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## Magical Objects, Magical Writing: Amulets Across the Ages

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### ABSTRACT

This note focuses on recent discussions on gemstone amulets from Late Antiquity through insights offered in two contributions to the volume *Textual Amulets from Antiquity to Early Modern Times: The Shape of Words* (Theis and Vitellozzi 2022). After a general presentation of the volume, I turn to the first two chapters, penned each by one of the volume's editors. Paolo Vitellozzi's paper examines the evolution of the textuality of magical gems in light of speech act theories and taxonomies elaborated in earlier secondary literature. Vitellozzi also analyses the complex interaction of medium (the gemstone), text and image in the course of this evolutionary process, showing how writing progressively assumed magical efficacy. In the following paper, Christoffer Theis analyses a specific category of magical gems, namely those which represent divinities with multiple heads. Theis' observations implicitly complement Vitellozzi's conclusions on the textuality of gemstone amulets. In the final paragraphs of this note, I briefly comment on Christian amulets and isopsephisms.

### KEYWORDS

Amulets; gemstones; speech acts; magical writing; representations of deities; isopsephisms.

Amulets are some of the most common apotropaic devices employed in various cultures throughout history to negotiate man's constant struggle with (hostile) preternatural forces. Typically reduced in size, amulets could be fashioned from various materials and in various shapes, and were expected, through contact with the beneficiary (person, object and / or space), to magically

protect from, avert and / or reverse the effects of phenomena perceived as harming. As such, these objects constitute precious sources for historical, cultural, as well as anthropological research, as the recent surge in scholarly attention attests.<sup>1</sup>

Equally intriguing, among these scientific works, is the volume of studies edited by Christoffer Theis and Paolo Vitellozzi (2022),

*Textual Amulets from Antiquity to Early Modern Times: The Shape of Words*. Born from the proceedings of a conference organised in 2018 at the University of Heidelberg, the volume seeks to identify a diachronic and transcultural continuity in-diversity of textual amuletic practices in the European, North African and Near Eastern cultural spaces. Its focus, as it transpires from the editors' Introduction (chapter 1, pp. 1-9), is to explore the significance of the act of writing – seen both as process and content – in channelling the magical potency of the amulet.

The volume contains eight papers framed by an Introduction and a Conclusion, both penned by the editors. The first three (chapters 2 – 4) are dedicated to late antique amulets in the Mediterranean world; the following two (chapters 5 – 6), to the Middle Ages; whereas the last three (chapters 7 – 9), to the Modern period. Each chapter introduces different cultural settings and focuses on certain types of amulets so that the geo-chronological and taxonomical coverage is maximised within the limited space of the volume.

In chapter 2, "Writing on Magical Gems: Reflections on Inscribed Gemstone Amulets of the Imperial Period" (pp. 10-33), Paolo Vitellozzi discusses the complexities and evolution of the relationship between the material support (the "medium" of gemstone amulets), the engraved image, and the inscribed writing, respectively. Vitellozzi considers the textuality of amulets as "speech acts," which translate and perpetuate in the object itself the originally orally recited ritual that generated the magical efficacy of the given amulet. The following chapter, Christoffer Theis' "Of Comprehensible and Incomprehensible Inscriptions: Remarks on Some Gems with Multi-headed Gods" (pp. 34-55), complements Vitellozzi's analysis by offering insights on a particular type of gemstones from late antique Egypt. Theis analyses the iconography of beings with several heads, and how this relates to the inscriptions engraved on the respective amulets. Nils Hallvard Korsvoll's contribution, "Agency and Efficacy in Syriac Amulets across the Ages" (chapter 4, pp. 56-68), takes one step further

in time and shifts the focus to the Asian space. Korsvoll analyses three corpora of amulets from the Syriac linguistic milieu: ancient incantation bowls, i.e., amulets placed on the threshold of houses; a set of medieval amulets of Syriac origin discovered in Turfan (Western China); and Early Modern amulets and handbooks from Northern Iraq. Korsvoll seeks to identify whether / how the inscribed text effects or merely transmits the magical power of the given amulets. This also offers him the opportunity to comment on amulet production in ecclesiastical – monastic circles across the Middle Ages and the Early Modern period.

With chapter 5, "Demons in Runic and Latin Amulets from Medieval Scandinavia" (pp. 69-79), authored by Rudolf Simek, the transcultural perspective is enlarged to include Norse traditions and practices. In turn, Edina Bozoky's contribution, "Magic Letters: Unintelligible Prophylactic Formulas" (chapter 6, pp. 80-89), illustrates the evolution of magical writing from a written record of speech acts to the locus of magical action. If the former chapter marks the intersection between intelligible and unintelligible textual presence, the latter focuses on the so-called *charakteres*, (alphabetic) symbols that do not constitute intelligible words. Here the analysis extends to the ecclesiastical context as well.

In chapter 7, "The Materiality of Talismans from Early Modern Spain: Morisco (and Old-Christian) Cases" (pp. 90-99), Esther Fernández Medina retrieves the Islamic heritage of an Early Modern ethnic minority from Spain. The forced Christianisation of the Morisco population in the seventeenth century led to the formation of hidden patrimony deposits, but also to a series of trials conducted by the Inquisition, from which Fernández Medina extracts relevant material. The final two contributions return to the Near and Middle East, analysing Ottoman and Persian practices, respectively. In "Talismans and Engravers of Talismans in the Seventeenth-Century Ottoman Society According to the Journal of Evliyā Çelebi" (chapter 8, pp. 100-11), Özlem Deniz Ahlers comments on Ottoman astrological talismans



on the basis of information referenced in the travelogue of a seventeenth-century explorer. Finally, Sarah Kiyanrad's "Small Letters against Great Misfortunes: A Glance at Safavid Amulet Culture" (chapter 9, pp. 112-31) describes the production and use of amulets in the Persian milieu of the seventeenth – nineteenth centuries.

Thus arranged, the material covered in this volume showcases the historical-cultural progression from the ancient Mediterranean (Graeco-Roman) *techné* of amulets to the wider Euro-Asian space from the Middle Ages to the Modern Era and beyond. This enables the editors to posit the "survival and continuity of some fundamental expressive categories which might be taken as common features of human religion" (p. 9). Each chapter also occasions discussions on the materiality of amulets, their production, the rituals, ritual experts and technicians involved. All these are reviewed in the concluding section of the volume (chapter 10, pp. 132-38), where the editors also trace a theoretical overview of amuletic praxeology.

Given the present reader's interest in Late Antiquity, the remainder of this paper takes a closer look at the first chapters of the volume.

The theoretical perspective that suffuses the rationale of the entire volume is amply presented in Paolo Vitellozzi's analysis of ancient magical gems. These constitute a special category of gemstones, objects of widespread popularity in Graeco-Roman Antiquity, in that they combine the magical force of the stone itself (the "medium") with that of the image engraved on it and that of the accompanying inscription (p. 10). Vitellozzi's interest lies precisely with how the inscription enhances or generates the magical efficacy of the gemstone amulet. The author structures his observations in three parts:

Firstly, he examines the evolution of writing and its magical roles in dialogue with theories and taxonomies developed in secondary literature. Compared with gemstone amulets of earlier periods, the imperial magical gems are increasingly textualised, a phenomenon that Vitellozzi attributes both to the "scribalisation" of Graeco-Roman society and to the interaction with Near Eastern (Judaic) cultural traditions.

Working from the perspective of "speech act" theories, he argues that texts inscribed on amulets originally translated in writing the orally performed rituals recited over the amulet. These rituals rendered the gemstone "magical." Their written record (often just a schematic rendering) perpetuated their magical efficacy through repeated oral performance starting from this very record. At this stage, then, the inscribed text is intelligible and can be integrated into a speech act by the beneficiary (p. 11). Precisely because of this, in time, especially with the spread of writing as a cultural habit, words and formulas themselves were perceived as magically efficacious. Text, medium and image complemented one another. A further transformative impulse was given by theories of language seen as vehicle of divinity, inspired by Hebrew, respectively neo-Platonic and Pythagorean thought. Thus, the magical core of the amulet gradually shifted from medium and image to text, which no longer needed be intelligible. The written symbols, graphemes and words conveyed the divine essence of the super-human entity invoked and represented by the image they accompanied (p. 13-5, 18, 30-1).<sup>2</sup> These stages of progressively infusing magical potency in the act of writing are further discussed and illustrated in the following sections.

Accordingly, the second part of Vitellozzi's contribution is dedicated to situations where text and image co-exist and co-operate to produce the desired magical action. Theonyms, incantations, commands, prayers, etc., or narrative sections (*similia similibus*, *historiolae*)<sup>3</sup> complement the imagery of the amulet and constitute efficacious channels of magical action. The author (pp. 20-3) examines concrete textual occurrences from the perspective of a combination of scholarly taxonomies, namely those elaborated by Faraone (2018, 1991), Kropp (2008) and Pocetti (2002). Next, he traces the kinds of magical action produced by the inscribed words in relation to (or independently from) the given amulet's imagery (pp. 24-6) and the oral performance of the beneficiary (pp. 28-9).

The third part of the chapter discusses the



final stage in the evolution of the textualisation of amulets, namely when language conveys the essence of preternatural (divine) beings (pp. 31-3). In this stage, writing, consisting of deconstructed graphemes, magical *charakteres*, isopsephisms, combinations of letters, acrostics, etc., assumes an iconographic character. Most illustrative in this sense are the exorcistic gemstone amulets, given their Jewish background, where, as the Vitellozzi noted, “the essence of divinity” is placed “in language rather than in images” (p. 31).

Chapter 3 addresses again the subject of gemstone amulets as the product of religious syncretism. Christoffer Theis examines amuletic depictions of deities with unnatural number of body parts, in particular, multiple heads, and their corresponding inscriptions. The examples selected feature anthropomorphic and zoomorphic deities (pp. 36-44), as well as the Egyptian Osiris and the ram representing the Sun god (pp. 44-50). This provides further illustration of the second and the third stages in the evolution of magical writing outlined in Vitellozzi’s contribution. Theis shows that, in many cases, the inscribed text (*voces magicae*, theonyms, sequences of vowels, etc.) functioned independently from the amulet’s imagery, being magically efficient in itself (pp. 51-2). The few intelligible inscriptions, in turn, are second person imperatives constituting magical commands (p. 53).

Vitellozzi and Theis convincingly show the transculturality that characterises ancient magical gems. In this sense, the mutual influence of Graeco-Roman, Egyptian and Hebrew traditions in creating magically powerful, syncretic iconographic and textual representations is amply documented. A conspicuous absence, however, is Christianity. Occasional references are made to sacred texts (e.g., the Gospels on p. 29), and to metalinguistic practices popular in early Christian circles, such as isopsephy (p. 16), but generally speaking, Christianity and the Church are addressed only in the volume’s later contributions. To a certain extent, this is understandable: Scholarly discussions on Christian amulets, or at least amulets with

Christian elements, tend to focus on papyri, of later date than the gemstones analysed in this volume.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, as Joseph E. Sanzo (2014, 10-3) noted, employing “Christian” as a category carries the danger of creating artificial contrasts (with, e.g., “non-Christian”), whereas the syncretic character of ancient amulets does not allow such distinctions, nor the individuation of the clientele (which must have included Christians as well).

Yet, when it comes to the idea of language as showcasing the essence of the divine, Christian emphasis on the Logos as the image of God must have surely left an imprint on the evolution of magical textuality. Admittedly, magical gems are a peculiar category of amulets compared, e.g., to papyri, in that the material from which they were fashioned was also thought to have magical energy. Even so, this reader, who does not pretend to be an expert, wonders if certain imperial-age gemstones with Christian symbolism (Christograms, fish, anchor, wreath, the cross, or images of the Good Shepherd)<sup>5</sup> could have been worn as amulets. A set of such gemstones, probably originating from Syria and possibly fabricated in series, have been engraved with the words  $\text{I}\text{H}\text{E}\text{O}\text{Y}\ \text{X}\text{P}\text{I}\text{S}\text{T}\text{O}\text{Y}$  (genitive). Spier (2011, 195) understands this to signify “servant of Christ.”<sup>6</sup> Yet it could also set the wearer apart as “belonging” to Christ and, as such, could evoke divine protection against unwanted (demonic) attacks. If this is the case, the genitive of the *nomen sacrum* could perhaps be included in taxonomies of magical writing.

A final comment concerns isopsephy as a magical device. Building on the numerical value of Greek (or Hebrew) letters, isopsephisms represent the alphanumeric correspondent of the sum of the numerical value of each letter in a word.<sup>7</sup> Thus,  $\rho\theta$  (99) is the sum of the letters that form the word  $\acute{\alpha}\mu\eta\nu$ . Such symbols, however, are not confined only to magical amulets or texts: We encounter them often in early Christian letters.  $\rho\theta$  or  $\Sigma\Delta$  (εἰρηνικά, “greetings of peace”), or even the cryptic combination  $\text{XMI}$  are interpreted in studies of early Christian epistolography as markers attesting that the writer was a Christian. In light



of the use of isopsephy in magical practices, one wonders if at least some of these epistolary occurrences could be more than just symbols of recognition. Could they have had a protective (magical?) function as well, meant to ensure the safekeeping and safe delivery of the letter?<sup>8</sup> This would be especially relevant in contexts unfavourable to Christians. Further research

on the provenance of epistolary papyri, but also on the complexities of late antique religious experience may shed light on this matter. At any rate, the presence of isopsephisms in letters seems to confirm this volume's assumption that, in late antique society at least, magic was an integral part of religion.



## NOTES

1. To cite but a few works relative to the late antique Mediterranean space: Endreffy, Nagy, and Spier (2019), Faraone (2018), De Bruyn (2017), Moriggi (2014), Sanzo (2014) and Spier (2007).
2. In this presentation, Vitellozzi draws on the classifications elaborated by Faraone (2018) and Kotansky (2019).
3. Understood as exemplary accounts that offered a precedent ("normative parallel") for the desired action, which, in turn, was brought into effect through persuasive analogy (cf. p. 20, 21).
4. E.g., De Bruyn (2017), which consciously eschews artefacts created from materials other than papyrus or parchment (cf. p. 19), or Jones (2016).
5. See De Bruyn (2017, 63) and Spier (2011, 195-98, with illustration).
6. Spier notes occasional similarities with magical gems but does not comment on the character of the Christian gems he discusses.
7. See, e.g., Frankfurter (2019, 647).
8. If ΣΔ can hardly be assigned magical value, papyri amulets do contain other common isopsephisms, the most intriguing of which is ΧΜΓ. It can be interpreted either as an acrostic or as an isopsephism for θεὸς βοηθός, "God (is) helper." See De Bruyn (2017, 65-66). In the latter understanding it can be integrated amongst the magically powerful *nomina sacra*, used to invoke the protective power of the divinity.

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