler, IFAO.

http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/online_journals/bmsaes/issue_15/regen.aspx
Fig. 3: Torch brick of Tutankhamun, Cairo Egyptian Museum JE 62357 + 87851, copyright Alain Lecler, IFAO.