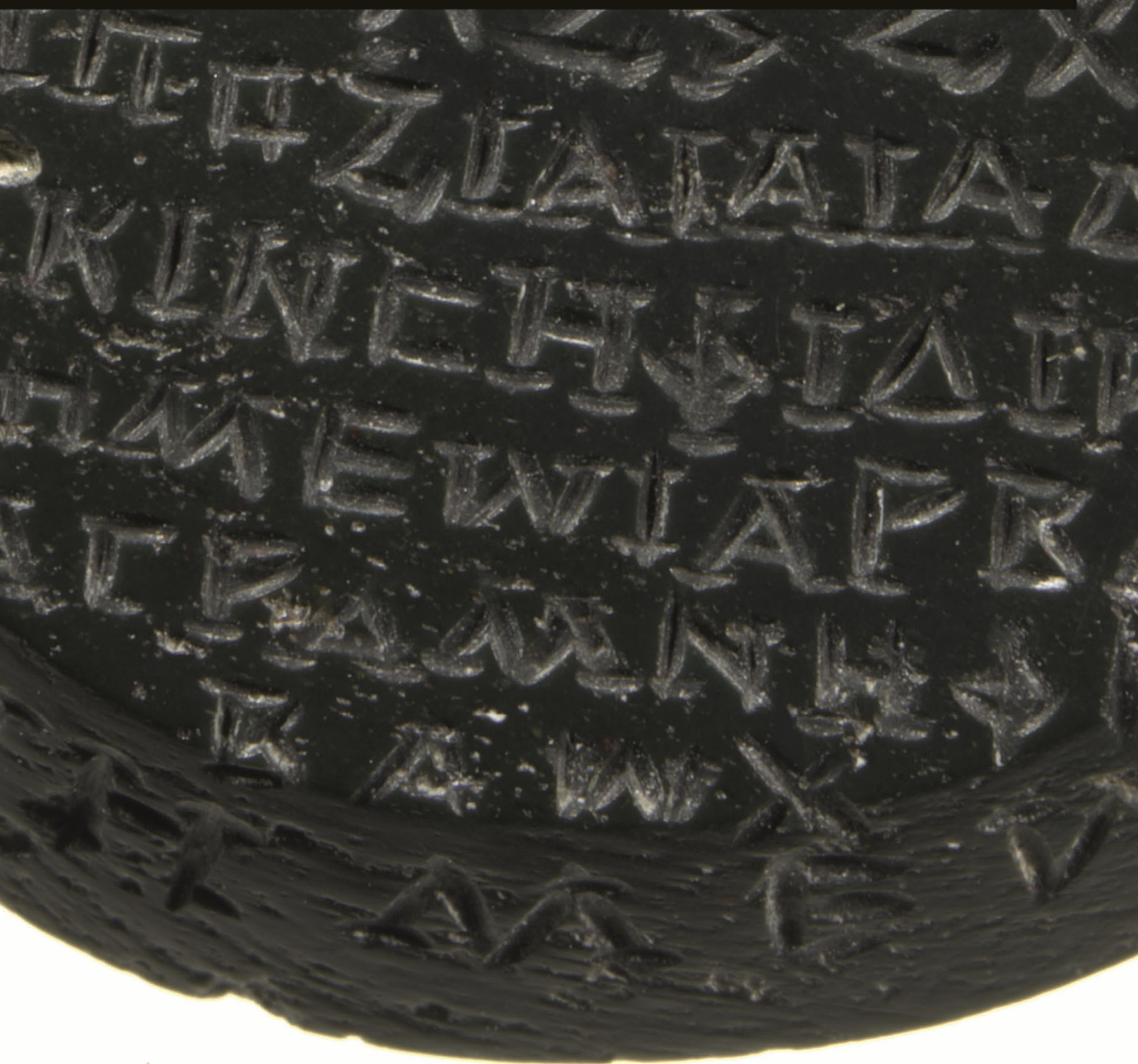


BLOOMSBURY STUDIES IN MATERIAL RELIGION

TEXTUAL AMULETS FROM ANTIQUITY TO EARLY MODERN TIMES

THE SHAPE OF WORDS

Edited by Christoffer Theis & Paolo Vitellozzi



Textual Amulets from Antiquity to Early Modern Times

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The Shape of Words

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London, British Museum, EA 56241. Inscribed amulet. Image licensed by the Trustees of the British Museum

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Preface

Amulets are used in many cultures for protective, apotropaic, and other beneficial purposes. The supposed power of an amulet, which was thought to derive from the synergy between potent shapes and powerful media, was often enhanced by adding further elements, such as images, symbols, or complex texts that are the transformation of prayers, incantations, and other orally performed speech acts. Describing such speech acts through the analysis of the function of written words on amulets is the core topic of this volume, which aims essentially at comparing such artifacts and their different forms over time and space from a multidisciplinary perspective. The time range stretches from Roman Egypt to the Middle Ages and the Modern period, and provides an overview on these types of artifacts in the Mediterranean world and beyond, including Europe, Iran, and Turkey. Each chapter is dedicated to a specific typology of textual amulets, with a chronological and geographical approach.

This volume originates from the international conference “Textual Amulets in a Transcultural Perspective,” held at the University of Heidelberg, April 9–10, 2018. Since the original organizers of the conference, Laura Willer and Konrad Knauber, decided not to proceed with the publication of the proceedings, they entrusted the editors to accomplish the task. Thus, the majority of the lectures given at the conference are now accessible to the readers, who could not take part in the meeting.

Our special thanks to the Collaborative Research Center 933 “Material Text Cultures” at the Ruprecht-Karls-University of Heidelberg, which supported the conference in 2018 both financially and intellectually. We would also like to thank our friends and colleagues Laura Willer and Konrad Knauber, for their efforts in organizing the conference and for giving us the opportunity to share the results. A special thanks goes also to the CRC 933 chairman Prof. Dr. Ludger Lieb for providing financial means for the publication of some pictures in this volume as well as for drawings. We are also especially grateful to the following institutions and people who have generously supplied images, permissions, and other materials: Mathilde Avisseau-Broustet (Département des monnaies, médailles et antiques de la Bibliothèque Nationale de France), Svetlana Adaxina and Zhanna Etsina (State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg),

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Christoffer Theis and Paolo Vitellozzi

Leipzig and Perugia, autumn 2021

Contributors

Özlem Deniz Ahlers works as a research associate at the Johannes Gutenberg-University of Mainz, Germany. Her research interests focus on Turkish and Ottoman language and culture.

Edina Bozoky is professor emeritus of Medieval History at the University of Poitiers, France, and member of the CESC (Centre d'études supérieures de civilisation médiévale). Among her research interests are the Catharism, Medieval hagiography, and legends and lore of the Middle Ages. She is the author of *Le Livre secret des Cathares* (1997), *Charmes et prières apotropaïques* (2004), *La politique des reliques de Constantin à Saint-Louis* (2007), *Attila et les Huns: Vérités et légendes* (2012), and *Miracle! Récits merveilleux des martyrs et des saints* (2013).

Esther Fernández Medina is currently an independent researcher. She studied magical health and gender issues among Morisco and Old-Christian women in sixteenth-century Spain. Her research interests focus on Aljamiado literature and Inquisitorial archives. Using such documents, she investigates the practices of the Moriscos related to health, magic, and experimental science as intertwined areas. At the moment she is working on a catalog of magical booklets from Granada.

Sarah Kiyanrad works as a research associate at Ludwig Maximilians-University of Munich, Germany. Her research interests focus on Iranian history and culture, on which she has published extensively since 2013. She is the author of *Gesundheit und Glück für seinen Besitzer: Schrifttragende Amulette im islamzeitlichen Iran (bis 1258)* (2017).

Nils Hallvard Korsvoll is associate professor at the University of Agder, Norway. His research focuses on history of religion, ritual, popular religion, magic, and material culture. His publications include articles on liturgy in ancient amulets and the use of biblical references in ancient magic.

Rudolf Simek is professor emeritus and chair of Medieval German and Nordic Studies at the University of Bonn, Germany. Simek researches a wide variety of topics connected to the Middle Ages: Germanic religion and mythology (including Old Norse religion and mythology), Vikings and the Viking Age, Old Norse literature, and medieval science (including astronomy) and popular religion. Simek has published a number of notable works on these subjects, several of which have been translated into multiple languages. Among his most famous monographs are *Die Wikinger* (1998), *Götter und Kulte der Germanen* (2004), *Runes, Magic and Religion: A Sourcebook* (with John McKinnell and Klaus Düwel 2004), *Die Germanen* (2006), *Die Edda* (2007), *Die Schiffe der Wikinger* (2014), *Vinland! Wie die Wikinger Amerika entdeckten* (2016), *Die Geschichte der Normannen. Von Wikingerhäuptlingen zu Königen Siziliens* (2018), and *Monster im Mittelalter* (2019).

Christoffer Theis is research associate at the University of Leipzig, Germany, and member of the Young Academy of Sciences and Literature, Mainz. His wide research interests focus on ancient Egyptian and Near Eastern religion, magic and ritual, loanwords, and language contacts, for which he received a number of awards. His ongoing research project “Egyptian Loanwords in Ancient Near Eastern Languages” will compile for the first time all real or just proposed Egyptian loanwords in other languages of the Ancient Near East.

Paolo Vitellozzi is a postdoctoral scholar of Classics at the University of Perugia, Italy. He works as a teacher of Greek and Latin and as a private art advisor. His interests focus on engraved gems, but he has also published on ancient magic and religion. Among his previous publications are *Gemme e Cammei della Collezione Guardabassi nel Museo Archeologico Nazionale dell’Umbria a Perugia* (2010) and *Tesori di una collezione privata* (2017).

Textual Amulets from a Transcultural Perspective

Christoffer Theis and Paolo Vitellozzi

1. Introduction

In many cultures some objects were and are worn for protective, apotropaic, and other beneficial purposes. This volume aims at comparing such artifacts, generally called amulets, and their different forms over time and space from a multidisciplinary perspective. The time span of the objects examined in the chapters ranges from ancient Egypt through to the Arabic period in the Mediterranean world and to various medieval examples, thus providing an overview of their use in different cultures. The investigations focus on inscribed amulets, where words or complex texts are employed to enhance the supposed efficacy of the material components, while a comparative analysis of the praxeology of these amulets examines how they were produced, and how they were worn and used in the rituals that lie behind their making, as well as the special purpose(s) of their inscriptions. A strong emphasis is placed on the material aspects and on how these were selected according to ritualistic purposes. The textual content (words, prayers, magical formulas and symbols)¹, as well as other features of the amulets, are examined from a systematic and phenomenological perspective, in order to determine possible approaches toward an anthropology of writing in ritual contexts.

This volume is the result of the “Textual Amulets in a Transcultural Perspective” workshop, held on April 9–10, 2018, at Heidelberg University Library, organized by Laura Willer and Konrad Knauber.

The main aim of this scientific meeting was to reach a consensus on the argument that in many cultures, texts were and still are used for protective, apotropaic, and sundry other beneficial purposes, together with specific

material components. Researchers from different areas at the workshop took a closer look at the typology, praxeology, and mindset associated with these customs, focusing on the connection between text and materiality of inscribed amulets.

Here are their contributions which illustrate the methods and observations shared, providing a fresh view of these phenomena from broader lines of perspective. The cultures surveyed thrived from antiquity to modern times over an area stretching from the Middle East to Scandinavia. With this volume, the editors would like to make the results of the workshop available to a broader audience. For various reasons, not all the presentations given at the workshop could be included in the publication; other contributions will be published in further volumes.

The amulets discussed in the chapters are often an important source to understand the influence of different cultures, not only in antiquity but also in Arabic and medieval times by using elements of different ages and origin. Among the many questions that connect the contributions with one another there are some that could be defined as the general topic: What defines an amulet? How are they generally acknowledged? How were they used? The chapters therefore provide an analysis of amulets in the different cultures of Europe and Asia based on their chronological and geographical similarities following two main lines of thought. The first is an outline into research and definition(s) on textual amulets, while the second is the comparison and collection of different similarities throughout the ages and cultures. It becomes evident that, although many differences might be observed in the use of textual amulets among the various peoples over time, specific lines, traditions, and meanings appear to be recurring elements. Therefore, a short theoretical foreword will be provided by summarizing the content of the volume.

2. Textual Amulets and Their Materiality

Approaching textual amulets from the point of view of their materiality has been theorized in some recent studies.² The manufacture of these ritual devices, seen as essential to the expressivity of practice,³ can be examined in reference to the interrelatedness between the physical objects and the texts they carry. Texts, which are the core topic of the amulet, can be understood both from a material angle and a linguistic point of view,⁴ by analyzing the speech acts that are conveyed by the texts through the application of the heuristic models provided

by the most recent studies that have arisen from the application of Austin and Searle's Speech Acts theory⁵ to magical language.⁶

Therefore, an outline into research on textual amulets, which includes the problems of definition(s) and material agency (assemblages, performance of manufacture, and the materiality of writing itself), has to be presented accompanied by a theoretical premise which will provide the central theme linking together the various chapters. Reference should also be made to the transcultural appearances of amulets since many of the ideas and applications known from Egypt and Mesopotamia can also be found in adjacent cultural areas, as well as in other times in Europe and elsewhere, not only in contemporary finds but also in areas far apart in time, therefore placing them in an intercultural framework. A talisman (from Greek τέλεσμα to Arabic طَلِسم), according to Ṭašköprüzāde, *Miftāḥ* I. 277.3, is a kind of "indissoluble knot," as well as the anagram of مُسَلِّط "bestowing power,"⁷ whose use in magical actions is clearly explained by the latter meaning.⁸ For this explanation, we can also point out the tradition by Pseudo-Aristoteles, *Kitāb Sirr al-Asrār* 156.4–157.6 as well as Pseudo-Mağrīṭī, *Ġāyat al-Ḥakīm* 7,⁹ who both talk about the power of such artifacts.

Most of the contributions deal with "magic," but the exact meaning of this word and what lies within it are still subject to a lively debate.¹⁰ Therefore, we shall not delve too much into this discussion since, at least in many cultures, there seems to be no meaningful distinction between magical lore and religious practices. Magic will thus be understood as an element of religion where the interrelation of the two becomes clear, despite the opposition often set up between them, solely by the fact that the somewhat blurred dividing line between these categories can only be drawn artificially.¹¹ No final answers can be offered to these and other questions, but the volume wishes to include and examine amulets with their pictures and texts from different perspectives and thus take a first step toward their holistic analysis.

3. Summary of the Contributions

In his chapter "Writing on Magical Gems: Reflections on Inscribed Gemstone Amulets of the Imperial Period," Paolo Vitellozzi explores the function of writing on one of the most significant types of amulets of the Roman Imperial period, commonly known as "magical gems." Since these artifacts are defined essentially by the interaction of medium (the stones), image and text, the discussion focuses on how writing was used to achieve the purposes that the

amulets were thought to serve, with special regard to ritual contexts as well as to material aspects. Part of the chapter concentrates on the nature of the inscribed texts (magical names, prayers, requests), in order to understand the needs of the people who believed in their power. The chapter also contains a general overview of the many writing techniques (graphic figures, pseudo-writing, cryptography), and the position the texts have within the reduced space of the amulets. This leads the author to a series of reflections on the importance of writing in a society where literate people were a small minority. Anthropological and linguistic questions, such as those regarding the formulary, are also discussed in order to understand the relationship between the dominant Graeco-Roman tradition in the Imperial age and the other Mediterranean cultures. In fact, gemstone amulets can well be regarded as precious documents showing the circulation of religious beliefs and culture among the many populations of the Mediterranean, as well as that of the interaction among different cultural models.

Chapter 3, “Of Comprehensible and Incomprehensible Inscriptions: Remarks on Some Gems with Multi-headed Gods,” by Christoffer Theis also focuses on gems from late antiquity, often referred to as “magical”; these objects show many different Egyptian, Greek, Jewish, Mesopotamian, and/or Near Eastern elements. Based on their assumed period of origin between the second and fourth or even fifth centuries AD, these artifacts thus form a veritable treasure trove for the tradition—and thus a *longue durée*—of motifs and symbols. The number of images on gems shows that even in late antiquity, beings from different cultures enjoyed certain popularity as a motif, even though they were hardly mentioned or depicted in sources in epichoric cultures in this period. The focus of the contribution are gems showing beings or gods with more than one head or face, whose study in antiquity is so far a *desideratum* of research. There is virtually no consensus on a name or names for multi-headed beings, since all the epithets and names are confused; even the number of heads is inconsequential. Among the various names of the intercultural framework of gems, Egyptian, Jewish, and Greek influences are preserved, which, when found together, create new beings. The question arises, how were the labels of the gems actually conceived or arranged together? Was it a decision of the stone cutter what text to write down on the gems, and if so, what intention can we recognize? Or were the labels selected by the customer? The aim is to provide answers to the aforementioned questions relying on a corpus of gems with depictions of gods with multiple heads, namely those accompanied by an inscription, focusing

on the inscribed texts, their understanding and their relationship with their religious and cultural background.

Nils Hallvard Korsvoll examines “Agency and Efficacy in Syriac Amulets across the Ages.” The Syriac amulets, known from antiquity up to the Early Modern period, from Iran to China, provide a clear view of the development of apotropaic practices over time and space, and lying within the same linguistic tradition. Self-designations and operative verbs are used to identify the material source of the amulets’ efficacy. Despite the many benefits of using the Syriac amulets to study textual amulets from a transcultural perspective, their restricted number and their temporal and spatial distribution, as well as issues of survival and representation, hinder historical inquiry and therefore remain a challenge. The examination shows that while it is difficult to pinpoint a specific locus of agency, there are certain trends and tendencies in the many corpora. First, there is a shift from the domestic context in the late-antique corpus to a clerical or monastic one in the medieval and early modern body of texts. Moreover, this shift is paralleled by a change in perspective in the spells, from client to scribe or ritual expert. Second, the medieval and early modern manuals contain more elements and phrases borrowed from or referencing to Christian ritual, whereas the late-antique amulets emphasize the illnesses and afflictions that the amulet should protect against. Furthermore, agency is mostly not specified in the late-antique amulets, while the medieval and early modern incantations have an intercessory structure that again compares with a Christian cosmology. We can suggest that there is a continuation in the request of the incantations, while the invocation and the *pars epica* were extended and elaborated on in response to Christian cosmology. This observation then suggests how a tradition can expand and adapt across time and space to new situations and contexts.

“Demons in Runic and Latin Amulets from Medieval Scandinavia” is the topic of the chapter written by Rudolf Simek. As opposed to popular opinion, runes never had any magical quality per se, that is to say that they would not have been used as magical symbols in any rituals or magical practices. However, the runic scripts, like all other lettering systems, could be used for any purpose including the composition of texts aimed at otherworldly powers, and that may be considered magical in a wider sense—contrary to what people usually believe. We have to distinguish between three different runic scripts in use in the first millennium AD, namely the so-called Elder Futhark, the Younger Futhark, and the Anglo-Saxon variant of the latter, the Anglo-Saxon Futhorc. It becomes obvious that although there are many amulets which neither mention the person to be protected nor the demons that are conjured up so as not to harm that

person, just limiting themselves to holy texts (like the beginning of the Gospel of John) or holy names, we now do have a good impression of what demons are thought to be doing. They are quite obviously in charge of harming people through illnesses, and not just temporal temptations: in fact, the latter are never mentioned on amulets. It also seems that it was safer to address demons both by their Latin and vernacular names, and by making sure that male and female demons are both addressed. We also learn from the texts that, apart from proper exorcism formulas, also the invocation of the Trinity, the saints, and the various names of God, including Alpha and Omega, or even magic words served as protection from demons. Demons were conceived of as having proper names, as in the case of the Seven Sisters, or Gordan Gordin, and Ingordan, which allowed the apotropaic magic to take a better hold on them.

Edina Bozoky puts “Magical Letters: Unintelligible Prophylactic Formulae” in focus of her contribution. Indecipherable formulas, the meaning of which was unknown to medieval users, had to be written and worn on the body instead of being uttered. The majority of charms are intelligible formulas. They were used both in oral and written forms. These charms derive their efficacy from the meaning of the words, reinforced with sound effects when uttered, and performed with gesture and ritual. In contrast, the category of unintelligible charms is composed of strange words or cryptic series of letters. Cryptic combinations of letters, which were called *characteres*, were even more unintelligible. These combinations are—for the material in focus—compositions of Latin letters, but seem to be absolutely meaningless to a modern eye, and they are generally combined together with other kinds of charms. Medieval charms composed of magical letters were often used with other kinds of formulas: narrative charms, conjurations, and divine names Bozoky shows that the assimilation of the patient to the collective mythology and the integration of the individual in a cosmic order had a symbolic “efficacy.” Conjurations addressed to the illness or to a demon were considered orders which could be immediately performed. On the other hand, Bozoky points out that formulas containing divine names and strange words had the same use as that of *characteres*. The main focus of the chapter is on the use of these wordings in the church and in some of its books. Was the church relatively tolerant with certain invocations and prayers uttered over the sick? Should unknown words, such as *characteres* and signs, be rejected only because they are “unknown”? For example, in the *Hammer of Witches* (*Malleus maleficarum*), behind these formulas one can see a pact with demons, “and the demon intervenes obscurely accomplishing the desires in order to lure into the worst.”¹² The magical charms contained in medieval medical prescriptions help

illustrate how medical books were used to produce amulets: a practice that made the church suspicious, as clearly shown in the *Hammer of Witches*.

Esther Fernández Medina describes and examines “The Materiality of Talismans from Early Modern Spain: Morisco (and Old-Christian) Cases.” The Moriscos of early modern Spain were a minority group from both a cultural and religious point of view. As descendants of the Muslim population of *al-Andalus*, in the Iberian Peninsula, in the first quarter of the sixteenth century they were forced to convert to Christianity by Royal edicts. However, although in some areas the population still claims a Morisco origin, one can affirm that their traces have disappeared. Nevertheless, most of their cultural and religious background has been preserved in a kind of literature known as *Aljamiada*. The Moriscos kept those texts hidden from the Catholic Court since it had banned their culture, especially their form of writing. As a result of those unfortunate circumstances, many secret libraries have been discovered, preserved, and studied. Today, most of the archival collections are located in Spain, but there are also many *Aljamiado* manuscripts in other European, Maghrebian, and Middle Eastern libraries. The basis of these writings is Islamic culture, and religious texts are the most frequent among them. Other types are medical and magical ones. The most common objective in the fabrication of *herces* was the quest for health and protection, as well as for love and many other purposes. They were written using enigmatic words and symbols, and the simple act of writing and carrying them was thought to be effective or curative. The materials were adapted to the specific needs of the talisman holder by their makers and the objects were created following instructions contained in manuscripts of magical content. The writings are sometimes interwoven with medical prescriptions and/or religious formulas. The Moriscos were fond of this kind of texts and they used them profusely. The dialectic relationship between visibility and invisibility is also evident in the Morisco amulets, since they were kept hidden and contained magical symbols.

Özlem Deniz Ahlers examines “Talismans and Engravers of Talismans in the Seventeenth-Century Ottoman Society According to the Journal of Evliyâ Çelebi,” and observes that talismans and magical amulets are not enclosed within geographical boundaries or specific periods of art history. They appear in different forms, following the needs of a society, as a protective means to cope with the dangers of everyday life. Such is also the case in the Ottoman society, which regulated magical practices according to the teachings of Islam. Talismans with precise astrological patterns were produced to provide practical desired effects. In his monumental journal “*Seyâhatnâme*,” the traveler Evliyâ Çelebi described a great number of talismans and their creators in the Ottoman society