Introduction

Sijpesteijn, P.M.; Garcia Probert, M.A.

Introduction

Marcela A. Garcia Probert and Petra M. Sijpesteijn

Amulets and talismans from the Islamic world have long fascinated collectors and scholars. Although often assembled as part of larger ethnographic, material-culture or art and manuscript collections, amulets have tended to form a distinct interpretative category, labelled semi-literary and consigned to the realm of popular belief and alternative medicine. Given their ostensible function, amulets and talismans have typically been considered within the specialised domain of magic. How they work, how they relate to systems of authority and control, and the means by which their power is manifest and conferred upon a person, family, building, or city, have all been understood within the framework of magical thinking.

More recent studies,[1] however, have approached amulets and talismans as part of a broader system of meaning that shapes how they are manufactured, activated and used in the different networks in which they circulate. In other words, amulets, like other material objects and cultural practices, are grounded in the social-historical context in which they occur and derive their meaning and efficacy through interaction with their cultural environment. This approach has emphasised that amulets and talismans are embedded in

1 Juan E. Campo, "Shrines and Talismans: Domestic Islam in the Pilgrimage Paintings of Egypt," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 55, no. 2 (1987): 285–305; Laurel Kendall. "Popular Religion and the Sacred Life of Material Goods in Contemporary Vietnam," *Asian Ethnology* 67, no. 2 (2008): 177–199. Widad K. Kawar, *Threads of Identity* (Nicosia: Rimal Publications, 2011); Rose Muravchick, "God is the Best Guardian: Islamic Talismanic Shirts from the Gunpowder Empires." (PhD diss., University of Pensilvania, 2014). https://repository.upenn.edu/edissertations/1380; Ariela Popper-Giveon, Atef Abu-Rabia, and Jonathan Ventura, "From White Stone to Blue Bead: Materialised Beliefs and Sacred Beads among Bedouin in Israel," *Material Religion. The Journal of Objects, Art and Belief*, 10 no. 2 (2014): 132–153; Venetia Porter, *Arabic and Persian Seals and Amulets in the British Museum* (London: British Museum Press, 2011).; Anne Regourd, "A Magic Mirror in the Louvre and Additional Observations on the Use of Magic Mirrors in Contemporary Yemen," in *Word of God, Art of Man: The Qur'an and Its Creative Expressions*, ed. Fahmida Suleman, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 135–156.; Don Skimer, *Binding Words: Textual Amulets in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006); Hồng Thuật Vũ, "Amulets and the Marketplace" *Asian Ethnology* 67, no. 2 (2008): 237–255; Travis Zadeh, "Touching and Ingesting: Early Debates over the Material Qur'an," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 129, no. 3 (2009): 443–466; Jean-Charles Coulon, "The Kitāb Sharāsīm al-Hindiyya and Medieval Islamic Occult Sciences" in *Islamicate Occult Sciences in Theory and Practise*, ed. Liana Saif et all. (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 317–379.

religious, medical and mystical practices, not as by-products or deviations from orthodox prescription, but integrated into a behavioural continuum. Indeed, it is the amulets' function to obtain aid from the divine to keep or re-establish well-being that forms the common background. Focusing on the ways in which amulets interact with sacred and profane spaces, natural forces and unexplainable phenomena, the question is how amulets interact with and impact devotional experiences. By acknowledging this function within a specific historical, social and cultural context, amulets can be seen for the dynamic objects they are, transmitting knowledge and power, and transforming as they pass from one environment to another.

This scholarly development of understanding amulets as an integral part of the world in which they circulate forms the premise of our volume. This is not a book about magical practices, of which amulets form a part. It also does not engage with contemporary or historical philosophical and religious debates about the use of amulets.[2] Rather, the volume's starting-point is the objects—amulets, talismans, writings about them and any other product of a concern or action that can be interpreted as talismanic. Examining the amulets and texts as *objects*, taking into account materiality, traces of use, reinterpretation and transformation, enables the contributors to trace how people used them and what kind of power these people attributed to them. In some of the cases presented in this volume, it is moreover possible to gain insights into how the objects were used through contemporary historical descriptions. The amulets analysed in this volume are not in use as such at this time, so ethnographic data on how they are used are obviously not available. Through the methods described above—examining the use, re-use and interaction through traces on the historical objects themselves and as discussed in contemporary historical sources—the book's contributors draw inspiration from modern anthropology and material culture studies with the aim of seeing these historical amulets within the framework of a living religion.[3]

The objects presented here as case studies were produced and used by Muslims and non-Muslims alike, and differ in size, material, language and shape.

2 Indeed, the presence of amulets and the like is a better indicator of 'magical' practice than such theoretical debates which might or might not interact with those who use amulets.

3 By "living religion" we mean the way individuals and communities engage with the sacred in everyday life. The cases explored in this book come from the past and present. Cfr. Nancy T. Ammerman (ed.) *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Meredith B. McGuire, *Lived Religion, Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Samuli Schielke and Liza Debevec (eds.) *Ordinary Lives and Grand Schemes. An Anthropology of Everyday Religion* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2012).

The processes by which they were produced, used and understood, differ enormously from one object to the next. However, whether they were meant to be read out loud, displayed or kept hidden, carried on the body, hung on the wall, folded, ingested or burned, they all share one common feature: their primary function was to establish a channel of communication with the supernatural in order to elicit some kind of divine intervention.

Focusing on this function allows us to see the centrality of the performative aspect of amulets and talismans. This means that the ways in which they were used, as well as the means by which they gained power and meaning, becomes essential to how we understand these objects. Forms of activation are ritual procedures in which someone (usually, but not exclusively, a specialist) invests the object with special powers. That task can be accomplished by uttering or reciting certain (magical or religious) formulae, by marking it with specific features (inscriptions, symbols), by putting it in contact with a source of power such as a holy site, by making it on a particular day of the year or time of the day or night, or by another act that serves to transmit divine or magical power to an otherwise neutral object in the production or activation phase. It can also be achieved through the act of reading, touching or observing (some of) the object's features during its subsequent use. This process of activating the amulet's function can occur multiple times, whenever a new objective or user interacts with the amulet. Similarly, instructions on how to produce amulets and how to use them were adopted according to the text genre (medical, religious, lore) and geographical, historical and socio-intellectual context in which they were produced, acquired and deployed. In this sense the texts *about* protective and healing through amulets operate like the amulets themselves, being activated over and over again in different contexts with different meanings and functions. It is this layering of use and meaning that allows us to see these historical objects as projecting a living religion within the sequence of the historical and geographical contexts in which they circulate.

Amulets are also kept alive in other domains than the protective religious-medical arena. New meaning is given to the amulets by collectors and researchers as they interact with the objects, rearranging, labelling, displaying and interpreting them. Collecting practice, material culture and museum studies thus add yet another disciplinary angle to this work, as many of the objects discussed are now found in museums or libraries. We extend the process of giving meaning and function to the amulets and related objects to this current phase of preservation and collection. So while they are no longer in use for healing and protection, they fulfil a function as collectible items.

Two themes are central to this book. Firstly, the understanding of how, in the eyes of the beholders, amulets and talismans receive their power and are able to distribute it again in the form of protection, health, good fortune and other

positive outcomes; and secondly that they (simultaneously) form the focus of study, aesthetics, commerce and collection. To demonstrate this we present case-studies of amulets and related textual materials. This volume is located at the intersection of history, philology, (historical) anthropology, religious studies and the study of material culture. It connects amulets and talismans to local religiosities, medical traditions as well as to nutritional and pharmaceutical knowledge, and collection practices, then and now, in rural, urban and different social contexts. In doing so the book makes available new material, connecting it to practices of healing, protection, patronage and fortune-enhancement. People sought divine help to safeguard their health and well-being and to deal with the individual and communal ailments, crises and catastrophes they experienced. The 11 chapters in this book all discuss ways in which this was achieved in the Muslim world, using materials stretching from the seventh to twentieth century and from Europe to Africa and Arabia. The different contributions show that amulets were used in all layers of society—by the literate and the illiterate, the rich and the poor, religious scholars and laymen. By focusing on *how* these objects gained their effectiveness, the different case studies help us to imagine the broader context of amulets and talismans in the Muslim world.

The structure of the book follows three main questions, aiming to prompt a number of important reflections. The first line of enquiry concerns how practice and knowledge about amulets moved from one cultural tradition to another, and how this transition affected their form and application as well as understanding of them. Secondly, we focus on how amulets and talismans obtain their efficacy; in other words, how do they *work*? Finally, the book looks at how amulets have been studied (through collections and archives, *in situ*, or through texts reporting about the objects) and how repositories, such as private and public collections, museums, etc., have defined our understanding of these objects.

Before we turn to the specific themes of the book, we need to examine exactly what we mean when talking about amulets and talismans.

1 The Terminology: What Are Amulets and Talismans?

In this volume we have chosen to use the English terms *amulets* and *talismans* in the title for practical reasons. The terms amulets and talismans overlap with other words in use, such as charms, incantations, phylacteries and objects that have been referred to as 'small blessings'.[4] Amulets and talismans are made of

4 Cf. the project of the Pitt Rivers Museum in Cambridge entitled "Small Blessings" (http://web.prm.ox.ac.uk/amulets/ accessed 3/7/2020).

diverse materials and come in many forms. Despite their variety, certain features appear repeatedly and can be distinguished, such as specific formulae and commonly used materials, drawings and signs, scratches and perforations. The purpose for which the objects were used and the ways in which their function as protectors was activated also shows recurrent identifiable elements.

The distinction between amulets and talismans has been addressed by several scholars. An amulet has been described as an object endowed with magical powers used by the person who carries it.[5] As it exercises its protective powers continuously, an amulet can be used by anyone to target different kinds of problems. By contrast, a talisman is only intended to perform one specific task; therefore, it has to be made to cover the needs of a particular user in a defined situation. Its power exists from the moment it is activated, but it expires once its function is fulfilled.[6] As we will see in the following pages, however, in practice the difference in function between talismans and amulets is much more blurred.[7]

Some definitions of amulets and talismans are unique to certain disciplines and emerge from the kind of material that is researched. Papyrologists, for example, always work with material that has been inscribed. As Ursula Hammed explains in her contribution, providing an overview of the kind of amulets that can be found on papyrus, documents containing certain features, such as specific formulae, random repetition of letters, etc., have all been considered amulets. On the other hand, within the study of architecture, as Juan Campo shows in his article on Ottoman houses from Cairo, inscriptions aiming to protect buildings are generally called talismans or are said to have talismanic power. For disciplines that rely strongly on fieldwork or on a more ethnographic approach, the definitions tend to change according to the trajectories of the objects. This means, as Marcela Garcia Probert shows in her chapter on uninscribed natural objects used to gain protection, that the focus lies on how objects are used here and now, compared to how they were used in the past, or in different historical circumstances. In literary and book studies, the genre under which a text is categorised—medicine, magic, religion—determines for a large part how the text is perceived by scholars, but not necessarily how it was used before it arrived at a research library. Petra Sijpesteijn and Charles

5 Tawfiq Fahd, 'Tamīma,' in *EI2*.

6 Ernest A. Wallis Budge, *Amulets and Superstitions* (London: Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press, 1930), 13–14.; Ursula Hammed in this volume: "Arabic Magical Texts in Original Documents—A Papyrologist Answers Five Questions You Always Wanted to Ask."

7 See also 'one of the most widespread uses of talismans was in the form of amulets' (J. Ruska and B. Carra de Vaux, 'Tilsam,' in *EI2*.)

Coulon show how texts related to amulets can move through different genres, developing features and taking on different shapes as they are transmitted and reworked.

In this volume, amulets and talismans comprise material objects that have been manufactured and used within the Muslim world for protection, healing and to procure good fortune. People ingest them (in the literal sense of eating, drinking or inhaling parts or traces of the amulet) or carry them on their body, but protective objects and texts can also be placed in or on houses, on city buildings or walls or hung on animals, in cars, trucks or on machines and other work-related objects. Amulets are usually used for general protection; however, they can also be manufactured in a way that combines elements that tackle one particular threat or ailment. Talismans on the other hand, can be meant to target one particular problem, but they can be reused later in another context or for general protection, often by another user. This means that a strict definition of these two terms is problematic because it artificially limits the object's identity to one particular function and moment in time. In doing so it neglects the actual fluid nature of amulets and talismans over their lifespan in different contexts. The translation into English of all the terms employed in each chapter might not be the most accurate, so we have encouraged the contributors to make use of the *emic* terminology for the material under consideration.

2 Transmission of Knowledge: Where Do Amulets and Talismans Come From?

Amulets and talismans, the production of which is almost as old as mankind, served practical purposes. These objects with special powers were intended to protect, to heal and to elicit good fortune. Different forms of knowledge surrounding amulets have developed and accumulated throughout time as practices and information were transmitted from one language, religion, culture, period or region to another. How knowledge about amulets and talismans was transmitted and transformed is a recurrent theme in this book. On the one hand, the process shows the interconnections between seemingly different traditions; on the other hand, it illustrates how well-known elements can adopt a new life and are taken and reused as a result of their seeming efficacy. As a consequence of this transmission deliberately imported foreign as well as hidden or accidentally unknown terms and performances can be introduced. Ancient stones could become highly valued elements in Muslim amulets in forms very different from their original function, as items in the British Museum collec-

tion discussed by Venetia Porter show. Similarly, as Gideon Bohak demonstrates with the aid of magical texts preserved in the Cairo Geniza, Hebrew and Aramaic phrases could turn into magical formulae without semantic meaning when pronounced phonetically by Arabic speakers.

Transmission of knowledge has taken place via oral tradition and written sources. People's knowledge about specific amulets and talismans—the way they are made and used—passed through generations by word of mouth. Since amulets and talismans respond to practical needs, their efficacy determines their longevity: if an object is considered to work, people will continue to use it. Similarly, practices, iconography and other elements were shared and adopted across languages, religions and cultural traditions easily and quickly, on the grounds that whatever works is worth being imitated or copied.

Obviously, the Muslim world was never inhabited solely by Muslims, nor was Arabic the only language in use. Moreover, the environment within which ideas, practices and objects circulated was not confined by either political or religious borders. Nowhere does that become clearer than when studying amulets and talismans. In order to understand these particular objects in their social context, we need to be aware of the different cultural and religious experiences that have co-existed within Muslim societies and which have contributed to the way that these traditions were shaped. Many texts have played a role in grounding systematic knowledge about how to make and use amulets. Some texts come from previous traditions and were adapted to the Arabic-Islamic tradition. Other texts were produced by inhabitants of the Muslim world, but their use changed continually to fit differing historical, social and cultural circumstances and needs. Still others circulated within and outside the Muslim world, transporting knowledge and practice far and wide.

Different forms of transmission are addressed in the contributions in this book. Texts discussing the workings of amulets and offering instruction on their production and application show the transmission and transformation of knowledge through time. Charles Coulon discusses how the corpus ascribed to al-Būnī (d. 622/1225) as it is known today, with its quintessential magical character, obscures its original sufi contents. The recipients of al-Būnī's works adjusted them to fit contemporary needs, adding a layer of magical practice and information on amulets that was not there in the original version. Similarly, Petra Sijpesteijn studies how two processes of reworking, one a systematic rewriting and the other an organic growing and adjusting of texts by users and readers reshaped a popular work of (prophetic) medicine into a magico-medical one. In this sense literature related to amulets fits into other textual and manuscript traditions in the Muslim world, especially those related to 'util-

itarian' texts. Amulets proper sometimes also display traces of such adjustment of understanding and application. The imagery and contents of the Mamluk talismanic roll that Yasmine al-Saleh edits and discusses in her contribution point to the military environment in which the owner and user of the roll operated.

When texts about amulets move between linguistically, religiously and culturally distinct communities, additional explanations and interpretations are generated that facilitate their integration into the receiving tradition. This is clear in the material that Gideon Bohak discusses, which circulated between Jewish and Muslim communities in medieval Cairo and Europe. Arabic glosses and, later, full translations of Hebrew and Aramaic texts, served an Arabicising Jewish community in Fustat. In this way Arabic facilitated the spread of magical Jewish-Hebrew-Aramaic practices and their mixing with classical, Indian and other applications. The circulation of exorcism texts from Yemen through Ethiopia into the Iberian peninsula, as Anne Regourd shows, interacted with different textual traditions along the way. Although originating in different cultural, textual and religious traditions, the texts she discusses all revolved around the custom of calling upon jinn to help with the practice of exorcism.

3 Function: Material and Textual Features

Amulets and talismans are a result of human intervention upon existing natural and man-made materials and objects. Amulets acquire their power first through their shape and form and secondly through their application—and both are adjusted to fit the amulet's function. The specific arrangement of elements on the amulet is achieved by carving, modelling or assembling the materials into symbolic shapes or by inscribing them.

Most amulets and talismans that have been studied bear inscriptions. It has been, in fact, the written elements that have attracted most scholarly attention, since inscriptions are very useful for deciphering the way in which a magical object was used and the kind of power with which it had been imbued. Moreover, textual content can also illuminate the ritual actions and the performative aspects of amulets and talismans. Karl Schaefer's contribution makes clear how important these textual elements are, not only for *what* they say but also *how* the text is presented on the amulet, in this case in hand-written or printed form. The talismanic scroll that Yasmine al-Saleh analyses, derived its power from the specific combination of texts, namely Qur'anic and literary, which points to the background of its user. Similarly, the *tafrīq* text edited by Hazem Abbas 'Ali contains the textual elements needed to provoke discord between husband

and wife, but also shows drawings and additional phrases that point to the rituals that activated its power. The amulets discussed in the volume, whether written on papyrus, such as those discussed by Ursula Hammed on the objects of the British Museum as discussed by Venetia Porter or on papers preserved in the Cairo Geniza as discussed by Gideon Bohak, all contain standard textual features, such as certain Qur'anic passages or drawings, that turn them into powerfully numinous objects. They often also contain textual references, such as phrases and sounds, that needed to be spoken aloud to make that power effective.

However, and this might be the most important contribution of this volume, there are amulets and talismans that do not bear inscriptions at all. This absence of text does not indicate a lack of performativity but requires a change in the methodology: a shift of focus from the textual elements to a consideration of the object as a whole. Features other than inscriptions can yield significant information about how objects have been used through time. When objects lack inscriptions, other elements become important keys to understanding their function. Indeed, the material, shape, colour, or traces of use, such as scratches, holes and cracks, can prove just as valuable as inscriptions or other forms of text for informing us of the way in which these objects were used. This comes out most explicitly in the contribution by Marcela Garcia Probert on the twigs used as amulets that are now part of the Tawfik Canaan Collection, but it plays in the background in many other papers. How to interpret a piece of papyrus or paper, for example, that has been folded several times in the way that amulets often are to fit into small containers that can be carried, but that does not contain any of the textual or iconographic features generally associated with amulets?

Focusing on function and the meaning-making processes behind that function allow us to understand better the diversity of materials used. The material aspects of amulets and talismans can be subservient to their function, but they can also define the way the amulet is used. Anything can be made into an amulet or talisman, but there has to be a meaningful connection between the material and function of the object. Indeed, objects that might not obviously possess magical power, can become potent talismans through ritual activation. Moreover, an object that has been used as an amulet or talisman by one individual in a specific context can be used differently by someone else in other circumstances. There are many examples of objects first used as talismans made for an individual in order to target a specific problem that were later used by other individuals as amulets for general protection. When amulets enter museum or private collections or textual sources become part of libraries their function alters again. In choosing a fitting material base for the amulet,

the properties of natural elements are taken into account, but sometimes an object gains power through its antiquity or its origin in a foreign culture. This is clear, for example, in the re-use of Sasanian seals in Islamic amulets preserved in the British Museum, as Venetia Porter discusses.

So, with a fitting material having been chosen, the object shaped according to its function and/or the correct textual and iconographic elements applied, how are amulets made to work? The material properties of the amulet have to be created at the proper time and under the proper circumstances to be effective. Al-Būnī considered certain star constellations and celestial configurations essential for producing certain amulets, as Charles Coulon explains. Magical spells and formulae sometimes had to be uttered to activate the amulet's power. The inhabitants of mediaeval Fustat continued to produce the Hebrew and Aramaic spells considered to be essential for activating the associated amulets. As Gideon Bohak shows, the spells continued to be pronounced in the original language, but became more and more garbled as producers and users lost the capacity to understand them. Some amulets had to be consumed to be effective, thereby destroying any textual evidence of the amulets proper. Practices such as absorbing the amulet's powers by inhaling the smoke generated by burning the amulet or drinking the water in which the ink of the text has been dissolved are known from instruction manuals as Petra Sijpesteijn discusses.

Some amulets exerted their power simply by being worn or being in place. Others could only be activated by reading the text written on them. The poetry lines publicly displayed in Ottoman houses in Cairo became effective talismans when observers read them (aloud), as Juan Campo discusses. Some amulets on papyrus also show traces of having been on display, suggesting a similar practice was expected to effectuate the texts.[8]

Once a talisman had fulfilled its function, it was disposed of by its user. The conditions under which papyri are found, namely discarded in refuse dumps, as Ursula Hammed, discusses, highlight this practice. When an amulet or talisman changed hands, it not only had to be reactivated through one of the rituals described above, but could also be personalised to fit the circumstances of its new owner. Yasmine al-Saleh shows how subsequent owners manipulated a talismanic Mamluk scroll to adjust it to their personal needs. Similarly, manuscripts containing instructions on how to produce and apply amulets and talismans show the traces of subsequent owners and users who have added their personal experiences, opinions and observations, as the contributions by Charles Coulon and Petra Sijpesteijn demonstrate. Amulets also show how

8 W. Matt Malczycki, "A Qur'anic Amulet on Papyrus: P. Utah. AR 342," in *Documents and the History of the Early Islamic World*, eds. Petra M. Sijpesteijn and Alexander T. Schubert (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 235–246.

Qur'anic phrases could be adjusted, for example, by changing the personal pronoun, to fit the specific context of the amulet, as several examples discussed by Ursula Hammed, Yasmine al-Saleh, Hazem Abbas ʿAli and Karl Schaeffer show.

4 Location and Preservation in the Study of Amulets

Amulets and talismans used in research are found either in actual use or in collections. Since the early nineteenth century collections have been the main repositories of amulets and talismans from the Muslim world. Whether private or public, these collections were formed under specific historical circumstances and articulate particular narratives, which have impacted the way amulets have been researched and understood. As Charles Coulon observes in his contribution, discussions of amulets and talismans have been produced by Orientalist scholars and colonial authorities based on material gathered during their missions which was eventually deposited in museum collections. Amulets and talismans were collected for three different purposes: for aesthetic reasons; as magical objects; and out of folkloric interest. Collections thus play an important but mostly neglected role in setting the conditions of our research. Given the potentially distorting effects of selectivity, it is essential that the ownership context is taken into account. Ursula Hammed discusses this in the framework of the papyrological evidence. Similarly, Marcela Garcia Probert explores this aspect in her analysis of the place of 'unrecognisable' amulets, such as twigs in collections.

Besides museum collections, some researchers have focused on amulets and talismans that are still in use. The study of magical objects *in situ* has mainly been carried out through ethnographic work, which in a more comprehensive manner considers the way amulets and talismans interact with other elements of local culture. Anne Regourd does this very effectively in her chapter, as she combines ethnographic with philological research. When we focus on the history of ethnography in the Middle East, we find that for a long time it was undertaken mainly by European missionaries. Quite early, local ethnographers such as Tawfik Canaan got involved in the collection and study of ethnographic objects. More recent ethnographic work analyses amulets in accordance with their processes of manufacture, ritual activation, and circulation. Although this approach is more inclusive, it is mainly limited to contemporary material. For material coming from archives it is difficult if not impossible to retrace the full history of the objects and the context in which they were collected. Still, one of the purposes of this book's diachronic approach has been to see how such observations from the contemporary period can be applied to earlier material.

Book and manuscript studies offer a promising springboard in this respect, as several papers in this volume make clear.

This book is the outcome of the international conference *Amulets and Talismans in the Muslim World* held at Leiden University in May 2016. The written versions of the papers that were presented during the conference and articles that were added afterwards to supplement the volume have been subject to constant revisions until the moment of publication to reflect the latest research.