Quipus and Witches' Knots

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Chapter Two: Magic Knots

1. Homeopathic and Contagious Magic

When Macbeth, in Shakespeare's tragedy, exhorts the witches to unlock the secrets of his fate, even if they have to "untie the winds" and set them free to "swallow navigation up," he is speaking literally, not metaphorically: he means precisely what he says. For flesh-and-blood witches in Shakespeare's day sold wind-knots to mariners in many English and Continental ports, and a majority of the members of Shakespeare's audiences, like Macbeth himself, believed—we cannot doubt it—that witches could imprison the wind in knotted strings and handkerchiefs.

And when Robert Burns, in his "Address to the Deil," warns his readers to beware of the "mystic knots" that "make great abuse" on young married men by rendering them sexually impotent, he is speaking of the dread Nestelknüpfen or ligaturae, outlawed by Church and State, yet still being tied in Scotland, among other places, at the end of the Age of Enlightenment and Reason. Primitive and unsophisticated people everywhere and in every age have believed in the magic power, for good or evil, of knots.

It is difficult for us in the scientifically oriented twentieth century to understand how it was ever possible for anybody, no matter how primitive and unsophisticated, to believe in magic, for magic violates what we have become accustomed to thinking of as the self-evident laws of natural cause and effect. We must remember, however, that primitive man did not view the universe in the same way we do. He thought of the universe as something sentient and alive. The Sun and the Moon, for primitive man, were deities; disease and death were the work of devils; and he took it for granted that a mysterious spiritual power which anthropologists call mana (a Polynesian word) animates all
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things both material and immaterial. Primitive man, reasoning from such premises, may be pardoned for believing in what he would have called, perhaps—if he had been given to conscious metaphysical analysis—the self-evident laws of extra-natural cause and effect.

Magic does, indeed, seem to function in accordance with more or less systematic laws. Tylor calls it a systematic pseudo-science based on a fallacious association of ideas. Frazer calls it the precursor of religion. Magic, he says, seeks to coerce the supernatural; religion seeks to propitiate it. MARETT, HUBERT, and PREUSS stress the dynamic role in magic of mana.¹

Frazer distinguishes two kinds of magic: homeopathic (or imitative) and contagious. Both kinds conform to what he calls the Law of Sympathy, or the Law that “like produces like.” Things act on each other, even at a distance, according to this Law, (1) if they are alike in some relevant respect, or (2) if they were formerly joined or in contact with each other. The first of these conditions obtains in homeopathic magic, the second in contagious magic.

Sticking pins into a waxen image of an enemy in order to hurt or kill him is an example of homeopathic magic. So also is the use of bear grease as a cure for baldness; for like produces like, according to the Law of Sympathy, and bears are very hairy animals. Contagious magic is illustrated by the belief that it is possible to gain power over an enemy by getting hold of a lock of his hair or a piece of his clothing. For this reason the hair clippings, the nail parings, and even the spittle of primitive chieftains were sometimes scrupulously protected lest they be stolen and put to harmful magic use.

The importance of knots in magic is due in part to the symbolic relationship between their function as a useful tool (to bind and to tie) and the constraint that magic in general imposes, so primitive people believe, on all sorts of natural and supernatural phenomena. “The ancients,” says Kirby Smith, “habitually associated the processes of magic with the ideas of binding, tying up, nailing down, and their opposites. A magic act is a κατάδεσσις, a κατάδεσσις, a δεσίο, a δεβίντιο; the removal of its effect is an ἀνάλυσις, a σωλοτίο.” “The primary object and supposed result of every charm,” he remarks, “is some form of restraint.”²

“The act of tying a knot,” says Dilling, “implies something 'bound,'
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and hence the action becomes a spell towards hindering the actions of other persons or things. Similarly, the act of loosening a knot implies the removal of the impediment caused by the knot, and from this belief are derived the various customs of unloosing knots, unlocking and opening doors and cupboards, and setting free captive animals at any period when undesirable hindrance of any event is feared."

Magic knots exemplify the principles of homeopathic magic. They are presumed (by primitive people) to have power over the following phenomena: (1) the weather; (2) disease and death; (3) sex (including love, marriage, conception, and childbirth); and (4) spirits, demons, and deities. These categories are not mutually exclusive, and instances are found that do not fit into any of them.

The influence of magic knots may be: (1) either maleficent or beneficent; (2) either intentional or spontaneous; (3) effective either at close range or at a distance; (4) effective either at once or after a lapse of time; and (5) the work either of a layman or of a professional (a witch, a wizard, or a medicine man).

When the influence is intentional—that is, when it is consciously directed by the person who ties the knot—the knot may be tied either in silence or in conjunction with the utterance of a magic spell. Blowing or spitting on a magic knot is sometimes supposed to increase its power. A beneficent knot may be either actively beneficent or passively apotropaic (protective).

2. WIND AND RAIN

Rain makers and wind brokers flourish in primitive communities where survival depends on the amount of rainfall and the strength and direction of the wind.

Rain makers rely on homeopathic rituals like dripping water down through the leaves of trees in imitation of rain, and blowing water out of the mouth through the lips in imitation of mist. They do not use knots, because knots inhibit and restrain, and would cause the rain to stop rather than to make it fall. In northern India, for example, where there is apt to be too much rain, the inhabitants of Mirzapur "name twenty-one men who are blind of an eye, tie twenty-one knots in a cord, and fix it under the eaves of the house in order to bind the rain."

Wind brokers profess to be able to bind the wind with knots so that
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it can be carried aboard a ship for use during a voyage. Thus in the Odyssey (to cite what is probably the earliest allusion in literature to wind-knots), Æolus, king of the winds, gives Ulysses a bag with all the winds except the west wind tied up in it by means of a silver cord. After a favorable voyage of nine days, Ulysses falls asleep at the helm, and his men open the bag in order to share the treasure they imagine it contains. The conflicting winds burst forth, and the ship, though in sight of Ithaca, is driven back to Æolus's magic island.  

Wind-knots reappear in literature in the fourth century A. D. During the reign of Constantine the Great, a man by the name of Sopater was put to death in Constantinople "on a charge of binding the winds by magic, because it happened that the corn-ships of Egypt and Syria were detained afar off by calms or head winds, to the rage and disappointment of the hungry Byzantine rabble."  

During the Middle Ages, and even as late as the present century, a considerable traffic in wind-knots was carried on in the seaports of Finland, Lapland, Denmark, Ireland, Shetland, the Orkneys, the Hebrides, the Isle of Man, and elsewhere. "In that ilond [the Isle of Man]," wrote Ranulf Higden in the fourteenth century, "is sortilege and wicchecraft i-vsed. For wommen there sellith to schipmen wynde, as it were i-closed vnder thre knottes of threde, so that the more wynd he wol haue, he wil vnknnette the mo knottes."  

The wind brokers of the North, unlike Æolus, usually tried to control the strength of the wind rather than its direction. Thomas Nash, however, one of Shakespeare's contemporaries, asserts that the witches of Ireland and Denmark will sell a man a wind that will "blow him safe unto what coast he will." Three knots in a thread, he says, or an old "grandams blessing in the corner of a napkin, will carry you all the world over." When a man frowns, Nash remarks, he knits his brows; but "let a wizard knit a noose . . . & it is haile, storm, and tempest a month after."  

The witches and wizards of Finland and Lapland were especially celebrated as wind brokers. Olaus Magnus, writing in 1555, has this to say about them:  

The Finlanders were wont formerly amongst their other Errors of Gentilisme, to sell Wines to Merchants, that were stopt on their
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Coasts by contrary Weather; and when they had their price, they knit three Magical knots, not like to the Laws of Cassius, bound up with a Thong, and they gave them unto the Merchants; observing that rule, that when they unloosed the first, they should have a good Gale of Wind: when the second, a stronger wind: but when they untied the third, they should have such cruel Tempests, that they should not be able to look out of the Forecastle to avoid the Rocks, nor move a foot to pull down the Sails, nor stand at the Helm to govern the ship: and they made an unhappy trial of the truth of it, who denied that there was any such power in those knots.\

An ancient Norse myth tells how the lame smith Volundr, whose father was a Finnish king, had a supply of wind-knots in his smithy. “A long rope of bast hung there, with knots in it at regular intervals. In each and every knot a storm wind was bound. Each week he untied a knot and freed the wind that was bound in it, and sent it south with his mad song, charged with clouds and hail.”

The Laplanders, according to Giles Fletcher (1588), give their friends good winds, and “contrary to other, whom they meane to hurt, by tying of certaine knots vpon a rope (somewhat like to the tale of Æolus his windbag).” And Knud Leems, in his account of the Laplanders (1767), tells of a Lapland witch who confessed that she and three other witches had assumed the forms of birds (an eagle, a swan, a crow, and a dove), put to sea in a tub, and destroyed a ship by invoking the devil and untying knots.

Richard Eden (1555) says that the Lapps were expert enchanters. “They tye three knottes on a strynge,” he says, and when they “lose” one, “they rayse tollerable wyndes. When they lose an other, the wynde is more vehement. But by losyng the thyrde, they rayse playne tempestes.”

Peder Claussøn Friis (1545-1614) writes that a Lapp who lived in Norway claimed to be able to raise any wind he wanted, especially the wind that was blowing when he was born. He sold the usual three knots to mariners, and advised them to use the second knot. Untying the third knot, he said, would result in shipwreck and loss of life.

The peasants of Esthonia used to blame the witches of Finland for the bitter northeast winds that sweep down in the spring across the
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Gulf of Finland, "bringing ague and rheumatic inflammations in their train." An Esthonian song, quoted by Frazer, runs as follows:

Wind of the Cross! rushing and mighty!
Heavy the blow of thy wings sweeping past!
Wild wailing winds of misfortune and sorrow,
Wizards of Finland ride by on the blast.

The witches of Macbeth, as befits their Northern character, have power over the wind:

2 [Witch]. Ile give thee a Winde.
1. Th' art kinde.
3. And I another.
1. I myself have all the other;
   And the very ports they blow,
   All the quarters that they know
   I' th' shipman's card.

And so, equipped with the winds she needs, the first witch proposes to sail to Aleppo in a sieve in order to wreak vengeance on the master of the Tiger, whose wife (a "rump-fed ronyon," in her opinion) has insulted her.

1. Though his bark cannot be lost,
   Yet it shall be tempest-tost.—
   Look what I have.
2. Show me, show me.
1. Here I have a pilot's thumb,
   Wrackt as homeward he did come.

Shakespeare, like Homer and the unknown Esthonian bard whose verses are quoted above, wrings poetry from the superstition.

3. SICKNESS AND DISEASE

The belief that magic knots can cure all kinds of ills is common in every age and in all parts of the world. In Babylonia and Assyria, as we know from a number of cuneiform tablets dating from the eighth century B.C., knots were used to cure headaches and other ailments. The following prescription is from Tablet IX in the British Museum:
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Take cedar . . . and
Plait a triple cord . . . and
Tie twice seven knots and
Perform the Incantation of Eridu and
Bind the head of the sick man,
That the evil Spirit, the evil Demon, may stand aside,
And a kindly Spirit, a kindly Genius be present.\(^{18}\)

This prescription is interesting for a number of reasons, and in particular because the knots are tied in the plaited bark of a tree. In magic, once a rite or formula is established, it tends to remain fixed and unaltered even after the original reasons for some of the details have been forgotten. Since the Babylonians and Assyrians were capable spinners and weavers, it is conceivable that the use of bark instead of woolen cords in the present rite may have been the vestige of a tradition that had been established before spinning was invented, when only the crudest sort of cordage was as yet available.

We have here, therefore, a clue to the antiquity of magic knots. "We are justified in assuming," says Thompson, referring to the prescriptions of which the one quoted above is an example, "that we have in our hands at the present time tolerably accurate copies of the exorcisms and spells which the Sumerian and his Babylonian successor employed some six or seven thousand years ago, to avert the attacks of devils, and to ward off malign influences of every kind."\(^{19}\) This, I suggest, is a conservative estimate of the age of magic knots.

The prescription quoted above does not provide any hints as to how the knots were supposed to effect the removal of the headache. Another prescription, however, indicates that the evil was thought to be bound by the knots, as if it were a tangible object, so that it could be removed to a distant place and disposed of:

He hath turned his [steps?] to a Temple-woman (?),
Istar hath sent her Temple-woman (?),
Hath seated the wise woman on a couch,
That she may spin white and black wool into a double cord,
A strong cord, a mighty cord, a twi-colored cord on a spindle,
A cord to overcome the Ban:
Against the evil curse of human Ban,
Against a divine curse,
A cord to overcome the Ban.
He hath bound it on the head,
On the hand and foot of this man,
Marduk, the son of Eridu, the Prince,
With his undefiled hands cutteth it off,
That the Ban—its cord—
May go forth to the desert, to a clean place,
That the evil Ban may stand aside,
And this man may be clean and undefiled,
Into the favouring hands of his god may he be commended. 20

Knots in which sickness is thought to be bound are often thrown into running water. In modern Rumania a woman reputed to be a sorceress used the following prescription to cure a man of lumbago. Laying her hands obliquely across the man’s back, she tied nine knots in a hempen cord, and as she tied each knot she uttered one of the following charms:

1. I do not bind the knot, but the pain in the heart. 2. I do not bind the knot, but the pain in the intestines. 3. I do not bind the knot, but the pain in the liver. And so on 4. for the ribs, 5. for the shoulders, 6. for the breast, 7. for the throat, 8. for the neck, ears, and teeth, 9. for all the joints and all the other parts of the body.” 21

The sorceress then put the cord into a pitcher of water, uttered another charm, laid the cord crosswise on the patient’s breast, and left it there three days. Then she threw the cord with its knots into running water—not into a well, for fear that if she did so, the people who drank from the well would also get lumbago.

Another way to get rid of an illness was to tie it to a tree. In nineteenth-century Germany, a peasant who had a fever would attach a straw to the trunk of a tree and utter certain charms, and the tree, he thought, would contract the fever. Or, according to another variation of the formula, he would wrap a blue woolen thread nine times round a toe of his left foot, wear it for several days, go before sunset to an elder bush, tie a knot in it, and say: “Good evening, Mr. Elder, here I bring my fever; I tie it to you and go on my way.” 22

In Holland, a peasant with a cold would go to a willow tree, tie three knots in a branch, and say: “Good morning, old fellow, I give you my cold, good morning, old fellow.” In New England, a cure for the
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Ague was to tie the left hand loosely to an apple tree with a string made of three-colored woolen yarn, slip the hand quickly out of the knot, and run home without looking back.  

Frazer cites numerous instances from England and the Continent of the belief that gout, warts, fever, and other ills can be transferred to trees, either by means of knots, or in some other way. The "still, sad music of humanity" is audible in Frazer's description of the following practice:

"Not far from Marburg, at a place called Neuhof, there is a wood of birches. Thither on a morning before sunrise, in the last quarter of the moon, bands of gouty people may often be seen hobbling in silence. Each of them takes his stand before a separate tree and pronounces these solemn words: 'Here stand I before the judgment bar of God and tie up all my gout. All the disease in my body shall remain tied up in this birch-tree.' Meanwhile the good physician ties a knot in a birch-twig."  

4. MISCELLANEOUS CURES

In the Punjab a cure for hemorrhoids is to tie a cotton thread of five colors round the big toe at night, and to wear it for a fortnight, ending on a Tuesday. A cure for a snake bite among the Veddas in Ceylon is to utter a charm and tie a string made of human hair round the limb above the bite. Medicine men in Togoland carry black and white cords, and they wind magic cords round the arms of sick people so that the evil spirits will depart from their bodies. In the Highlands of Scotland black and white thread used to be wound round the limbs of people and animals who were thought to have been touched by the evil eye. The Musquakie Indians wore magic headbands to cure headaches. The izze-kloth, or sacred medicine cord of the Apaches, was believed capable of working all kinds of miracles, including the healing of the sick. The 'ukād in modern Egypt is a woolen cord with seven knots, over each of which a charm has been uttered, and each of which has been blown on by a magician. It is used to cure colds and fevers, and is often hung round the necks of children.  

An ancient Assyrian cure for ophthalmia was to twist black and white hairs together, tie "seven and seven" knots in them while uttering a charm, and fasten the black hair to the sick eye and the white hair
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to the sound eye. To cure an unspecified ailment, a Babylonian priest spoke the words "Ea hath sent me" three times, and untied a knot that had previously been tied. Then the sick man had to go away without looking back.

The elder Pliny (died 79 A.D.), in his extensive account of ancient folk medicine, includes several magic remedies that involve knots. For catarrh and ophthalmia, he says, the "magicians" recommend that the fingers of the right hand be tied together with a linen thread. For sores on the thighs due to riding a horse, they say that the groin should be rubbed with the foam from a horse's mouth, and three horsehairs, in which three knots are tied, should be placed in the sore. For quartan fever, wrap a caterpillar in linen, pass a thread three times round it, and tie three knots, repeating each time the reason for doing so. Or wrap a nail or cord from a crucifixion in wool, tie it round the patient's neck, and after the patient is cured, hide it in a hole where the sun cannot shine on it. For inguinal tumors, take a thread from a loom, tie seven or nine knots in it, at each knot naming a widow, and attach it to the groin. For swellings of the groin, tie the big toe and the toe next to it together. To facilitate the capture of a hyena, a hunter should tie seven knots in his girdle and seven knots in his whip.

Magic remedies, Pliny admits in a moment of candor, are usually fraudulent. "And by Heavens!" he says, "the disappointment is well deserved if they prove to be of no avail." Such skepticism is commendable, in the first century A.D., of course; but unfortunately the innocent were as likely as the gullible to suffer the consequences of the quackery of the "magicians" (as Pliny called the medicine men of antiquity). Thus the mummy of a little girl who died about 1000 B.C. was found some years ago by the Egyptian Expedition of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Knotted strings were tied round her throat, elbows, wrists, and ankles, and each string had a magic number of knots in it—seven, fourteen, twenty-one—in the empty hope, presumably, of binding the sickness demon and rendering it harmless. But if the knots did the child no good, at least they did her no harm—no harm, that is, in comparison with the harm her physician did her if he prescribed, as he probably did, any of the nostrums that Pliny says were made in ancient times of sputum, blood, urine, and other equally loathsome ingredients.

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During an epidemic of smallpox in Malaya in 1899, to cite a modern example, many small children who had contracted the disease were set adrift in boats in order that they might take the disease away with them. Sheltering them if they drifted back to shore was a crime punishable by death. "Slip-knots tied in strips of cocoanut leaf" were placed in the boats, "some of them having been ceremonially pulled undone in contact with the patient's forehead to loose the disease from him, and some of them still untied [i.e., tied?], probably to keep the spirit fast in the ship." 36

5. Knot Amulets

Knots, so primitive people have always believed, possess preventive as well as curative powers. They have been widely used, therefore, as amulets, for protection against illness, hostile spirits, the evil eye, the spells of witches, and other malign influences. The knots discussed in the preceding sections are intended by those who tie them to cure ills already incurred. Apotropaic knots, as amuletic knots are sometimes called, are tied as a precaution against present and future dangers.

The relationship between knots and amulets is an intimate one. Linguistic evidence suggests that knots were among the earliest and most important prehistoric amulets. In Russia the words for amulet (náuzū) and knot (úzelū) are etymologically related, and one of the words for wizard is Uzol'nik (knot-tier). 37 In Hebrew literature the charmer or enchanter is called hobar haber, "which means a man who ties (magic) knots." 38

The prophet Isaiah (47:19) denounces Babylon for the multitude of its sorceries and the great abundance of its enchantments, but according to Gandz, the passage means, translated literally, "the great abundance of its knots." 39 "In postbiblical Aramaic literature," says Gandz, "the amulet is called qami'a, meaning originally a knot and then something suspended or attached by a knot." 40 In present-day Indonesia, all magic charms are called "knot-tying." 41

Among some thirty or more Egyptian hieroglyphics which represent string, cord, rope, and the like, at least five have amuletic significance. 42 The sign 帳, which represents either a rope hobble for cattle or just
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a string of magic knots, means “amulet” or “protection.” The ankh sign \( \text{\textcircled{\text{\( \mu \)}}} \), which represents some sort of tie or strap, means “life, living.” Egyptian artists often picture it in the hands of men, women, and deities, and the life of every individual, human or divine, was thought to depend on the possession of it. A variant of the ankh sign, known as the tyet amulet \( \text{\textcircled{\text{\( \mu \)}}} \), signifies “life” and “welfare.” Both the ankh sign and the tyet amulet are found in art as early as the Third Dynasty.

The sign \( \text{\textcircled{\text{-}}} \) represents a ribbon or piece of folded cloth or cord, and like the ankh sign is often depicted in the hands of gods and men. It, too, has amuletic significance, for it is used in the abbreviated cliché \( \text{\textcircled{\text{\( \mu \)}}} \text{\textcircled{\text{-}}} \), which stands for “may he live, be prosperous, be healthy.” The names of Egyptian kings, furthermore, were inscribed in round or oblong spaces called cartouches, encircled by a double rope, which served, it has been suggested, as a magical protection for the king’s name.

The Greek word δεσμός means, literally, “knot,” but also “spell” or “charm,” and κατάδεσμος means both “binding fast” and “enchantment.” The word ἁμα means merely “knot,” but the compound περιάμα means “something worn about the body” or “amulet.” And ἱμάς, which means “strap” or “thong,” is also the word for Aphrodite’s magic girdle.

The Latin words fascia and fascina mean “band” or “bandage” and “bundle of sticks” respectively. Fascino means “bewitch,” fascinato means “enchanter,” and fascinum means “witchcraft.” The etymological kinship of fascino to fascia and fascina is dubious, but the Romans probably did not think so. In English, the original meaning of “fascinate” was “bewitch.” The skeptical Lucretius, in the first century B.C., refers obliquely to magic knots as follows: Artis religionum animum nodis exsolvere pergo (I hasten to free the mind from the tight knots of religion).

Several ancient Egyptian amulets made of knotted strings have been found and are preserved in European museums. One of them, in Berlin, has seven overhand knots and a square knot joining the ends, very similar, presumably, to the modern ‘\( u\text{\textk\textd} \) mentioned on page 49 above. Several others, which are in the Egyptian collection at University College, London, are pictured in Petrie’s book Amulets.
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6. THE HERCULES KNOT

In addition to these string amulets, some remarkable square knots and square-knot forms made of gold and wood have been found in Egypt from time to time. Howard Carter, for example, found two flat gold “amuletic knots of unknown meaning” on Tut-Ankh-Amen’s mummy, on either side of the thorax, parallel to the arms. A line drawing of one of them, showing the square-knot motif in the center, is included among the illustrations of the Hercules knot on page 57 below (Fig. 2).

Seventeen small square knots from the Twelfth Dynasty (about 2000 B.C.) were found by Morgan at Dahshur. They are of hollow gold, about three centimeters long, and were formerly thought to have belonged to a necklace. Fifteen of them represent the square knot alone, with the ends cut off short. One represents the stems of two lotus blossoms knotted together, and one represents the stems of two papyrus blossoms knotted together. Similar gold knots have subsequently been found at other sites, and different conjectures have been offered as to their purpose. Winlock, commenting on several from El Lähün, believes that they may have been used as catches on garments, or as shoulder clasps for light dresses. But whatever their practical function may have been, there can be no doubt that they had amuletic significance. Two of them are pictured on page 57 below (Fig. 4).

Three square knots made of wood, about 14.5 centimeters long, were found at Deir el Bahri by the Egyptian Expedition of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. They are inscribed with the name of Queen Hat-shepsüt, and date from about 1500 B.C. A line drawing of one of them is provided on page 57 (Fig. 3).

The Greeks and Romans called the square knot the Hercules knot (Greek Ἡρακλεωτικόν ἱμμα or Ἡράκλειος δεσμός; Latin nodus Herculis, Herculeus, or Herculaneus) and thought that it had beneficent magic power. Pliny, in his Natural History, says that wounds are supposed to heal with remarkable rapidity if they are bound with a Hercules knot, and that it is useful to tie the girdle with it every day, “for,” he adds, “Demetrius wrote a treatise in which he states that the number four is one of the prerogatives of Hercules.” Demetrius is believed to have been a physician who lived about 200 B.C., but the relevance of the
number four to the square knot is obscure. The point may be, perhaps, that the square knot is, in fact, square: it has four corners from which four cords project, one from each corner.

The ancients may have attributed special amuletic power to the Hercules knot because Hercules, its supposed inventor, was worshiped as a savior (σωτήρ) and averter of evil (ἀλεξιακός). Or they may have thought that, like the cowrie shell, it resembled the female generative organs. A Roman bride customarily wore a girdle of wool tied with a Hercules knot, and upon arriving at her husband’s house, she anointed the doorposts and tied woolen threads round them. In the bridal chamber her husband untied the Hercules knot in her girdle as an omen of fruitfulness.

The square knot is the only knot that is realistically portrayed in ancient art. In Egypt it is shown as a shoulder knot, a girdle knot, a necklace knot, and independently (as we have seen) as a golden or wooden amulet. It is often used as part of the design of Egyptian thrones, and it symbolizes, when so used, the union of Lower and Upper Egypt. It is worked into the handles of a number of vases of a kind called, appropriately, the Hercules vase (σκύφος Ἡρακλεωτικός); it sometimes joins the heads of the two serpents in Mercury’s caduceus or wand; it is the girdle knot in many statues of deities and mortals (Athena and Roman vestals, for example); and it turns up in rings, clasps, bracelets, and other kinds of jewelry. Drawings illustrative of these uses will be found on pages 55-57.

Greek and Roman artists had little occasion to depict any knots other than the Hercules knot. Egyptian artists did, and yet they deliberately refrained from doing so. When they represented a knot in an otherwise realistic scene of daily life on the wall of a mastaba or tomb, they avoided realism and resorted to meaningless and conventionalized curves. “As the Egyptian artists, in both the Old and Middle Kingdom, were accurate in detail,” writes Margaret Murray, “we can only suppose that these subterfuges were intentional, and were due not to incapacity on the part of the artist to represent so small an object but to some religious or superstitious feeling in representing a knot that could never be untied.” This taboo, however, if that is what it was, evidently did not apply to the square knot. (Examples of the way Egyptian artists avoided realism when drawing knots are shown on pages 58-59.)
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THE HERCULES KNOT

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THE HERCULES KNOT

1. Illustration of a Hercules knot in use.
2. Diagram of a simple knot.
3. Diagram of a more complex knot.
4. Diagram of a decorative knot.
5. Diagram of a knot tied around the waist.
6. Diagram of a knot tied around the neck.
7. Diagram of a knot tied around the arm.
8. Diagram of a knot tied around the leg.
9. Diagram of a knot tied around the head.
10. Diagram of a knot tied around the ankle.
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SACRAL KNOTS

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THE HERCULES KNOT
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1. A colossal statue of Herakles from Cyprus, with damaged nose and mouth, wearing a lion’s skin. About 600 B.C. The paws are tied together with a Hercules knot (*Herakleios desmos, Herakleotikon hamma, nodus Herculeus, nodus Herculaneus*). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Cesnola Collection; purchased by subscription, 1874-1876.

2. The torso of a youthful votary, lacking head and feet, found at Old Paphos in Cyprus by J.H. Iliffe and T.B. Mitford, leaders of the Kouklia Expedition (1950). The “Cypriote belt” or loin cloth is tied with a Hercules knot. About 600 B.C. From a photograph in *The Illustrated London News*, January 20, 1951, p. 105. The Metropolitan Museum of Art owns an earlier statue of a Cypriote votary (about 750 to 700 B.C.) with loin cloth and Hercules knot.


5. The statue of a goddess, now in Lucknow, from a Buddhist temple in the north of India near Mathura. Date: 3rd century A.D. From a photograph in Réalités, July, 1965, p. 56.

6. The girdle of a vestal virgin (Rome). From a drawing in Hjalmar Öhrvall, *Om Knutar*, 1916, p. 204. Öhrvall cites Heinrich Jordan, *Der Tempel der Vesta und das Haus der Vestalinnen*, 1886, Figs. 2, 7, 9, 10, and 17, which, he says, illustrate statues of vestals with knotted girdles.

THE HERCULES KNOT
(see page 56)

1. Top and side views of a marble representation of the sacred Omphalos (or navel of the earth). Knots that have the approximate form of Hercules knots may be seen here and there in the netlike fillet that is carved in relief on the surface of the stone. From a sketch in Otto Benndorf and Richard Schöne, *Die Antiken Bildwerke des Lateranensischen Museums*, 1867, Plate 11. The Omphalos was associated with the cult of Apollo in
fifth-century Greece. A representation of it (now lost) stood between two golden eagles near the sacrificial hearth and the golden statue of Apollo in the temple of Apollo at Delphi. Another representation, which Pausanias saw outside the temple in the second century (Description of Greece, X.xvi.3), has been found and is now in the Museum at Delphi. Euripides, Strabo, Plutarch, and other ancient authors mention the Omphalos; nearly every Greek city had a copy of it; and it is depicted (with many variations) on coins, vases, and reliefs—covered, as a rule, by a fillet of wool, which (like the Hercules knot) was thought to possess special protective and curative powers. See Daremberg and Saglio’s Dictionnaire des Antiquités Grecques et Romaines, s. v. “Omphalos,” IV (n. d.), pp. 197-200.

2. Mercury’s caduceus or wand. A Hercules knot, in this representation, joins the heads of the two serpents. From a sketch in Daremberg and Saglio’s Dictionnaire des Antiquités Grecques et Romaines, s. v. “nodus,” IV, Fig. 5323. According to Athenagoras’s Apology (XX), the knot in the caduceus symbolizes the union of Jupiter and Rhea, for Jupiter bound Rhea to himself with a Hercules knot. Macrobius, on the other hand (Convivia Saturnalia, I.xix.16), says that the caduceus represents the union of the male and female serpent and symbolizes necessity.

3. The handle of an ancient vase in the Naples Museum. From a sketch in Daremberg and Saglio’s Dictionnaire des Antiquités Grecques et Romaines, s. v. “nodus,” IV, Fig. 5324. Athenaeus (XI.500a) calls vases of this sort skyphoi Herakleotikoi (σκύφοι Ἡρακλεωτικοί).

4. A clasp with Hercules knot and Gorgon’s head. From a sketch in Daremberg and Saglio’s Dictionnaire des Antiquités Grecques et Romaines, s. v. “nodus,” IV, Fig. 5327. Both the Gorgon’s head and the Hercules knot were believed to possess amuletic power against the evil eye. The British Museum owns more than thirty Phoenician, Greek, Etruscan, and Roman earrings, bracelets, clasps, necklaces, rings, and sandal ornaments which employ the motif of the Hercules knot. See F. H. Marshall. Catalogue of the Jewelry . . . in . . . the British Museum, 1911.


THE HERCULES KNOT
(see page 57)

1. Two deities tying the square knot that symbolized the union of Upper and Lower Egypt (throne of a statue of Sesostris I, 1980-1935 B. C.). From a photograph in Schäfer and Andrae, Die Kunst des Alten Orients, Propyläen Verlag, Berlin, 1927, p. 297. This symbol of union occurs re-
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peatedly, with variations, in Egyptian art. See Penelope Fox, *Tutankhamen's Treasure*, 1951, Plate 6; Christiane Desroches-Noblecourt, *Tutankhamen*, 1963, Plates 4a, 10, 11c, and 12; and Lange and Hirmer, *Egypt*, 1961, Plates 36, 85, 86, 97, 104, 152, 190, 218, and 222.


3. A square knot in cedar about 14 centimeters long, discovered in a foundation deposit, temple of Hat-shepṣūt, Deir el Bahri, about 1500 B. C. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Museum Excavations, 1920-1922, Rogers Fund. Two square knots in ebony, inscribed with Hat-shepṣūt's name, were found by the Metropolitan's Egyptian Expedition in 1926-1927. (Accessions 22.3.258, 27.3.399.)

4. Two of several small gold knots found by Morgan in the last century, used as clasps or in necklaces, and presumably of amuletic significance. They have the square-knot form. Examples of various sizes, and different in detail, have been found by later expeditions. See J. J. M. de Morgan, *Fouilles à Dahchour*, I (1895), Plates 15 and 16; H. E. Winlock, *The Treasures of El Lahun*, 1934, Plates 9 and 13; and J. H. Breasted, *Geschichte Aegyptiens*, translated by Ranke, 1936, Fig. 329.

5. A wooden figure of Methethy, overseer of the estate of Unis, last king of the Fifth Dynasty. The neckpiece is fastened by a realistically represented square knot. Nelson Gallery-Atkins Museum (Nelson Fund), Kansas City, Missouri.


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The square knot or reef knot, as it is called in English, was sometimes accurately and realistically portrayed in Egyptian art. Other kinds of knots,
ordinarily, were not. The illustrations on pages 58-59, above, tend to support Margaret Murray's thesis (see above, page 54) that Egyptian artists habitually conventionalized their representations of knots, or resorted to subterfuges, in order to avoid depicting knots that could never be untied.

1. From N. de G. Davies, *The Mastabas of Ptahhetep and Akkathetep at Saqqareh*, Egypt Exploration Society, II (1901), Plate 21.
3. From *ibid.*, Plate 5.
4. From *ibid.*, Plate 5.
5. From N. de G. Davies, *The Mastabas of Ptahhetep and Akkathetep at Saqqareh*, Egypt Exploration Society, I (1900), Plate 22.
6. From *ibid.*, Plate 22.

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(see page 59)

1. From M. A. Murray, *Saqqara Mastabas*, British School of Archaeology in Egypt and B. Quaritch, II (1937), Plate 4.
4. From M. G. Maspéro, *Le Musée Égyptien Recueil de Monuments et de Notices sur les Fouilles d'Égypte*, III (1915), Plate 36. Volume I of this bibliographically confusing work was published by Eugène Grébaut in 1890-1900, and Volume II by Pierre Lacau in 1907. The knot shown here is known in English by various names: sheet bend, weaver's knot, becket hitch, simple bend, common bend, swab hitch, signal-halyard bend, and perhaps others. It is the only knot other than the square knot that is realistically represented in any of the books on Egyptian art that I have consulted. Is it possible that Maspéro's draftsman could have allowed his imagination to take control of his pencil? The men depicted are hauling on a bird trap. In a similar scene from Meir, accurate representation of what must have been the same knot is carefully avoided (A. M. Blackman, *The Rock Tombs of Meir*, II, 1915, Plate 4).
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8. From *ibid.*, I (1905), Plate 40.

SACRAL KNOTS
(see page 60)

1. A folded cloth or cord is seen in the hands of many Egyptian statues. It was used as a hieroglyph signifying health, and may be profitably compared with the cords, whether knotted or unknotted, which in other parts of the world have been thought to possess magic power. From A. M. Blackman, *The Rock Tombs of Meir*, Egypt Exploration Society, II (1915), Plate III.
2. The Isis knot, an unidentified knot of religious or magic significance. The mantle of the Egyptian goddess Isis is customarily tied with it in Roman statues of the goddess. From Daremberg and Saglio, *Dictionnaire des Antiquités Grecques et Romaines*, III, part i (n. d.), 579, Fig. 4095, s. v. "Isis."
3. One of Tehuti-hotep's daughters, wearing a head-dress that looks as if it were tied with a bowknot. From P. E. Newberry, *El Bersheh*, Egypt Exploration Society, I (1893), frontispiece. Actually, according to Margaret Murray, the fastening is not a bowknot, but rather "the conventional representation of a knot." See her article "Knots" in *Ancient Egypt*, I (1922), 17.
4. The Cretan votary shown here is known to scholars as the *petite Parisienne* because of her large eye and provocative lips. She is wearing what is thought to be the mysterious sacral knot of Crete. From Arthur Evans, *The Palace of Minos*, The Macmillan Company, I (1921), Fig. 311.
5. The sacral knot of Crete as painted on the wall of the palace at Niru Khane. From Arthur Evans, *The Palace of Minos*, The Macmillan Company, II, part i (1928), Fig. 168.
6. The sacral knot, carved in ivory, from Knossos. From Arthur Evans, *The Palace of Minos*, I (1921), Fig. 308.
7. One of several faience knots found by Schliemann at Mycenae. From Henry Schliemann, *Mycenae*, New York, 1878, p. 242. Schliemann thought they were made of alabaster. M. P. Nilsson has suggested that they were prizes for the winners of competitions (*The Minoan-Mycenaean Religion*, 1927, p. 137), but in view of the prevailing attitude toward knots in the ancient world, it is more likely that they had religious or magic significance.

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7. The Slip Knot

The mysterious Minoan knot-tassels found by Schliemann at Mycenae and by Evans in Crete are unlike anything else in ancient art. When first found in the graves of the Acropolis at Mycenae, they were thought to be mere ornaments. Later, however, many representations of them were found in the Palace of Minos at Knossos, some of them embossed on gold signet rings, some of them in wall paintings, and some of them executed in faience and ivory. Another explanation of them, therefore, had to be found, and it is now agreed that they had ritual or magic significance. Nilsson’s suggestion that they were either prizes or a detail of contemporary fashion does not accord with the attitude toward knots of other ancient people.

When viewed in perspective against the background of magic knots in general, the knotted tassels of Mycenae and Knossos are seen to be remarkable in an important respect: they are loop knots. They consist, that is to say, of a loop, a knot, and two ends. Although their identity cannot be established with anything like certainty, they may very well be ordinary slip knots. If so, a pull on the shorter end would loosen them at once.

The slip knot is never specifically mentioned by ancient authors as possessing magic power. It is a magic knot among the Lapps, however, and the Lapps are as likely as any modern people to have preserved the ancient superstitions concerning knots. “A Lapp whom I questioned concerning the knots used by Lapps,” writes Öhrvall, “made a slip knot of this sort [i.e., like the overhand slip knot that Öhrvall has just described] . . . and said that it was called a turknut or lyckoknut [luck knot]: also that to wear a cord tied round the neck with nine turknutar tied in it was thought by many Lapps to bring luck.”

Öhrvall suggests that the slip knot is especially suitable as a trollknut (troll knot or magic knot) because it vanishes with a pull on the end. Knots in general are closed, and therefore dangerous; but the overhand slip knot is the least closed and permanent of all knots. When the loop is reduced to the smallest possible circumference (Öhrvall says that it was so reduced in the turknutar tied by his informant), the slightest pull on the end will release it. Although closure is dangerous, the closure of a slip knot can be terminated at a moment’s notice.
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The Malay medicine man, says Skeat, in order to cast out the devil of sickness, makes little dough images and places them in a tray with a silver dollar and a taper. One end of a parti-colored thread is held by the patient, and the other end is placed between the taper and the dollar. The medicine man then utters magic spells to make the evil spirit pass along the thread into the objects on the tray. When he thinks this has been accomplished, he unties three slip knots, repeats another charm, and throws the remaining knots out of the house.56

Wolters describes a Greek vase on which a number of nude men and women are depicted with threads or strings tied round various parts of their bodies. Some of the strings have just one knot in them, others have several knots; and all, Wolters argues, represent amulets.57 Identification of the knots on the basis of Wolters’ illustrations is impossible, but since some of them consist of a loop, a knot, and two ends, they may be slip knots. If so, they provide an interesting analogy to the ritual knots of Mycenae and Knossos.

8. MISCELLANEOUS AMULETS

Colored cords (whether knotted or unknotted) and nets (because of their many knots) have always been esteemed as amulets. White cords customarily symbolize health, black cords disease and death, and red cords the blood of life. Cords made of wool are thought to possess especially great magic power. The following Assyrian charm shows that these conventions had become fixed at a very early date:

Bind white wool doubled in spinning on his bed, front and sides,
Bind black wool doubled in spinning on him,
On his left hand,
That there may enter no evil spirit, nor evil demon,
Nor evil ghost, nor evil devil, nor evil god, nor evil fiend,
Nor hag-demon, nor ghoul, nor robber-sprite,
Nor incubus, nor succuba, nor phantom-maid,
Nor sorcery, nor witchcraft, nor magic, nor calamity,
Nor spells that are not good—
That they may not lay their head to his,
Their hand to his,
Their feet to his,
That they may not draw nigh.58
In modern times, black woolen cords with knots in them have been used as amulets in the Hebrides, and red and red-and-white cords, with knots, in Macedonia. Cotton cords, half yellow and half white, and knotted at intervals, are worn by pregnant women in Togoland to protect themselves and their unborn children from evil influences. Musquakie Indians wore leg and head bands of special patterns and colors, and when asked why they did so, they always replied: “Luck band, luck band, bring heap good luck.”

Bridal couples and pregnant women require special protection against magic spells, and nets as well as knots have often been used to keep evil influences away from them. In parts of Russia, for example, a fish net used to be thrown over a bride after she was dressed because, presumably, all the knots in the net would have to be untied before she could be harmed. The groom and his companions were also provided with nets. The modern bridal veil reflects the once universal belief in such superstitions. Brides in ancient Israel wore knotted cords, and both bride and groom in aboriginal Australia wore amuletic red bands on their foreheads.

In pre-Communist China, the sedan chair in which a pregnant woman was carried was sometimes enclosed in a net. In northern India women hung up nets before childbirth to repel evil spirits, and in Luzon women had nets tattooed on their arms for the same reason.

The upper-class boy in ancient Rome wore a golden amulet called a bulla round his neck, but the son of poor parents had to be content with a knotted cord. Jewish children in Talmudic times wore knotted cords round their necks. In Togoland, cords are tied round the necks, arms, and feet of newborn babies in order to protect them from the charms of evil witches and wizards.

Knots and nets were once widely used to keep harmful spirits away from houses, cattle, and crops. In Armenia, Russia, and Bulgaria magic knots were believed capable of tying shut the mouths of predatory wolves. In central Africa a cord, hung on the door, was supposed to turn into a snake if a thief tried to enter in order to steal something. The Tena Indians of Alaska hung small nets over the doors and windows of their houses because they thought that evil demons, if they tried to get in, would become enmeshed in the knots. In Scotland, hemp cords which had been plaited with the left hand were tied round...
the necks of cattle at sundown in order to keep witches out of the barns. The Toradjas of Indonesia tie knotted palm leaves to poles at the entrances to rice paddies, and knotted grass to the doors of barns, because they imagine that the souls of the dead, which might want to return to earth in order to ruin the crops, would remain outside for fear of being caught in the knots.

To learn the proper time to sow seeds, the Toradja farmer in Indonesia goes to a priest at dusk and listens to the hoot of an owl. When he hears an auspicious hoot, he ties a knot in a blade of grass, buries the grass in the soil to be cultivated, and imagines that the success of the crop is bound up in the knot. If a traveler hears an inauspicious cry of a bird, he must remain for a night where he is, in order to give the evil time to spread and become harmless. But if he has to go on, he can tie a knot in some long grass, spit on it, put a chew of sirih-pinang beside it, and proceed on his way. The evil will remain tied up in the knot and in the deeply rooted grass.

To prevent the soul of the rice from departing and impoverishing the harvest, a Toradja girl goes alone to the paddy, binds from three to seven stalks of rice together, and ties some knots in them. In this way the soul of the rice is thought to be bound to the soil. The knotted plants remain uncut until the whole harvest has been gathered. At the end of every day's work, a knot is tied in the rice that has been cut last, and before the harvest is stored, herbs with knots in them are placed on the floor of the bin to tie the body and the soul of the rice together.

Even death can be repelled, so it used to be believed, by means of knots and knotted cords. Strings with knots in them were discovered round the neck of a convicted Scottish witch in 1572, and when they were taken away from her she lost all hope of being saved from death. During the Russo-Japanese War, the women of Japan prepared amuletic body-bands for their sons and husbands as a protection against cuts, thrusts, and bullets. The Russian insurgent chief Stenka Razin thought that the following charm would make him invulnerable:

"I attach five knots to each hostile, infidel shooter, over arquebuses, bows, and all manner of warlike weapons. Do ye, O knots, bar the shooter from every road and way, lock fast every arquebuse, entangle every bow, involve all warlike weapons, so that the shooters may not reach me with their arquebuses, nor may their arrows attain to me, nor
their warlike weapons do me hurt. In my knots lies hid the mighty strength of snakes—from the twelve-headed snake." 82

9. Maleficium

The mysterious power that is supposed to reside in knots, either because of the mana in them or because a sorcerer has uttered spells and charms over them, can be injurious as well as beneficial. Inconsistencies in usage sometimes arise as a result of this dichotomy. For example, in some communities brides wore nets in order to safeguard themselves from the evil eye and the malevolence of witches, whereas in others they made a point of untying all the knots and fastenings in their clothing just before the marriage ceremony. Such inconsistencies are due at least in part to the fact that the supposed effectiveness of a magic knot depends as much on the intentions of the person who ties the knot as on the virtues inherent in the knot itself.

Occasional instances are reported of the belief that knots can cause an enemy's death. Thus in Lapland certain women who were reputed to be witches, and no doubt thought of themselves as such, tied three knots in a linen towel in the name of the devil, spat on the knots, and "called the name of him they doomed to destruction." 83 Here the infernal invocation, the act of spitting, and the uttering of the victim's name determined the effect the knots were supposed to have. The act of spitting is to be interpreted as a way of imbuing the knots with something of the witch's own spiritual essence. Frazer in *The Golden Bough* calls attention to an allusion in the Koran to the mischief of "those who puff into knots." An Arab commentator on the passage, he says, explains that the words refer to women who tie magic knots and then blow and spit on them. 84

In Togoland it was believed that a medicine man could kill an enemy by tying a knot in a stalk of grass and then pronouncing the following curse: "I have tied up So-and-So in this knot. May all evil light upon him! When he goes into the field, may a snake sting him! When he goes to the chase, may a ravening beast attack him! And when he steps into the river, may the water sweep him away! When it rains, may the lightning strike him! May evil nights be his!" 85

In parts of Germany, as late as the nineteenth century, it was be-
lieved that an enemy could be killed by means of a knot in the branch of a willow tree.\textsuperscript{86} And in India, Persia, Arabia, Africa, Australia, New Guinea, and elsewhere, magic nets, snares, and knots have been, and in some instances probably still are, used as lethal weapons.\textsuperscript{87}

As a rule, however, witches and wizards have tied maleficent knots, not in order to kill people, but in order to inhibit their sex life, and in particular to render bridegrooms impotent. This kind of magic was called \textit{Nestelknüpfen} in Germany during the Middle Ages, \textit{nouer l'aguillette} in France, \textit{nälknytning} in Sweden, and \textit{asar} in medieval Hebrew. The legal term was \textit{ligatura}. To make a ligature was held to be a serious crime under Salic law in the fifth century,\textsuperscript{88} and Theodore of Tarsus pronounced the practice detestable in the seventh century.\textsuperscript{89} It was made punishable by excommunication in 1208,\textsuperscript{90} and by death according to a decree of the Council of Regensburg.\textsuperscript{91}

Prosecutions for the crime are recorded as late as the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. At the trial of Helen Isbuster on the Orkney Islands in 1685, it was charged that a man had been ruined by nine magic knots tied in a blue thread. In 1705 George and Lachlan Ratray were sentenced to death in Scotland for bewitching a man named Spalding, and destroying his wedded bliss, by means of magic knots. In 1718 the Parlement of Bordeaux sentenced a person to be burned alive for using knots to bewitch an entire family.\textsuperscript{92}

The severity of these sentences shows how great the fear of ligatures once was. Even comparatively enlightened people, while deploring the use that was made of them, believed in their efficacy. James I of England speaks in his book on demonology of the harm done by such “Devil's rudiments” as “staying maried folkes, to have naturallie adoe with other, by knitting so manie knottes vpon a poynyt at the time of their mariage.”\textsuperscript{93} Jean Bodin, on the other hand, with what seems like a measure of skeptical objectivity, refers to a peasant woman who told him in 1567 that there were more than fifty ways of tying a knot so as to affect either a husband or a wife, and that the spell could be made to last for a day, a year, or forever.\textsuperscript{94}

I detect a note of skepticism also in a story told by Snorri Sturleson (1179-1241) about the brother kings of Norway, Sigurd and Eystein, who boasted to each other of their deeds at a banquet following Sigurd's return from the First Crusade early in the twelfth century:
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Sigurd: You must have heard that on this expedition I was in
many a battle in the Saracen’s land, and gained the victory in all; and
you must have heard of the many valuable articles I acquired, the like
of which were never seen before in this country, and I was the most
respected wherever the most gallant men were; and, on the other
hand, you cannot conceal that you have only a home-bred reputation.

Eystein: I have heard that you had several battles abroad, but it
was more useful for the country what I was doing in the meantime
at home. I built five churches from the foundations, and a harbour
at Agdanes, where it before was impossible to land, and where vessels
ply north and south along the coast. I set a warping post and iron ring
in the sound at Sinholm, and in Bergen I built a royal hall, while you
were killing bluemen for the devil in Serkland. This, I think, was of
but little advantage to our kingdom.

King Sigurd said: On this expedition I went all the way to Jordan
and swam across the river. On the edge of the river there is a bush of
willows, and there I twisted a knot of willows, and said this knot thou
shouldst untie, brother, or take the curse thereto attached.

King Eystein said: I shall not go and untie the knot which you
tied for me; but if I had been inclined to tie a knot for thee, thou
wouldst not have been king of Norway at thy return to this country,
when with a single ship you came sailing into my fleet.

Thereupon both were silent, and there was anger on both sides. 95

Eystein was a reasonable man, on the whole, and he probably had
as little fear of ligatures as any one. Still, his anger is understandable,
for there are some things that even a brother cannot be permitted to
jest about.

Robert Burns’s stanza in his “Address to the Deil,” to which refer-
ence has already been made, runs as follows:

Thence mystic knots mak great abuse
On young guidmen, fond, keen, an’ crouse:
When the best wark-lume i’ the house,
    By cantrip wit,
Is instant made no worth a louse,
    Just at the bit.

Once a man has been bewitched by a magic knot, the proper remedy
is to untie the knot and throw the cord away in some remote place. A
Babylonian incantation against witches who cast spells with magic knots ends thus: "Her knot is loosed, her sorcery is brought to nought, and all her charms fill the desert." And at the trial of one Marioun Peebles in 1644, it was brought out that untwisting witch-knots would undo the damage wrought by them.

A Jewish enchanter by the name of Lubaid bewitched the prophet Mohammed by tying eleven knots in a cord and hiding the cord in a well. Mohammed's symptoms were weakness, loss of appetite, and neglect of his wives. Fortunately the Angel Gabriel revealed the place where the knots were hidden, and after they were found and brought to him, Mohammed repeated the eleven verses of Suras 113 and 114. At every verse a knot untied itself, and Mohammed recovered from his indisposition.

An ounce of prevention, however, is worth a pound of cure. Hence the widespread use of amulets. Special precautions were deemed advisable at weddings, for it was then that ligatures were apt to be most dangerous. In some localities, as we have seen, bridal couples wore knots and nets to avert the spells of witches. In others they did just the opposite: they untied and loosened the knots in their clothing just before the ceremony. This custom lingered on in Perthshire, according to Frazer, until the end of the eighteenth century. In Syria, more recently, a bridegroom not only untied all the knots in his wedding garment before the ceremony, but also unbuttoned all the buttons as well.

Several other aspects of sex were formerly thought to be subject to the influence of magic knots. The name "Knut," for example, was originally given to Scandinavian boys whose parents already had as many children as they wanted. The mere word "knot," it was thought, would prevent further conception. Abramelin the Sage is quoted as saying that Austrian wizards in 1458 tied knots in osier or willow branches in order to put "discord among married people" and to stop the flow of milk in nursing women. And Willie's mother in the medieval ballad "Willie's Ladie" bewitches her daughter-in-law by tying nine magic knots in her hair in order to prevent her from bearing Willie's child. Willie, who knows something about magic himself, looses his bride's "left-foot shoe" and "the nine witch-knots That was amo that ladie's locks,"
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And now he's gotten a bonny young son,
And mickle grace be him upon.

In order to make childbirth easier, whether witchcraft has been at work or not, primitive people have traditionally resorted to such homeopathic expedients as opening doors, unlocking locks, freeing caged birds, loosing the hair of the other women in the household, untying knots, unbuttoning buttons, and other acts symbolic of the freeing of the embryo from the womb. Conversely any act symbolic of constraint is taboo when a birth is imminent.

Pliny says that to sit near a pregnant woman with the fingers interlaced is to be guilty of sorcery. The birth of Hercules was delayed in this manner because Ilithyia, goddess of childbirth, was bribed by Juno to sit in front of Alcmena’s door with her right knee over her left, and her hands clasped. If, says Pliny, the husband of a woman who is near her time will “gird her about the middle with his own girdle, and unloose the same again, saying withal this charm, I tied the knot, and I will undo it again, and therewith go his ways, she shall soon after . . . have more speedy deliverance.”

10. LOVE KNOTS

The belief that magic knots can win or retain a lover is widespread and ancient. Virgil describes the efforts of a lovesick Roman maiden to regain the love of Daphnis, her swain, by means of the conventional image of wax, the colored woolen cord, the mystic number three, the charmed knots, and the uttered spell:

Around his waxen image first I wind
Three woolen fillets, of three colors join’d;
Thrice bind about his thrice-devoted head,
Which round the sacred altar thrice is led.
Unequal numbers please the gods.—My charms,
Restore my lovely Daphnis to my longing arms.
Knit with three knots the fillets; knit ’em straight;
And say, “These knots to love I consecrate.”

This is a mere literary exercise, but it reflects beliefs held by the common people in Virgil’s day, though presumably not by Virgil himself. In modern times the love knot has often been used as a sort of
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game, without serious expectation of results. In Shakespeare's *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Julia proposes to disguise herself as a boy in order to seek out the man she loves. "Why, then," her waiting-gentlewoman tells her, "your ladyship must cut your hair." "No, girl," Julia replies,

I'll knot it up in strings,
With twenty odd-conceived true-love knots:
To be fantastic may become a youth
Of greater time than I shall show to be. 107

John Gay’s *Shepherd's Week* (1714) contains the following lines:

As Lubberkin once slept beneath a tree,
I twitch'd his dangling garter from his knee;
He wist not when the hempen string I drew.
Now mine I quickly doff of inkle blue;
Together fast I tye the garters twain,
And while I knit the knot repeat this strain,
*Three times a true-love’s knot I tye secure,*
*Firm be the knot, firm may his love endure.*

"Whenever I go to lye in a strange bed," a sentimental young lady admitted in 1755, "I always tye my garter nine times round the bedpost, and knit nine knots in it, and say to myself: ‘This knot I knit, this knot I tye, to see my love as he goes by.'" 108 Oliver Goldsmith in *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766) says that the farmers of the neighborhood "kept up the Christmas carol, sent true-love knots on Valentine morning, ate pancakes on Shrovetide, showed their wit on the first of April, and religiously cracked nuts on Michaelmas eve."

A distinction is drawn in Sweden, according to Öhrvall, between the love knot (*kärleksknut*), the friendship knot (*vänskapsknut*), and the betrothal knot (*trolövningsknut*). 109 The commonest love knot, he says, is the familiar knot variously called, in English, the Englishman’s knot, the fisherman’s knot, the true-lover’s knot, and the middleman’s knot. Heraklas described the true-lover’s knot very clearly in the first century A. D. and called it a single *karkhesios*. It consists of a loop and two overhand knots which can be either separated or pressed close together, the one against the other. In conformity with the symbolism implied by this characteristic of the knot, says Öhrvall, a bashful Swedish sailor a hundred years ago (were sailors bashful then?) would enclose
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a true-lover's knot, with the overhands separated, in a letter to his sweetheart. If she returned it with the knots close together, he would know that she still loved him.

The betrothal knot was once more common, probably, than the betrothal ring. There is reason to believe, in fact, that all rings and bracelets were originally imitations of knotted cords tied by primitive men round fingers, wrists, necks, and ankles—not for decorative purposes, but as charms and amulets.\(^\text{119}\)

During the Middle Ages, knots were used as symbols of legal contracts in general, not merely of marriage contracts. A witness in a court of law, if he could not sign his name, would tie a knot in a strap to be attached to the document as confirmation of his testimony. Hence in legal language the word *nodator* (knot-tier) came to be a synonym of *witness*.\(^\text{111}\)

Analogies to the betrothal knot (*trolövningsknut*) are found in many parts of Asia. In Parsi and Iranian weddings, it is said, the bride and bridegroom join hands under a curtain which separates them from each other. A piece of cloth is then wrapped around the couple and tied with a symbolic double knot. Finally twists of raw yarn are wound seven times round the couple's hands, seven times round the couple, and seven times round the knot.\(^\text{112}\)

A Brahman bridegroom hangs a small gold ornament round the neck of his bride and ties it with three knots. Before he does so, the bride's father may withdraw his consent to the marriage, but afterward the union is indissoluble. A cord is tied round the bride's waist, and as she leaves the house a verse meaning "I loosen thee" is repeated.\(^\text{113}\)

Ceremonial knots of this sort were probably intended, originally, as protection against the evil spells that were once thought to endanger the mutual happiness of young married people. The phrase "tying the marriage knot," therefore, was at one time no mere figure of speech, but rather the description of a custom based on the belief that magic knots can have a decisive influence on the sexual relationship of a man and a woman.

11. RELIGIOUS KNOTS

Vestiges of primitive faith in the extra-natural power of knots have survived in the rituals of contemporary religions. The Jewish phylac-
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tery knots, for example, are now regarded as symbols of divinity, but originally they probably had a more materialistic purpose. The generally accepted view is that they were amulets. Another possibility is that they took the place of marks previously cut on the forehead and hands as signs of Jahweh’s ownership. Gandz has suggested (as we have seen) that they were mnemonic knots and served to remind the worshiper of the divine commandments. Whatever their original function may have been, their retention in Hebrew law can be ascribed to the desire to give a more spiritual significance to ancient superstitions which were too deep-rooted to be eradicated.

In India, when a Brahman youth reaches the age of eight, he is invested at the rite of initiation with a cord called (in Sanskrit) the yamopavita and made of three strands of cotton threads which must be spun by Brahmans. The cord is passed three times round the initiate’s waist, a number of knots are tied in it, traditional formulas are uttered, and a threefold knot called the brahmagranthi or knot of the Creator is tied on “the north side of the navel” and “drawn to the south side of it.” After marriage the cord must have six strands instead of three. All castes in India wear sacred cords with knots in them.

The Parsi child also, whether boy or girl, is invested with a sacred cord. It is called the kusti, and is elaborately symbolic of Zoroastrian beliefs and sacred texts. In pre-Communistic China, one of the Buddhist funeral rites was “the untying of knots.” A bowl of rice and a seven-strand cord with twenty-four copper coins tied in it were presented to a Bonze, who then recited the virtues of Buddha in releasing souls from pain and trouble, untied the knots in succession, and put the coins one by one into his vest. The ceremony was “meant to illustrate the release from all tightness and difficulties in the next world.” The Grand Lama of Tibet used to tie knots of silk round the necks of his votaries. In both Greek and Slavic monasteries part of the ceremony of the “investiture of the Little Habit and the Great Habit” is the bestowal of a knotted cord on monk or nun.

The cord of St. Francis hung from the waist to the feet. St. Francis wore it, so it is said, in memory of the cord with which Christ was bound on the Cross, but the common people of Europe attributed curative powers to it, and thought that it could work miracles. A small fifteenth-century statue of St. Francis on exhibit at the Cloisters (a branch of
the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York) has a realistically repre­
sented cord with five-, six-, and sevenfold overhand knots in it, the
longest knot at the top, the shortest at the bottom, near the end of the
cord. "And good Saynt Frances gyrdle, With the hamlet of a
hyrdle," according to an old jingle, "Are wholsom for the pyppe." Dante in Cantos XVI and XVII of the Inferno speaks of a cord
which he wore as a girdle on his tour of the nether world and with
which he had once hoped to snare the Leopard of Incontinence. Upon
reaching the great abyss between Violence and Fraud, he handed the
cord, knotted and coiled, to Virgil, his guide, who threw it over the
edge of the cliff. In response to this signal, the monster Geryon, per­
sonification of Fraud, rose into view and carried the travelers over the
abyss. Dante, it is said, may have been a novice of the Franciscan order
in his younger days, and if so, his girdle may have been the cord of St.
Francis. The symbolism of the episode, however, is obscure. Perhaps
the apotropaic power of the knots in the cord was intended to prevent
the travelers from becoming entangled in the knots (nodi) and in the
arabesques (symbolic of fraud) on Geryon's back, breast, and sides.
An Augustinian nun at Antwerp was miraculously cured of a
grievous illness in 1657 through the wearing of a cord in honor of St.
Joseph, and as a result the members of the Archconfraternity of the
Cord of St. Joseph are now required to wear a cord with seven knots
tied in it. St. Thomas was girded with a cord by an angel as a reward
for overcoming temptation. Innocent X subsequently sanctified the
Confraternity of the Cord of St. Thomas. Its members wear a cord with
fifteen knots in it.
The "belt of St. Guthlac" was reputed to be a sovereign remedy for
a headache in the Middle Ages; and "For lampes and for bottes," said
John Bale in 1562, "take me Saynt Wilfride's knottes."
The distinction between magic and primitive religion is difficult to
define. Was magic the precursor of religion? Or was it a corruption of
religion? How does its reliance on the extra-natural differ from ortho­
dox faith in the supernatural? Magic knots pose such questions as these
in an interesting way. The Latin word religio, for example, seems to be
etymologically related to the word religare (to tie or bind). Tying and
binding imply knots; but who, in prehistoric times, was tied by whom,
and for what purpose? It used to be assumed, says Westermarck, that
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the worshiper was tied by his god, or bound, as the saying is, to obey his god. Westermarck argues, on the contrary, that the god was bound by the man, and that knots were merely one of a number of devices for compelling the god to do the will of the man. 126

In support of this view he cites a practice of the common people of Morocco, who tie rags to a saint’s grave in the belief that they are binding the saint to grant their petitions. If later they get what they want, they untie the rags and release the saint. Westermarck once saw many such rags tied to a pole in a cairn dedicated to the saint Mūlai ‘Abd-ūl-Kader. “A Berber saint of mine,” he writes, “invoked Lālla Rāhma Yusf, a great female saint . . . and tied his turban, saying, ‘I am tying thee, Lālla Rāhma Yusf, and I am not going to open the knot until thou hast helped me.’” On another occasion a person in distress knotted the leaves in a palmetto near the grave of Lālla Rāhma Yusf, saying, “I tied thee here, O saint, and I shall not release thee unless thou releasest me from the toils in which I am at present.”

The prehistoric Roman worshiper, in like manner, may have supposed that he could bind (religare) the gods to do his will. Vestiges of such beliefs are buried in the substrata of contemporary culture, but they are inconsistent with orthodoxy. The ritual knots of mature religions have only symbolic significance at the present time.