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Amulets, materiality and experience: demarcating space in the Roman world

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Citation

Kret, P. M. M. (2026, September 22). *Amulets, materiality and experience: demarcating space in the Roman world*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4309854>

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Amulets, materiality and experience:
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Patricia Kret

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Print: www.ridderprint.nl

Amulets, materiality and experience: demarcating space in the Roman world

Proefschrift

ter verkrijging van

de graad van doctor aan de Universiteit Leiden,

op gezag van rector magnificus prof.dr. S. de Rijcke,

volgens besluit van het college voor promoties

te verdedigen op dinsdag 22 september 2026

klokke 16:00 uur

door

Patricia Maartje Margaretha Kret

geboren te Leiderdorp

in 1993

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Deze publicatie maakt deel uit van het project *Verandering in gebruik, een verandering in behoeften? Het gebruik van amuletten van de eerste eeuw v. Chr. tot de vroegchristelijke wereld* met dossiernummer PGW.20.019 van het onderzoeksprogramma *Promoties in de Geesteswetenschappen* dat (mede) is gefinancierd door de Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek (NWO).

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First of all, I want to thank my supervisors Prof. Dr. Luuk de Ligt en Dr. Kim Beerden. Without their help I would neither have obtained my scholarship nor finished my thesis in time. They helped me structure my thoughts and form my arguments, and gave me the motivation to continue. Working on my thesis, it was a pleasure to have Kim as a role model. She showed me how important it is to see what women can do: be excellent teachers, productive scholars, and the best mothers. She helped me to develop, made sure I did not take on even more tasks, and always was my greatest supporter.

Carrying out PhD research is essentially a lonely process. I would therefore like to thank all my colleagues, who helped me get through it and were always ready for a chat: my roommates Marlisa, Larissa, Teuntje, Bente, Jamal, Suzan, Ruben, Liesbeth, Geert, Roosje, Sarah, and Camilla; my Ancient History colleagues Geert, Indira, Jürgen, Kim, Liesbeth, Luuk, Manon, Marijke, Miko, Rafal, Rens, Renske, and all the temporary colleagues who came and, unfortunately, went; all the PhDs who shared their experiences with me, especially those with whom I started my PhD trajectory: Alies, Ramona, Tessa, and Geke; and Theo, my fellow PhD representative. Warm thanks are especially due to Renske for her wisdom, kind words, and advice throughout my project. Last but certainly not least, I would like to thank my two paranymphs: Geke and Geert. From the start of my PhD research, I always looked forward to seeing Geke in the office next to mine, ready to talk about anything. She helped me enjoy the experience of writing, and her discipline inspired me to finish in time. Geert helped me control my nerves as the end of the trajectory came in sight and always provided a listening ear.

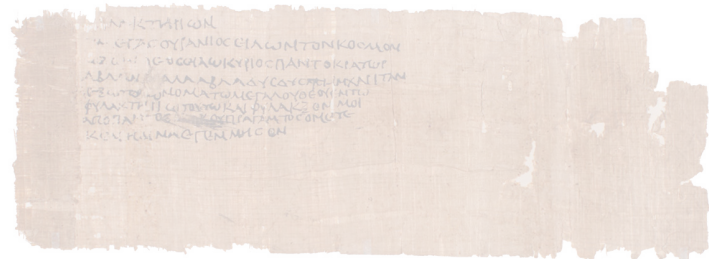
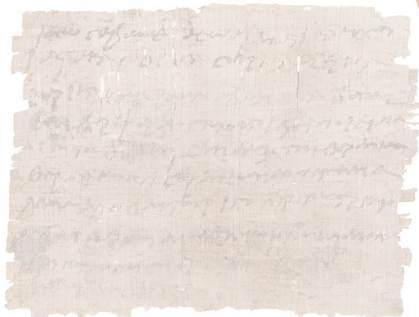
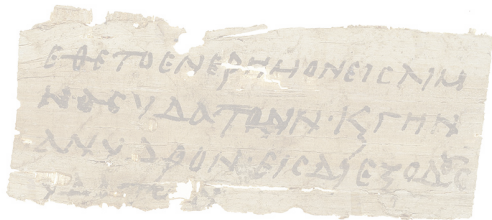
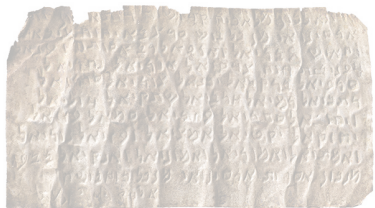
I also want to thank the organisations, institutions, and people that made this thesis possible. First of all, NWO for their confidence in me as a researcher and their appreciation of the interest and value of my subject. Furthermore, Leiden University for accommodating me as a researcher; OIKOS and KNIR for allowing me to attend various courses and gain experience abroad; KNAW and NEMO Kennislink for guiding me in the communication about my research; the organisers of conferences I was able to attend and my hosts at the places where I stayed. I am deeply grateful to Prof. Dr. Emma-Jayne Graham for the wonderful contact we had during my project. Finally, I would like to thank Frits Naerebout, Joanne Stolk, Efstathia Dionysopoulou, Ben van den Bercken, Glyn Muijtens, Indira Huliselan, and Anna Beerens for the help they provided in coping with sources, research, and texts.

I would like to thank my friends and family for always being interested, even when it must have been hard for them to see what exactly I was doing. Arina, Cornalijn, Saskia, my parents and sister, apologies for having bothered you with stories about strange amulets and annoying bishops, and thank you for listening. Closer to home, I owe more than can be expressed in words to Twan, to his unconditional love and support, and to his willingness

to be my own private encyclopedia with much more knowledge than I can ever keep in my own head. Most of all, I need to thank Ian. His entrance into this world almost meant my exit. He made me experience liminality at its most intense and brought me closer to my research topic than I could ever have imagined. Dear Ian, although I love studying the Roman world, my love for you will always come first.

ABBREVIATIONS

- ACM M.W. Meyer, R. Smith (eds.), *Ancient Christian Magic. Coptic Texts of Ritual Power* (Princeton 1994).
- CCSL Corpus Christianorum, series Latina.
- GEMF C.A. Faraone, S. Torallas Tovar, *Greek and Egyptian Magical Formularies, Vol. I: Text and Translation* (Berkeley 2022).
- GMA R.D. Kotansky, *Greek Magical Amulets. The Inscribed Gold, Silver, Copper, and Bronze Lamellae* (Opladen 1994).
- GMPT H.D. Betz (ed.), *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation, Including the Demotic Spells* (Chicago 1996).
- PCM K. Dosoo, M. Preininger, *Papyri Copticae Magicae. Coptic Magical Texts, Volume I: Formularies* (Berlin/Boston 2024).
- PDM The Demotic magical papyri that were included in the GMPT, but excluded in the *PGM*.
- PG J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus, series Graeca*, 161 Vol. (Paris 1857-1866).
- PGM P Christian texts added to the *PGM* edition of 1973-1974.
- PGM K. Preisendanz, A. Henrichs, *Papyri Graecae Magicae. Die griechischen Zauberpapyri*, 2 Vol., Second Edition (Stuttgart 1973-1974).
- PL J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus, series Latina*, 221 Vol. (Paris 1844-1855).
- PLS A. Hamman (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus compeletus, series Latina: Supplementum*, 5 Vol. (Paris 1958-1974).
- SC Sources Chr tiennes.
- SM R.W. Daniel, F. Maltomini, *Supplementum Magicum*, 2 Vol. (Opladen 1990-1992).





PREFACE

THE IMPACT OF AMULETS

The right front foot [of a chameleon], tied as an amulet (*adalligatum*, *litt. tied on*) to the left arm with hyaena skin, is powerful protection against robbery and terrors of the night, and the right teat [of a chameleon] against fears and panic.¹

Ancient amulets existed in many shapes and forms, from long texts written on papyrus or metal tablets to (parts of) all sorts of animals and plants, and (inscribed) stones. Amulets were among the topics discussed by the first-century Roman encyclopaedist Pliny the Elder. He described how objects such as the foot of a chameleon were used to provide help, relief or protection to individuals in the ancient world. Amulets are defined by their relation to space; they were attached to the location they needed to act in. In this way they demarcated the spaces on which they ought to have a positive impact. In the amulet described by Pliny, different parts of the chameleon – wrapped in hyena skin – could be tied to the human body (in this case the left arm) for protection.

Amulets are more than objects described in ancient texts; they were actually created, used and relied upon by individuals as part of their daily lives. In times of distress, sickness, violence or foul weather, people could resort to amulets to alleviate their worries. In the example above, the chameleon amulet would rid people of the fear of being robbed, or help them cope with panic or fear of the dark. Using this object, feeling its pressure on the skin of their left arm and remembering why it was there, might already make the user feel better.

Amulets have been studied for centuries. In existing studies of amulets, however, most of the attention is given to the texts on and/or iconography of the objects. The actual use of amulets as objects and especially the impact of the experience of using them have been rather neglected.² In line with recent paradigm changes in the research on materiality and religion, this thesis focusses on the use of amulets: on the relation between the object and the space it demarcated; on the impact of the experience of the object; and on continuities and changes

1 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.115. Translation: W.H.S. Jones, *Pliny. Natural History, Books 28-32. Vol. VIII* (London 1963) 80-81, adapted by author. Pliny's interpretation of the teat or breast of a chameleon is ambiguous, see the commentary in the Budé: A. Ernout, *Plinie L'Ancien, Histoire Naturelle XXVIII* (Paris 1962) 146-147.

2 A historiography will follow in chapter one. As for the most recent and most important works for this book: C.A. Faraone, *The Transformation of Greek Amulets in Roman Imperial Times* (Philadelphia 2018); T.S. de Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian: Artefacts, Scribes, and Contexts* (Oxford 2017); M.G. Spathi, M. Chidioglou, J. Wallensten (eds.), *Apotropaia and Phylakteria. Confronting Evil in Ancient Greece* (Oxford 2024); K. Dosoo, 'Magical Names: Tracing Religious Changes in Egyptian Magical Texts from Roman and Early Islamic Egypt', *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 26.1 (2024) 69-144; J.E. Sanzo, *Ritual Boundaries. Magic and Differentiation in Late Antique Christianity* (Oakland 2024). Another recent publication on amulets is B. Roberts, *Amuletic Objects in Late Antique Italy and Sicily* (PhD Thesis Open University 2023), I was not able to integrate it in my thesis.

in the forms and uses of amulets with a special focus on Late Antiquity.³

BRINGING DIFFERENT TIME PERIODS TOGETHER

Ancient Roman individuals used amulets before the arrival of Christianity and continued to do so afterwards. In one of his sermons, the sixth-century bishop Caesarius of Arles disapprovingly described how people identifying as Christians would resort to practices which he saw as non-Christian: ‘They consult seers and divines, summon enchanter, and hang diabolical phylacteries (*fylacteria*) and magic letters (*caracteres*) on themselves. Often enough they receive charms (*ligaturae*) even from priests.’⁴ *Fylacteria* (protective, often textual, amulets), *ligaturae* (amulets that were tied onto someone or something), and amulets with the script form of *charaktêres* had been used long before Caesarius and continued to be used long after his time.⁵ As Caesarius noted, priests and monks with scribal knowledge and access to the Scriptures were often involved in the creation of amulets. Amulets from Late Antiquity often included Christian elements in their text and iconography.

Both before and after the arrival of Christianity, amulets were used to provide feelings of protection, comfort, or healing. This does not mean that amulets were static: they developed as elements were added or changed. What may have motivated individuals to use amulets over such a long period of time, however, is seldom discussed in modern research. While C.A. Faraone and other researchers have shown that it is possible to study developments in the practice of amulet use, amulets from before and after the arrival of Christianity are rarely studied together.⁶ Problems in dating amulets and a focus on texts and on specific corpora have fragmented amulet research.⁷ By using an approach that puts the materiality of amulets centre-stage and focussing on the objects and the experience of the users, this study aims to examine amulets before, during and after the arrival of Christianity – not only to highlight continuities, but also to reveal developments over time.

Studying the use of amulets on a timeline makes it possible to gain insight into motivation. What made amulets special? Why did people continue to use amulets for hundreds of years?

3 For the importance of the study of materiality in investigating ancient religion see for example: M.J. Versluys, G. Woolf, ‘Artefacts and Their Humans: Materialising the History of Religion in the Roman World’ in: J. Rüpke, G. Woolf (eds.), *Religion in the Roman Empire* (Stuttgart 2021) 210-233. For recent research on the combination of materiality, ancient religion and experience see for example: E.-J. Graham, *Reassembling Religion in Roman Italy* (Abingdon 2021); K.A. Rask, *Personal Experience and Materiality in Greek Religion* (London 2023); M. Haysom, M. Mili, J. Wallensten (eds.), *The Stuff of The Gods. The Material Aspects of Religion in Ancient Greece* (Stockholm 2024); A. Bonnell Freidin, *Birthing Romans. Childbearing and its Risk in Imperial Rome* (New Jersey 2024).

4 Caesarius of Arles, *Sermones* 50.1. Translation by M.M. Mueller, *St. Caesarius, Sermons, Volume 1 (1-80)* (Washington 1956) 253-254.

5 See for example Dosoo, ‘Magical Names’.

6 For Graeco-Roman amulets see: Faraone, *Transformation*. For the transition period see: Sanzo, *Ritual Boundaries*. For Christian amulets see: de Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*.

7 As will be further analysed in chapter one.

How was this use impacted by religious changes related to Christianity and the new alternative religious practices it provided? The analysis of amulets over a long time period, taking both continuity and change into account, makes amulets one of the most useful sources for the study of developments in late antique religion.

This book aims to go beyond existing studies of amulets on three levels. First, it is the first to analyse amulets structurally over a large time period. Second, it shows that a materiality approach allows us to better understand the holistic process of use. Third, it involves humans, objects and places, and argues that the relation between amulets and space is one of the central features of the attraction of amulets over time.

SCOPE

In this monograph the corpus of amulets is approached as a coherent category of evidence. It therefore covers a large geographical area and a time period of considerable length in order to provide an in-depth analysis of all aspects of amulet use. As mentioned above, a large time frame enables the study of both continuity and change.⁸ My sources may be dated between 100 BCE and 600 CE, from before the emergence of Christianity until the arrival of Islam in Egypt. The starting point of my research coincides roughly with the beginning of the Roman Empire; ‘roughly’, because it is virtually impossible to provide exact dates for amulets.⁹ As many of the sources have been found in modern Egypt, the arrival of Islam has been used as an end date.

In order to approach amulets as a conceptual whole, I have included all regions (once part) of the Roman Empire.¹⁰ This broad approach is possible because similar strategies regarding text, material, iconography, functioning, and use have been found in amulets and in instructions for making them all over the Roman Empire.¹¹ The use of amulets continues to show similarities, even after the Empire had been split in a Western and Eastern part during the latter half of the research period.¹² Although local circumstances impacted amulet use, as

8 Dosoo, ‘Magical Names’, 89.

9 Dieleman dates the start of the inclusion of instructions for making amulets in the Greco-Egyptian ‘magical’ papyri to the first century BCE. The chosen periodisation fits this timeline. J. Dieleman, ‘The Greco-Egyptian Magical Papyri’ in: D. Frankfurter (ed.), *Guide to the Study of Ancient Magic* (Leiden 2019) 283-321: 283.

10 The same regions will be included for all time periods.

11 G. Bohak, ‘Amulets’ in: R. Raja, J. Rüpke (eds.), *A Companion to the Archaeology of Religion in the Ancient World* (Chichester 2015) 83-95: 92; Dieleman, ‘Greco-Egyptian Magical Papyri’, 284-285, 290. For the geographical spread of amulets, see for example the variety of sites discussed in R. Kotansky, *Greek Magical Amulets: The Inscribed Gold, Silver, Copper and Bronze Lamellae* (Opladen 1994). Amulets thus fit the ideas as discussed in M.J. Versluys, ‘Roman Visual Material Culture as Globalising koine’ in: M. Pitts, M.J. Versluys (eds.), *Globalisation and the Roman World* (New York 2015) 141-174.

12 For late antique similarities see: Dosoo, ‘Magical Names’, 72.

is evident from the prominence of scorpion amulets from Roman Egypt, this study aims to demonstrate that the fundamental aspects of amulet use recur in all sorts of regions and times.¹³

I have included a variety of sources, which can be classified into three categories: 1. amulets found in the archaeological record (activated amulets); 2. handbook instructions for making amulets (formularies); 3. ancient authors commenting on or describing amulet use. I have only used published material, addressing known sources with new questions.¹⁴ Although the main foci of this study are materiality, experience, and the relation to space, textual sources turned out to be of great importance to answer historical questions; amulets carrying texts and handbook instructions for making them form the main source. However, my aim is not to study the texts as such, but to study the objects and their use through the information that can be gained from texts.¹⁵ Non-textual amulets and amulets carrying very brief texts, such as gemstones, *bullae*, *lunulae*, bells and coins, also play a part, but are discussed less extensively.¹⁶

My conceptual approach allows me to go beyond religious identities. A variety of religious elements may be found in one and the same amulet. The specialists creating amulets had multiple religious and/or cultural elements at their disposal and combined these within the same object; elements we would now like to categorise as ‘Egyptian’, ‘Jewish’ or ‘Christian’ can be found in amulets from all over the (former) Roman Empire and not necessarily within

13 Local vegetation probably also influenced the nature of amulets, but depending on socio-economic status a large variety of amulets would still be available to users. L.R. LiDonnici, ‘Single-Stemmed Wormwood, Pinecones and Myrrh: Expense and Availability of Recipe Ingredients in the *Greek Magical Papyri*’, *Kernos* 14 (2001) 61-91. There is discussion regarding the uniqueness of Egyptian material; see for example chapter two of this book on the ritual specialists behind the ‘magical’ papyri from Egypt. See also: G. Bohak, ‘The diffusion of Greco-Egyptian Magical Tradition in Late Antiquity’ in: I. Rutherford (ed.), *Greco-Egyptian Interactions: Literature, Translation, and Culture, 500 BC - AD 300* (2016) 357-382: 358-366.

14 I deliberately do not mention the number of sources I have studied, because it is not the purpose of my research to highlight a specific group of sources. Instead, I approach known sources with conceptual historical questions.

15 The present monograph includes amulets that were used on different locations: such as bodies, houses, vineyards, crossroads, city gates. The amulets for larger locations are often less textual which makes it harder to analyse their user perspective. Therefore they have received less attention.

16 I do discuss early Christian relics, but they are not part of the main body of sources. I do not seek to answer the question whether relics might be understood as amulets; it deserves its own dissertation. Recently relics have been studied as a distinct group of material sources, but in earlier scholarship they were part of larger discussions, for example, on the cult of martyrs and saints. In current research, relics are still defined as ‘corporeal remains or other objects connected with people considered to be saints’. The focus is thus on the material relics consist of. We need research with a focus on the functioning of relics – what were the objects expected to do? – before we can compare relics and amulets. See: R. Wiśniewski, *The Beginnings of the Cult of Relics* (Oxford 2019), definition on page 2. See also C. Hahn, H.A. Klein, ‘Introduction’ in: C. Hahn, H.A. Klein (eds.), *Saints and Sacred Matter. The Cult of Relics in Byzantine and Beyond* (Washington 2015) 1-11. Studies on relics/reliquaries as an object group, though not from the perspective of use or function: E. Thunø, ‘Reliquaries and the Cult of Relics in Late Antiquity’ in: R.M. Jensen, M.D. Ellison (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Early Christian Art* (London 2018) 150-168; G. Noga-Banai, ‘Visual Rhetoric of Early Christian Reliquaries’ in: D.K. Pettegrew, et al. (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Archaeology* (Oxford 2019) 221-235.

a specific group of believers.¹⁷ In this project, therefore, the focus is on the use of the object and not on the religious identity of its owner.¹⁸ Amulets of all kinds are studied together, because the various religious elements are interacting.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND OUTLINE

The principal aim of this book is to shed light on two important questions: Why did individuals continue to use amulets for hundreds of years? And how was this use impacted by religious changes related to Christianity?

Chapter one lays the groundwork for this study. It offers definitions and approaches that form the basis for the interrogation of the sources. It discusses the histories of amulet studies and materiality studies and provides a new definition of amulets as objects demarcating space. It also advocates a new approach to the actual use of amulets and the interplay between continuity and change in developments over time. The relationship between object and location of use, the materiality of the object, and amulet use as a dynamic process are important elements of this book.

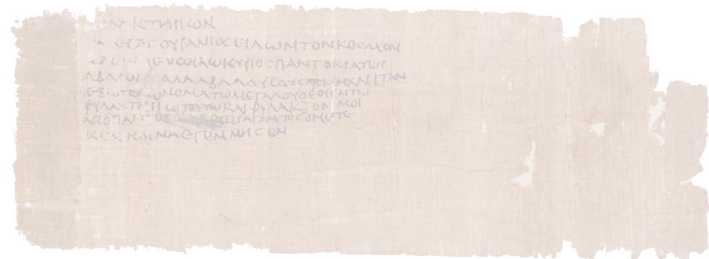
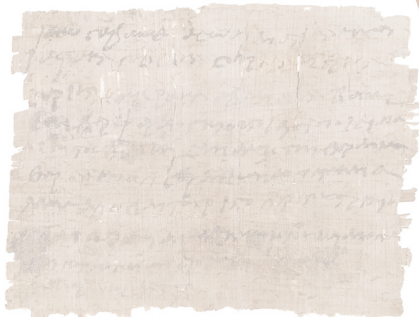
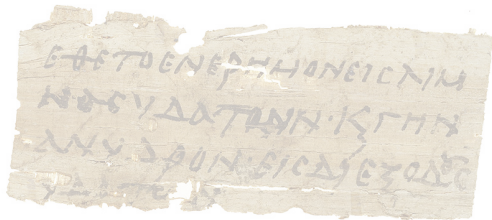
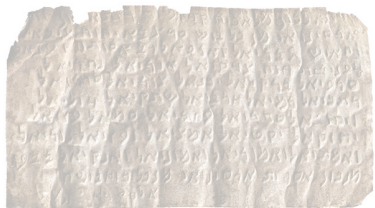
The second and third chapters present aspects of my investigation of the process of amulet use: from the first step of engaging the object to the last step of discarding or reusing the amulet, and everything in between. The second chapter focusses on what precedes the actual use of amulets, from the motives for the acquisition of an amulet to the installation of the object in its demarcated space. It discusses the users, the location of use, the creation of the object and more. Moreover, it provides an analysis of the users' expectations on the believed functioning of the object, especially with regard to the relationship between object and location. The third chapter focusses on actual use and experience. I describe the various steps in handling the object as well as experience in space and time (including the aspect of reuse). In order to throw light on why people continued to reach out to amulets,

17 Jewish religious practices had a large influence on traditional Graeco-Roman-Egyptian magical practices and the early Christian practices. A large amount of Jewish elements in an amulet, therefore, does not indicate that its users or makers identified as Jewish or Christian. The relationship between Jewish 'magic' and 'magicians' and Graeco-Roman, Egyptian and Christian practices is an interesting and vast field for further research, but it is not part of the present study. For the difficulty of interpreting the religious background of elements such as IAO in amulets see: Dosoo, 'Magical Names' 125-126, and for more research on the interplay with the Jewish 'magician' see: G. Lacerenza, 'Jewish Magicians and Christian Clients in Late Antiquity: The Testimony of Amulets and Inscriptions' in: L.V. Rutgers (ed.), *What Athens has to do with Jerusalem. Essays on Classical, Jewish, and Early Christian Art and Archaeology in Honor of Gideon Foerster* (Leuven 2002) 393-419.

18 Inspired by the work of J.E. Sanzo on the discussion of 'Christian amulets' versus 'amulets with Christian elements'. J.E. Sanzo, *Scriptural Incipits on Amulets from Late Antique Egypt: Text, Typology, and Theory* (Tübingen 2014) 10-14; I. Sandwell, *Religious Identity in Late Antiquity: Greeks, Jews and Christians in Antioch* (Cambridge 2007) 10-11. This is further discussed in section 1.1.3 of the next chapter.

I discuss the creation of meaning, expectations, sensory experiences and possible impact. The embodied sensory experience of the material presence of the amulet is considered to understand the impact the object could have on their users. I demonstrate that the impact of expectations and knowledge is intertwined with the experience of the material object. This analysis of the process of amulet use provides insight into the physical and/or emotional impact of amulets on their users and forms the basis for the next chapter.

The fourth chapter focusses on Late Antiquity and analyses historical developments at the different stages of the process of amulet use. The chapter introduces a new source: the sermons of bishops criticising amulet use. In addition, it discusses both change and continuity in the use of amulets: both are evident in amulets of Late Antiquity. Specific stages in the process of amulet use are studied separately to grasp the impact of change and the meaning of continuity. To support my interpretations, I also put into context new elements such as the role of new authorities – priests and monks making amulets – and new texts added to amulets from the Scriptures. These aspects are combined with insight into the continuities in amulet use to understand the pull factors for choosing amulets in Late Antiquity.



CHAPTER



STUDING AMULETS

STUDYING AMULETS

As amulets were popular for hundreds of years, there are many sources and there is a variety of approaches to study them. In this chapter, I discuss existing approaches as well as my own. First, I provide a short historiography of different aspects of amulet research, such as relevant discussions on magic, the focus on text, and developments in the study of early Christian amulets. Second, I present developments and theories from the research field of materiality studies, which will help to create a new overarching approach to amulets. Third, I formulate a new definition of ancient amulets, which focusses on the demarcating function of amulets and aims to bring different types of amulet research together. Fourth, I present the approach to amulets used in this book, which incorporates all aspects of amulets into the study of amulet use as a process. This allows exploration of the full experience of using amulets at different moments in time and makes it possible to study amulets as a conceptual whole, to understand why amulets were used and how this use developed in Late Antiquity after the arrival of Christianity.

1.1 HISTORIOGRAPHY: THE MANY FACES OF AMULET RESEARCH

In 1910, in the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, several authors discussed amulets (and charms) in various places and times, including Greek, Roman, and early Christian amulets.¹⁹ In the introduction to these papers, B. Freire-Marreco provided a definition of amulets that would not look out of place in a modern publication:

An *amulet* is a material object worn or carried on the person, or preserved some other way, for magico-religious reasons, *e.g.* to cure disease, to give strength, 'luck,' or general protection to the possessor, or to defend him or her from specified dangers or misfortunes.²⁰

The analysis that follows, however, definitely would be out of place. Amulet use is supposed to have continued for the 'savage', 'semi-civilized' and 'less educated classes'.²¹ Nevertheless, the definition encapsulates aspects of materiality ('an amulet is a material

19 L. Deubner, 'Charms and Amulets (Greek)' in: L.H. Gray (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. 3 (1910) 433-439; R. Wünsch, 'Charms and Amulets (Roman)' in: L.H. Gray (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. 3 (1910) 461-465; E. von Dobschütz, 'Charms and Amulets (Christian)' in: L.H. Gray (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. 3 (1910) 413-430.

20 B. Freire-Marreco, 'Charms and Amulets (Introductory and Primitive)' in: L.H. Gray (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. 3 (1910) 392-398: 392-393.

21 Freire-Marreco, 'Charms (Introductory and Primitive)', 392-393.

object’) and the location of use (‘carried on a person’).

In the historiography of amulets these aspects have received much attention, but they have been secondary to the study of texts. In general, the investigation of amulets is fragmented, because amulets feature in wider debates on religion and magic in traditional Graeco-Roman and early Christian religion. As a consequence, the study of the objects is not consistent and emphases are variously placed. Most of all, amulets were mostly studied per category or specific time period. Still, certain elements, for instance materiality, recur. How do all these different studies into different types of amulets relate to one another?

1.1.1 Early research: broad interests and normative discourse

Ancient amulets have been studied and collected for centuries, and scholarly interest increases in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As early as 1855, O. Jahn wrote about the use of objects against the *böse Blick* (evil eye).²² In 1905, P. Wolters discussed tying and knotting threads around the body as amulets.²³ Although the work of these scholars is nowadays no more than a footnote in historiography, in their attempts to understand non-textual religious sources, their research was innovative. These scholars and their colleagues combined a wide variety of sources, from the iconography of archaeological sources (activated amulets), to the descriptions of the use of amulets in the works of ancient authors.²⁴ In their research, they sought to grasp the ‘why?’ of these objects with ‘strange’ or deviating iconography and inscriptions: the use of phalli, Gorgons sticking out their tongues, ‘strange’ words that we now call *charaktères*.²⁵ Jahn discussed the use of the image of a Gorgon, a female monster, as follows:

Es wäre ganz unbegreiflich, das man dieses abschreckende Bild, das an sich nimmermehr einen wohlgefälligen Eindruck machen kann, zu allen Zeiten überall (...) anbrachte, wenn nicht die Vorstellung von einer heilsamen Kraft, welche man damit verband, alle ästhetischen Rücksichten beseitigt hätte.²⁶

Jahn wonders why one would use such ‘unattractive’ images and concludes that they must have had a healing or, as he later proposed, apotropaic – evil-averting – function.²⁷ Although their research is representative of a normative approach to ‘strange’ and ‘deviant’

22 O. Jahn, ‘Über den Aberglauben des bösen Blicks bei den Alten’, *Berichte über die Verhandlungen der Königlich Sächsischen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Leipzig. Philologisch-historische Klasse* 7 (1855) 28-110.

23 P. Wolters, ‘Faden und Knoten als Amulett’, *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft* 8 Beiheft (1905) 1-22.

24 For example, Wunsch, ‘Charms (Roman)’.

25 See also: Deubner, ‘Charms (Greek)’.

26 Jahn, ‘Aberglauben des bösen Blicks’, 60.

27 For his interpretation of phalli as powerful because they are indecent (*Unanständig*), see Jahn, ‘Aberglauben des bösen Blicks’, 73-74. For more on apotropaic powers, see 82-83.

forms of religion, these early scholars showed a genuine interest in the motivation behind the use of these objects. In addition, although they distinguished between several time periods – Greek, Roman, Christian –, they did include a wide variety of objects.

In a book dealing with the use of textual amulets, D.C. Skemer describes a long historiographical tradition of a normative approach towards the use of amulets: the objects were treated as ‘wrong’ by the early church, were later presented by Protestants as a negative aspect of Roman Catholicism, and Rationalism and Orientalism promoted the idea of amulets as being ‘primitive’.²⁸ This normative stance on amulets can actually be traced back to antiquity itself, since elite male authors often framed the use of amulets as behaviour typical of the desperate.²⁹ Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholars should be considered as part of this long tradition. Their normative attitude was influenced by anthropological research and works on magic such as J. Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*, in which magic is presented as superstitious folklore and inferior to religion.³⁰ Amulets were seen as part of magical beliefs and as primitive, strange, and even bad. Although early scholars sincerely asked themselves – as I do – why people in the ancient world would be attracted to amulets, they generally argued that it was all part of a universal instinct of primitive man to control the natural forces that might influence his life.³¹ Their view of amulets as universal was buttressed by the observation that the ‘less educated’ of their own time were still attracted to them.³² Although these early scholars understood the use of amulets as prompted by a universal primitive instinct, they could not ignore the existence of early Christian amulets. The theologian E. von Dobschütz comprehensively described amulets with early Christian elements, including the question in how far they formed a continuation of traditional Graeco-Roman amulets: ‘The Christians adopted all these so far as they were consistent with their religious views.’³³

The notion that amulets are primitive and ‘for the uneducated’ is obsolete, but the early research is still of importance. As I already pointed out, several authors showed an interest in the motivation behind the use of these objects. Moreover, in his work on (ancient) amulets of 1930, Wallis Budge paid attention to the use of amulets as a coping mechanism. He wrote

28 This is, for example, argued by Von Dobschütz, ‘Charms (Christian)’, 413-414; for a more recent analysis see D.C. Skemer, *Binding Words. Textual Amulets in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia 2006) 3.

29 According to Plutarch, Pericles was too ill to offer resistance to the women who foisted an amulet on him Plutarch, *Vitae Parallelae. Pericles* 38.2; Faraone, *Transformation*, 6-7.

30 J. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, Vol. 1, Second edition (London/New York 1900) on religion and ‘magic’: 63-79, specific: 75. These views were influential for E.A. Wallis Budge, *Amulets and Superstitions* (London 1930), and can also still be found in C. Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets. Chiefly Graeco-Egyptian* (Ann Arbor 1950) 2.

31 For example, in the words of Wallis Budge: ‘The use of amulets dates from the time when animism or magic satisfied the spiritual needs of man. Primitive man seems to have adopted them as a result of an internal urge or the natural instinct which made him take steps to protect himself and to try to divine the future.’ Wallis Budge, *Amulets and Superstitions*, xv, see also: xvi, xxiii.

32 Freire-Marreco, ‘Charms (Introductory and Primitive)’.

33 Von Dobschütz, ‘Charms (Christian)’, 421.

that amulets provide ‘a sense of comfort, and protection and well-being, and (...) harm no one.’³⁴ In his preface, he tried to steer clear of the negative view of amulets, indicating that important men also used them³⁵ and stating that amulets have ‘never been, and never can be, connected with what is commonly called “Black Magic.”’³⁶ In this respect, the work of Wallis Budge shows a movement towards a different approach, away from the idea that amulets were primitive. Around this time, scholars also started to look at ancient magic in a different way.

1.1.2 Revival of the 1990s: magic and texts

From the early twentieth century onwards, editions and collections appeared of ancient sources that were considered ‘magical’, often arranged according to language and the type of material.³⁷ Under the supervision of K. Preisendanz, a collection of Greek magical papyri from Egypt was published and translated into German as the *Papyri Graecae Magicae* (PGM). The collection included two types of sources: instructions for making amulets (formularies) and used activated amulets.³⁸ In 1950 C. Bonner published a work on gemstone amulets that is still of influence. He describes amulets as follows:

In the broadest sense of the word, an amulet is any object which by its contact or close proximity to the person who owns it, or to any possession of his, exerts power for his good, either by keeping evil from him and his property or by endowing him with positive advantages.³⁹

Bonner’s research also reflected the notion of amulets as an expression of ‘primitive concepts of the mind’, but his definition is based on the objects’ use and function and not on their appearance. Amulets were objects that were worn by their owners (or placed on or near their possessions), and Bonner presents ideas on the power of tying, binding, and knotting amulets around the body.⁴⁰ Below, I shall extensively discuss this aspect of amulets as objects that were in contact with and/or proximity to their location of use.

The late twentieth century saw an increase in the investigation of ancient magic and the study of ancient amulets likewise expanded significantly. Research into amulets

34 Wallis Budge, *Amulets and Superstitions*, xxix, 1-3, 10-11.

35 Wallis Budge, *Amulets and Superstitions*, xxxv-xxxvi.

36 Wallis Budge, *Amulets and Superstitions*, xxiii.

37 For the work that led to these developments see also: K. Dosoo, ‘(Post-)Colonialism and Ancient Magic’ in: K. Blouin, B. Akrigg (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Classics, Colonialism, and Postcolonial Theory* (London 2024) 280-300: 281-286.

38 K. Preisendanz et al., *Papyri Graecae Magicae. Die griechischen Zauberpapyri*, 2 Vol. (Leipzig 1928-1931); H.D. Betz, ‘Introduction to the Greek Magical Papyri’ in: H.D. Betz (ed.), *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation, Including the Demotic Spells* (Chicago 1996) xli-lxiii: xlii-xlv.

39 Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets*, 2.

40 Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets*, 2-3.

evolved into a study of performative texts and this was influenced by developments in the study of ancient magic and religion. P. Mirecki and M.W. Meyer ascribe this ‘dramatic resurgence of interests in the study of what has usually been called “ancient magic”’ to the publication of the second edition of Preisendanz’ *Papyri Graecae Magicae* (PGM) by A. Henrichs in 1973-1974.⁴¹ This publication was followed by many others, such as the English translation of the PGM by a team supervised by H.D. Betz (1986), the publication and translation of texts appearing on *lamellae* (amulets on metal tablets) by R.D. Kotansky (1994) and translations of Coptic spells from Egypt (which include amulets and instructions for making amulets) by R. Smith and M.W. Meyer (1994).⁴² As the latter indicates, interest in Christian written amulets also increased in this period.

Research into amulets was also affected by critical reassessment of the concept of magic. This reassessment started in anthropology and was mainly the result of growing criticism regarding the normative use of the term ‘magic’.⁴³ Because of this, scholars increasingly refrained from using this term, focussing instead on a central element in the ancient sources that used to be referred to as ‘magical’: ritual power.⁴⁴ Research into these practices increased and scholars started to explore the functioning of rituals and objects that used to be associated with magical practices, such as curses and amulets. These inquiries also included Christian practices, although these were often qualified as pagan survivals, an attitude that failed to acknowledge the presence of such performative strategies within Christianity itself.⁴⁵ Still, in general, as research on magic increased, research on amulets grew as well.⁴⁶

41 M.W. Meyer, P. Mirecki, ‘Introduction’ in: M.W. Meyer, P. Mirecki (eds.), *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power* (Leiden 1995) 1-10: 1.

42 M.W. Meyer, R. Smith (eds.), *Ancient Christian Magic. Coptic Texts of Ritual Power* (Princeton 1994); Kotansky, *Greek Magical Amulets*; H.D. Betz (ed.), *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation, Including the Demotic Spells* (Chicago 1986).

43 On the importance of this discussion in the 1990s see the introduction of: M.W. Meyer, R. Smith, ‘Introduction’ in: M.W. Meyer, R. Smith (eds.), *Ancient Christian Magic. Coptic Texts of Ritual Power* (Princeton 1994) 1-9: 1-6; C.A. Faraone, D. Obbink, ‘Preface’ in: C.A. Faraone, D. Obbink (eds.), *Magika Hiera: Ancient Greek Magic and Religion* (Oxford 1991) v-vii; Meyer, Mirecki, ‘Introduction’.

44 Meyer, Smith, ‘Introduction’, 3.

45 For a historiography see: D.E. Aune, ‘Magic in Early Christianity’, *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* II.23.2 (Berlin 1980) 1507-1557: 1507-1510. For an early application of new ideas see: P. Brown, ‘Sorcery, Demons, and the Rise of Christianity from Late Antiquity into the Middle Ages’ in: M. Douglas (ed.), *Witchcraft, Confessions and Accusations* (London 1970) 17-45.

46 Meyer, Smith, ‘Introduction’, 2; J. van der Vliet, ‘Christian Spells and Manuals from Egypt’ in: D. Frankfurter (ed.), *Guide to the Study of Ancient Magic* (Leiden 2019) 322-350: 331. In a recent book on ancient ‘magic’, D. Frankfurter ascribes the change in attitude towards ‘magic’ to M.H. Smith and his book *Jesus the Magician* of 1978. Smith describes how different images of Jesus are presented in different sources: a magician or a son of God, someone who performs magic or someone who performs miracles. He notes that in the case of ‘magic’, ancient authors should be read with caution as it often comes with preconceptions. M.H. Smith, *Jesus the Magician* (London 1978); D. Frankfurter, ‘Ancient Magic in a New Key: Refining an Exotic Discipline in the History of Religions’ in: D. Frankfurter (ed.), *Guide to the Study of Ancient Magic* (Leiden 2019) 3-20: 3.

Are amulets magic?

Amulets might be understood as magic from an emic (insider perspective) point of view, especially that of ancient authors and early Christian bishops who disapproved of the use of amulets. They often use words such as μάγος (*magos* ‘magician’) or μαγεία (*mageia* ‘magic’) to describe what they perceive as illegitimate and ambiguous ritual.⁴⁷ In a Phrygian canon, for example, we read that priests and other clerics must not be μάγοι, ‘nor shall they make what are called φυλακτήρια, which are chains for their own souls.’⁴⁸ Magic was seen as a dubious form of religion. Eventually, however, whether amulets were understood as magic or not, was in the emic eye of the beholder. This is already indicated by Pliny the Elder. Pliny states that he knows magical instructions for all sorts of things, but he adds: ‘I am very shy of quoting them, because of the widely different feelings they arouse. Wherefore everyone must form his own opinion about them as he pleases.’⁴⁹

These emic definitions of magic are important for appreciating early opinions about amulets. They provide us with insight into the thoughts and feelings of people who criticise certain religious practices. This does not, however, tell us what the people who used amulets thought about their use and effect. When trying to study the actual daily practice of amulet use, we can hardly escape the concept of magic and the accompanying normative preconceptions. This also holds true for the ancient Greek terms μάγος and μαγεία.⁵⁰ It is therefore problematic to apply these concepts to amulets. It would be possible, though, to apply the term ‘magical’ to illegible or illogical texts or imagery added to amulets, as is done by C.A. Faraone – illegible to us, modern scholars, for instance *charaktêres*. Faraone argues that the adjective ‘magical’ can only be used ‘in an extremely limited way to describe types of evidence – for example, “magical names” or “magical gems” in places where one might just as easily have used the adjective “nonsense” to describe such texts or “weird” to describe such gems.’⁵¹

Alternatively, one might create an etic definition – the outsider perspective. In 1991, H.S. Versnel wrote ‘Magic does not exist, nor does religion. What do exist are our definitions of these concepts.’⁵² He subsequently suggests to use an etic definition of both concepts.

47 F. Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World* (Cambridge, MA 2003) 16-19; Meyer, Smith, ‘Introduction’, 1-3. H.S. Versnel, ‘Some Reflections on the Relationship Magic-Religion’, *Numen* 38 (1991) 177-197: 182. For Late Antiquity, see: J.E. Sanzo, ‘Early Christianity’ in: D. Frankfurter (ed.), *Guide to the Study of Ancient Magic* (Leiden 2019) 198-239. For a recent approach that uses ‘illegitimate and ambiguous ritual’ in various ancient cultures see Frankfurter, ‘Ancient Magic in a New Key’.

48 Circa fourth-to-fifth-century Canon 36. Often referred to as the Council of Laodicea. Translation in Sanzo, ‘Early Christianity’, 222.

49 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.29. Translation by Jones, *Pliny, Books 28-32*, 20-23.

50 Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World*, 16-19; Meyer, Smith, ‘Introduction’, 1-3; Versnel, ‘Relationship Magic-Religion’, 182.

51 Faraone, *Transformation*, 5. In line with Frankfurter, ‘Ancient Magic in a New Key’, 10-15. Similar in Bohak, which is part of a larger collection of articles on religion: Bohak, ‘Amulets’.

52 Versnel, ‘Relationship Magic-Religion’, 177, see also 177-181.

An etic definition of ‘magic’ would then be based on ‘formal characteristics generally associated with magic action.’⁵³ The key question here is what magical practices actually *do* and in relation to amulets this means that we must define them on the basis of their believed efficacy. In Versnel’s definition of ‘magic’, magic is not the opposite of religion since, in his view, everything is religion. Still, a difference can be made between magical acts and religious acts. All amulets are religious in the sense that their users believed these objects to be in contact with the supernatural world, even if the supernatural beings that amulets were believed to derive their power from remain unspecified. Individual amulets can be placed on a sliding scale with on the one side magical action forcing supernatural powers to (re)act and on the other religious action asking the supernatural to act.⁵⁴ In practice, most amulets would be placed at the former end of the scale as expressions of coercive action. However, for modern scholars it would be hard to apply such a scale, because amulets do not always contain clear and comprehensible texts (with questions or commands). Besides, it is debatable whether the application of an etic definition of magic would genuinely contribute to a better understanding of amulets.

All in all, in the emic sense, the term magic does not tell us anything about the thoughts and beliefs of the people who actually used amulets. In an etic sense, magic is understood as coercive communication with the supernatural, but differentiating between coercive and non-coercive texts on amulets does not add to the understanding of their use. Even if magic would only be used in this etic sense, the word would come with negative connotations of illicit religious behaviour, which would hamper our approach to the research questions. For all these reasons, in this book the word magic will be avoided as much as possible.⁵⁵

Focus on texts

During the 1990s, research into amulets increasingly turned towards the functions of the texts written on amulets or in instructions.⁵⁶ This was very much related to the publication and translation of new sources, such as the *PGM*, I mentioned above.⁵⁷ Another impetus came from the fields of linguistics and anthropology, where ideas emerged and developed that were later applied to the study of ancient magic. In a lecture series of 1955, the linguist J.L. Austin discussed ‘Speech-act theory’, the idea that words can have performative power: saying something is doing something.⁵⁸ He described utterances such as ‘I do’ at a wedding ceremony as *performative*, because ‘it indicates that the issuing of the utterance is the

53 Versnel, ‘Relationship Magic-Religion’, 191.

54 In this I follow Versnel, ‘Relationship Magic-Religion’, 191-192.

55 It seems impossible to completely avoid the word ‘magic’, especially when discussing the ideas of other scholars or sources from collections such as the *PGM*.

56 On developments before this period, see also: Dosoo, ‘(Post-)Colonialism and Ancient Magic’, 284-293.

57 Meyer, Mirecki, ‘Introduction’, 1.

58 J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*. Edited by J.O. Urmson and M. Sbisà (Oxford 1976).

performing of an action.⁵⁹ By saying *I do* the marriage is a fact. In short, words can have the power to create, to bring change in the world.⁶⁰ These ideas were used by the anthropologist S.J. Tambiah, who studied the performative power of ritual acts: ‘we can say that ritual acts and magical rites are of the “illocutionary” or “performative” sort, which simply by virtue of being enacted (under the appropriate conditions) achieve a change of state, or do something effective.’⁶¹ Tambiah also argues that ritual acts were believed to exercise their power through ‘analogical associations, comparisons and transfers (through simile, metaphor, metonym, etc.)’ and ‘through use of words commanding, ordering, persuading and the like.’⁶² The notion of the magical act as an act of performative ritual and the idea of the performative use of words turned out to be of great influence for the study of ancient amulets as sources that incorporated a performative use of words.⁶³

Although the power of words in incantations and charms had been studied before, the 1990s saw an increased interest in the power of both the spoken and the written word in ancient religion.⁶⁴ In 1991, R.D. Kotansky published an article on the spoken and the written word with regard to amulets. He argued that, during the Roman period, there was a development away from spells spoken over objects such as amulets and towards spells written on the objects.⁶⁵ In 1992, C.A. Faraone drew attention to the performative, or persuasive, use of images: ‘images could often be erected to *do* something to prevent or constrain.’⁶⁶ In 1994, D. Frankfurter discussed the relationship between spoken and written words with power in Egyptian and Greek religious practices, including the use of amulets; in 1995 he introduced the ideas of Tambiah and Austin in his study on the power of the

59 Austin, *Do Things with Words*, 6.

60 For the basis of Speech-act theory, see lecture 1: Austin, *Do Things with Words*, 1-11.

61 S.J. Tambiah, ‘Form and Meaning of Magical Acts: A Point of View’, *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 7.3 (2017) 451-473. Reprint of: S.J. Tambiah, ‘Form and Meaning of Magical Acts: A Point of View’ in: R. Horton, R. Ruth Finnegan (eds.), *Modes of Thought: Essays on Thinking in Western and Non-Western Societies* (London 1973) 199-229.

62 Tambiah, ‘Magical Acts’, 467.

63 Van der Vliet, ‘Christian Spells’, 326. As will be demonstrated in the next paragraph.

64 On the therapeutic power of words: P. Lain Entralgo, *The Therapy of the Word*. Edited and translated by L.J. Rather, J.M. Sharp (New Haven 1970), translation of original from 1958. These ideas were redeveloped, for example, in the study of ‘magical’ words in P. Cox Miller, ‘In Praise of Nonsense’ in: H. Armstrong (ed.), *World Spirituality: Classical Mediterranean Spirituality* (New York 1986) 481-505: 493-495.

65 R. Kotansky, ‘Incantations and Prayers for Salvation on Inscribed Greek Amulets’ in: C.A. Faraone, D. Obbink (eds.), *Magika Hiera: Ancient Greek Magic and Religion* (New York 1991) 107-137: especially 107-113.

66 C.A. Faraone, *Talismans and Trojan Horses: Guardian Statues in Ancient Greek Myth and Ritual* (New York 1992) 118-119.

historiola – a spell in the form of a story.⁶⁷ In 2002, departing from an article from 1996, H.S. Versnel discussed the meaning of the magical charm – not the literal meaning of the words, but the meaning of the texts for their users.⁶⁸ Although these scholars draw attention to the meaning of text and iconography for the users, they all focus on amulets with texts,⁶⁹ mainly because these provide more information on the ritual act than amulets without.⁷⁰

Currently, in the study of amulets, the function of texts is still the dominant focus, although iconography is now also taken into account.⁷¹ This dominance is especially noticeable in the approach to amulets with early Christian elements, because their texts and imagery form the key to their identification.⁷² Evidently, scholars still seem to be mostly attracted to specific types of amulets – those carrying text.⁷³ These objects are often classified according to writing material: papyrus amulets from Egypt, amulets with inscriptions on silver or gold, and texts on precious stones are all studied separately. As amulets with texts were often made by scribes and priests, they would have been more costly and not available to all.⁷⁴ As a result, a focus on textual amulets, especially those involving texts on gold, silver or gemstones, implies a focus on the users of these amulets: members of the elite. A focus on text thus leaves many individuals out of the discussion and ignores other elements such as context of use.⁷⁵ Therefore, in this study, text is only

67 D. Frankfurter, 'The Magic of Writing and the Writing of Magic: The Power of the Word in Egyptian and Greek Traditions', *Helios* 21.2 (1994) 189-221; D. Frankfurter, 'Narrating Power: The Theory and Practice of the Magical *Historiola* in Ritual Spells' in: M.W. Meyer, P. Mirecki (eds.), *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power* (Leiden 1995) 459-476. More recently: D. Frankfurter, 'Spell and Speech Act: The Magic of the Spoken Word' in: D. Frankfurter (ed.), *Guide to the Study of Ancient Magic* (Leiden 2019) 608-625; D. Frankfurter, 'The Magic of Writing in Mediterranean Antiquity' in: D. Frankfurter (ed.), *Guide to the Study of Ancient Magic* (Leiden 2019) 626-658.

68 H.S. Versnel, 'The Poetics of the Magical Charm. An Essay in the Power of Words' in: P. Mirecki, M.W. Meyer (eds.), *Magic and Ritual in the Ancient World* (Leiden 2002) 105-158.

69 For example, Versnel, 'Poetics of the Magical Charm', 107; Kotansky, 'Incantations and Prayers', 113.

70 Kotansky, 'Incantations and Prayers', 107-112. See for example: C.A. Faraone, *Vanishing Acts on Ancient Greek Amulets: From Oral Performance to Visual Design*. Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies, supplement 115 (London 2012).

71 For example in: J.H. Dijkstra, 'The Interplay Between Image and Text. On Greek Amulets Containing Christian Elements from Late Antique Egypt' in: D. Boschung, J.N. Bremmer (eds.), *The Materiality of Magic* (Paderborn 2015) 271-292.

72 The *Guide to the Study of Ancient Magic* from 2018 includes two papers on amulets – one on gems and one on textual amulets, to be precise. It thus seems to focus on material or the presence of text and not on the use of the object: V. Dasen, Á.M. Nagy, 'Gems' in: D. Frankfurter (ed.), *Guide to the Study of Roman Magic* (Leiden 2019) 416-455; R. Kotansky, 'Textual Amulets and Writing Traditions in the Ancient World' in: D. Frankfurter (ed.), *Guide to the Study of Ancient Magic* (Leiden 2019) 507-554. With a different approach: R.L. Gordon, 'From Substances to Texts: Three Materialities of "Magic" in the Roman Imperial period' in: D. Boschung, J.N. Bremmer (eds.), *The Materiality of Magic* (Paderborn 2015) 133-176: 166-169.

73 Kotansky, 'Incantations and Prayers', 110 uses the term 'sophisticated' for written amulets and qualifies uninscribed amulets as 'simple'.

74 These ideas of amulets for the elite are especially prominent in a more recent article by Kotansky: 'Textual Amulets', 550.

75 Dasen, Nagy, 'Gems', 445.

one of the many elements which constitute an amulet. Naturally, the texts on the objects are an important source for historians, but for the users they were part of the object, of the material presence that they required and handled.

Recent developments

In 2018, C.A. Faraone gave a new twist to the study of amulets and the texts written on them. He studied amulets as a group, instead of per object type, and gave a new impulse to the study of ‘text’. He showed how, around the beginning of the Imperial period, words that were formerly spoken, began to be written onto objects. His approach to the role of texts in the creation and use of amulets yielded important insights in the development of amulets over time. His research included non-textual amulets and he placed these in the same traditions as the textual ones in order to put the continuation of amulets in a much broader perspective. Faraone was able to broaden his perspective because he looked at all kinds of amulets and not just focussed on one type, such as textual metal tablets or gemstones. In addition, he was aware of transformations, such as the ‘miniaturisation’ of traditional domestic amulets, which developed into body amulets.⁷⁶

Faraone’s approach is clarified by his definition of amulets.

‘Amulets’ refers to any object – plant, animal, or mineral; natural or manmade, image or text – that the Greeks placed on their bodies, domestic animals, homes, ships, vineyards, or cities in the hope of protecting themselves, of curing some illness, or of gaining some benefit, usually understood in the abstract – for example, charisma, prosperity, or victory.⁷⁷

Faraone stresses that amulets can be anything material, from perishable matter without text to long textual papyrus strips. He points out that these objects were not only placed on bodies, but also applied to all sorts of other settings. This can be found in earlier definitions as well, but it is certainly not included in all definitions.⁷⁸ Faraone subsequently applied his broad definition to different time periods in order to highlight changes and transformations. Although Faraone’s work is invaluable, he seemed less interested in use and his analysis does not extend into Late Antiquity. The amulets with Christian elements he includes are only studied as a continuation of earlier practices.⁷⁹ While the study of early Christian amulets also increased from the 1990s onwards, traditional Graeco-Roman amulets and amulets with Christian elements are still mostly studied separately. In order to fully understand the continuation of amulets into Late Antiquity, this gap needs to be bridged.

76 Faraone, *Transformation*, 1-4, 240-242; for early ideas see: Kotansky, ‘Incantations and Prayers’, 107-108.

77 Faraone, *Transformation*, 5.

78 Not all scholars include non-body amulets, such as amulets for houses and workshops, in their definitions. For example: ‘assumption that certain objects have the power to protect, heal, or assist those who carry them.’ Bohak, ‘Amulets’, 87.

79 Faraone, *Transformation*, 261-262.

1.1.3 Amulets with Christian elements: parallel developments in the 1990s and beyond

A growing interest in religious practices such as amulets and an increase in the publication of primary sources gave the study of amulets with Christian elements a boost. The translation of the Greek magical papyri by H.D. Betz from 1986 included some papyri with a few Christian elements, but does not contain ‘truly’ Christian amulets. In the 1990s things shifted. In 1993 H.F. Stander wrote a paper discussing amulets in relation to the texts of the early church fathers,⁸⁰ and M.W. Meyer and R. Smith’s *Ancient Christian Magic* of 1994 gave due attention to Christian Coptic amulets.⁸¹ Over time, research into Late Antiquity saw a paradigm shift under the influence of scholars such as P. Brown, who began to study religious changes in their social contexts.⁸² Amulets, however, only played a small part in these new discussions⁸³ as they were often seen as a continuation of Graeco-Roman traditions, in other words as ‘pagan survivals’.⁸⁴ R. MacMullen, for example, saw amulets as a continuation of rural non-Christian (i.e. ‘superstitious’) practices. He stressed that individuals especially tended to reach out to the traditional supernatural for the purpose of healing. It was in this area that, according to MacMullen, ‘the church plainly offered too little’.⁸⁵

From the 2010s onwards, research into amulets with early Christian elements increased significantly. In 2011, J.H.F. Dijkstra and T.S. de Bruyn published a list of Greek amulets with Christian elements from Egypt, and other publications on specific Christian elements followed, for example by J.E. Sanzo (2014), B.C. Jones (2016) and T.S. de Bruyn (2017).⁸⁶ The research of the 2010s mainly concentrated on the new Christian elements in the textual amulets on papyrus and parchment. De Bruyn, for example, focussed on how the Christian elements entered amulets: where did the texts come from, who were the makers of these

80 H.F. Stander, ‘Amulets and the Church Fathers’, *Ekklesiastikos Pharos* 75 (1993) 55-66.

81 Versnel, ‘Poetics of the Magical Charm’, 111.

82 Early publication: P. Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity. From Marcus Aurelius to Muhammad* (London 1971); K.D. Bowes, ‘Early Christian Archaeology: A State of Field’, *Religion Compass* 2.4 (2008) 575-619; 579-579; D.A. Michelson, “‘Salutary Vertigo’”: Peter R.L. Brown’s ‘Impact on the Historiography of Christianity’ in: P. Guran, D.A. Michelson (eds.), *Faith and Community around the Mediterranean in Honor of Peter R.L. Brown* (Bucharest 2019) 45-70.

83 See for example P. Brown on Christianisation and the interaction between traditional Graeco-Roman and early Christian practices: P. Brown, *Authority and the Sacred. Aspects of the Christianization of the Roman World* (Cambridge 1995) 3-26, esp. 24.

84 An early publication: A.A. Barb, ‘The Survival of Magic Arts’ in: A. Momigliana (ed.), *The Conflict Between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century* (Oxford 1963) 100-125, for research into pagan survivals see: R. MacMullen, *Christianity and Paganism in the Fourth to Eighth Centuries* (New Haven 1997) 74-149, amulets on 142-144.

85 R. MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire (A.D. 100-400)* (New Haven 1984) 77.

86 T.S. de Bruyn, J.H.F. Dijkstra, ‘Greek Amulets and Formularies from Egypt Containing Christian Elements: A Checklist of Papyri, Parchments, Ostraka, and Tablets’, *Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists* 48 (2011) 163-216; Sanzo, *Scriptural Incipits*; B.C. Jones, *New Testament Texts on Greek Amulets from Late Antiquity* (London 2016); De Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*.

amulets and what Christian sources did they use?⁸⁷ As his definition shows, de Bruyn's approach is similar to that of the scholars who wrote about traditional Graeco-Roman amulets: an amulet is 'an object that is worn, affixed, or deposited by an individual for healing, protective, or propitious purposes.'⁸⁸ Amulets are still things that are being added to a specific location such as the human body (worn) and doors (fixed to the doorpost or deposited at the threshold).

Recently, a change took place in the amulet vocabulary that was very much in line with developments in the study of Christian identity and a lived-religion approach. The latter acknowledges that daily practices can easily transcend religious boundaries without causing issues.⁸⁹ Instead of identifying certain amulets as fully Christian, scholars began to refer to the objects as 'amulets with Christian elements'.⁹⁰ J.E. Sanzo discussed the use of 'Christian' in the designation 'Christian amulets', arguing that amulets with language or symbols associated with Christianity were not necessarily created by a Christian maker and for a Christian user. He also pointed out that modern scholars themselves are often the judge of what should be understood as 'Christian'.⁹¹ I acknowledge his argument and will therefore speak of 'Christian elements' when they occur in amulets, referring to the origin of the elements, but not to the religious identity of the amulet, the maker or the user.⁹² In addition, in studies of early Christianity most scholars now refrain from using the word 'pagan'. Pagan identity is a Christian construct that is used to distinguish the Christian from the non-Christian. I. Sandwell discussed alternative ways of identifying 'those who worshipped the Graeco-Roman gods', for instance 'adherent of Graeco-Roman religion'.⁹³ This book will refrain from identifying amulets as 'pagan' or 'Christian'.⁹⁴ When it is necessary to distinguish between different backgrounds, I will speak of amulets with Christian, Graeco-Roman, and also Egyptian or Jewish elements, as many different religious backgrounds can be traced in amulet use.⁹⁵

87 De Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*.

88 De Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 15.

89 On Christian identity in Late Antiquity: É. Rebillard, *Christians and Their Many Identities in Late Antiquity, North Africa, 200-450 CE* (Ithaca 2012); Sandwell, *Religious Identity*; Sanzo, *Ritual Boundaries*.

90 De Bruyn, Dijkstra, 'A Checklist', 170-173; Sanzo, *Scriptural Incipits*, 10-14.

91 Sanzo, *Scriptural Incipits*, 10-14.

92 I will not distinguish between different forms of Christianity, see for example in H.G. Snyder, 'Early Christianity' in: B.S. Spaeth (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Mediterranean Religions* (Cambridge 2013) 177-196.

93 Sandwell, *Religious Identity*, 10-11.

94 See for example, Sandwell, *Religious Identity*, 267-271; Rebillard, *Christians and Their Many Identities*, 74-75. For an example of an amulet with a wide variety of religious influences see: N.H. Korsvoll, 'Same, Same, But Different? A Cognitive Analysis of an Early Christian Apotropaic Amulet', *Journal of Cognitive Historiography* 4.1 (2017) 79-99: 81-84.

95 See for example, de Bruyn, Dijkstra, 'A Checklist', especially 170-171; Sanzo, *Ritual Boundaries*. I will not discuss all possible approaches to explain these developments, but see for example: D. Frankfurter, *Christianizing Egypt: Syncretism and Local Worlds in Late Antiquity* (Princeton 2018) 15-20; J. van der Vliet, 'Tradition and Innovation: Writing Magic in Christian Egypt' in: A. Geljon, N. Vos (eds.), *Rituals in Early Christianity. New Perspectives on Tradition and Transformation* (Leiden 2020) 259-281.

Continuity and change

Amulets did not disappear as a consequence of the emergence of Christianity – they adapted. Therefore they are often used as case studies in the debate on different types of religion in Late Antiquity. Scholars like I. Sandwell, É. Rebillard and recently J.E. Sanzo explored Christian identities in the everyday lives of people in Late Antiquity.⁹⁶ Amulets played a role in these scholars' arguments.⁹⁷ Bishops such as John Chrysostom and Augustine described the use of amulets as un-Christian, but the individuals who used the objects did not share their misgivings and were perfectly able to accept the use of amulets as a Christian practice.⁹⁸ For them, what was 'Christian' could vary according to the situation. In the words of Sanzo, ancient amulet users drew the boundary between accepted and unaccepted religion in a different manner.⁹⁹ Apart from an interest in the religious identities of the users, there was more awareness of the interaction between different religious practices in Late Antiquity. J. van der Vliet investigated how 'various traditional (pre- or non-Christian) rituals may become incorporated in Christian ritual discourse, not as badly disguised survivals of a pagan past, but as witnesses to the interaction of tradition and innovation.'¹⁰⁰ Yet, many studies on late antique amulet practices mainly focus on the new textual elements.¹⁰¹ J.H.F. Dijkstra and T.S. de Bruyn drew attention to the importance of amulets in the interpretation of late-antique religious transformations: 'Amulets containing Christian elements afford us valuable insights into the dynamics of religious transformation in Late Antiquity; they challenge the normative discourse of ecclesiastical authorities.'¹⁰² However, since scholars often specialise in either traditional Graeco-Roman amulets or amulets with early Christian elements, long-term developments tend to be neglected.

1.1.4 Bringing together different approaches

As this overview shows, amulet research is fragmented into a wide variety of research fields focussing on different time periods, different religions and sources of many kinds. This book

96 For a historiography of developments in research into Late Antiquity, see: Bowes, 'Early Christian Archaeology', 576; Michelson, 'Salutary Vertigo', 54; Sandwell, *Religious Identity*, 3-5; 28-30; É. Rebillard, 'Material Culture and Religious Identity in Late Antiquity' in: R. Raja, J. Rüpke (eds.), *A Companion to the Archaeology of Religion in the Ancient World* (Chichester 2015) 427-436; 430-431.

97 Sandwell, *Religious Identity*, 267-271; Rebillard, *Christians and Their Many Identities*, especially 74-75.

98 Sandwell, *Religious Identity*, 269-281; Rebillard, *Christians and Their Many Identities*, 91-97; see also: de Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 28-29.

99 Sanzo, *Ritual Boundaries*. See also: Sandwell, *Religious Identity*, 269, 267-270; Rebillard, *Christians and Their Many Identities*, 8, 92-93; Rebillard, 'Material Culture', 430.

100 Van der Vliet, 'Tradition and Innovation', 267.

101 The new publications mentioned earlier: de Bruyn, Dijkstra, 'A Checklist'; de Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*; Sanzo, *Scriptural Incipits*; Jones, *New Testament Texts*. Although due attention is given to continuity and change, texts and iconography still plays the main role in, for example, the innovative work of Dosoo, 'Magical Names'; K. Dosoo, 'Heathen Serpents and Wingless Angels? Some Notes on Images in Coptic Magical Texts' in: R. Martín Hernández (ed.), *The Iconography of Magic. Images of Power and the Power of Images in Ancient and Late Antique Magic* (Leuven 2022) 117-168.

102 De Bruyn, Dijkstra, 'A Checklist', 164.

uses the results and insights of existing scholarship as building blocks to study amulets as a conceptual whole that changed over time. Unlike scholars who exclusively study amulets from either before or after the arrival of Christianity, this book investigated amulets from 100 BCE until Late Antiquity (600 CE). This yielded new insights into both religious change and the practices of amulet use.

Although every type of research has its pitfalls – the normative discourse, discussions on definitions of magic, focus on texts – the histories of the various approaches also show that amulets can be studied as a coherent category of evidence. While many scholars focus on one type of amulets (whether on the basis of material, dating or other characteristics), they all use similar definitions for the objects. Amulets are things, objects, tangible material presences in the world. Amulets were used; they were worn or put in specific places. In the words of C. Bonner, the objects needed to be in contact with or close proximity to the person or the larger location of use.¹⁰³ And finally, amulets were believed to do something positive for their users. C.A. Faraone summarises these functions as protecting, curing and gaining.¹⁰⁴

This book aims to study all kinds of amulets, both pre-Christian and Early Christian, as well as look into every aspect of amulet use. Text research has shown that users expected the objects to work in a certain way, and the overall consistency of the many definitions of amulets scholarship has so far produced, highlights the relationship between the objects, their use, their users, their place and placement, and their believed functions and actions. In order to shed new light on the practical aspects of amulet use, this monograph draws on various insights that have emerged in the field of ‘materiality’ studies.

1.2 NEW RESEARCH INTO AMULETS: MATERIALITY STUDIES

In recent years, the new discipline of ‘materiality studies’ has reached the fields of religion and the ancient world.¹⁰⁵ Inspired by this approach, scholars in these fields also began to ask questions about the use and impact of objects. This has resulted in an increased attention for religion-in-context. Scholars realised that new insights could be gained from the study

¹⁰³ Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets*, 2.

¹⁰⁴ Faraone, *Transformation*, 5.

¹⁰⁵ For some of the most recent see: Haysom, Mili, Wallensten (eds.), *The Stuff of the Gods*; Rask, *Personal Experience*; S. Hoffmann, *Between Deity and Dedicator. The Life and Agency of Greek Votive Terracotta Figurines* (Berlin/Boston 2023); Graham, *Reassembling Religion*; R. Gordon, F.M. Simón, ‘Introduction’ in: R. Gordon, F.M. Simón, M. Piranomonte (eds.), *Choosing Magic. Context, Objects, Meanings: The Archaeology of Instrumental Religion in the Latin West* (Rome 2020) 15–22. For general explorations of the materiality of the ancient world, see for example: J. Tanner, A. Gardner (eds.), *Materialising the Roman Empire* (London 2024); M. Betrò, M. Friedrich, C. Michel (eds.), *The Ancient World Revisited: Material Dimensions of Written Artefacts* (Berlin/Boston 2024); E. Angliker, I. Bultrighini (eds.), *New Approaches to the Materiality of Text in the Ancient Mediterranean. From Monuments and Buildings to Small Portable Objects* (Turnhout 2023).

of religious objects – their context, material presence, and use. As will be argued later, with the help of materiality studies a better understanding of the process of amulet use can be achieved that includes the object, its use in space and its use by a sensing human body.

1.2.1 Object agency

Materiality studies cover research into anything physical and tangible as well as the investigation of the relationships between objects and humans.¹⁰⁶ The so-called ‘material-cultural turn’ which took place within the fields of archaeology and anthropology influenced many other fields of research.¹⁰⁷ For example, classicists and historians were influenced by the work of scholars such as the anthropologist I. Kopytoff, who introduced the idea of object biographies.¹⁰⁸ To put it somewhat bluntly, while objects were once merely used as illustrations of a philological or historical narrative, they are now centre stage. The interdisciplinary research field of materiality studies, in the words of C. Tilley, revolves around the idea that ‘persons cannot be understood apart from things.’¹⁰⁹ Because ‘materiality is an integral dimension of culture’, objects and their users need to be studied together.¹¹⁰ The concept of ‘material agency’ received special attention. Scholars now recognise that objects have an impact in the world. Objects (or in a broader sense ‘things’) shape humans; they have the agency to be of influence in human lives.¹¹¹ An obvious example is the way in which dress influences one’s posture, movements, and actions. It is impossible to run very fast in a tight skirt, or to move freely in a corset; a pyjama does not provide the same confidence as a suit, and you will be more careful if you want to keep your crisp white shirt clean.

Ideas about the origins and workings of material agency vary. However, R.J. Crellin contended that most of the approaches towards materiality and agency can be understood as ‘relational’. They ‘focus upon the importance of the relations between people, things,

106 C. Houlbrook, N. Armitage, ‘Introduction: The Materiality of the Materiality of Magic’ in: N. Armitage, C. Houlbrook (eds.), *The Materiality of Magic: An Artifactual Investigation into Ritual Practices and Popular Beliefs* (Oxford 2015) 1-13: 3-5.

107 D. Hicks puts this development in the 1970/1980s. D. Hicks, ‘The Material-Cultural Turn: Event and Effect’ in: D. Hicks, M.C. Beaudry (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Material Culture Studies* (Oxford 2010) 25-99.

108 For arguments to include material culture in historical research, see: L. Auslander, ‘Beyond Words’, *The American Historical Review* 110.4 (2005) 1015-1045; I. Kopytoff, ‘The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process’ in: A. Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things. Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge 1986) 64-91; see also R.J. Crellin, *Change and Archaeology* (London, New York 2020) 141-148.

109 C. Tilley, ‘Introduction’ in: C. Tilley, *et al.* (eds.), *Handbook of material culture* (London 2006) 1-6: 1.

110 Tilley, ‘Introduction’, 1.

111 See for example: M. Pitts, M.J. Versluys, ‘Objects as Agents: A Manifesto for Investigating the Impacts of Object Flows on Past Societies’, *Antiquity* 95 (2021) 367-381. On different approaches towards agency in study of ancient religious practices see: D. Frankfurter, ‘Magic and the Forces of Materiality’ in: D. Frankfurter (ed.), *Guide to the Study of Ancient Magic* (Leiden 2019) 659-677.

animals, and plants (as well as others).¹¹² In these relationships, humans are ‘one-of-many’ as all things are understood as ‘actively produced by ever-changing relations they exist within.’¹¹³ When studying a single element, it needs to be considered in relation to the elements it coexists with. The relationships may be seen as a network, entanglement, objectscape or assemblage, but in all approaches human things and non-human things are considered as equals.¹¹⁴ In other words, objects have agency. Scholarship remains divided about the conceptualisation of this ‘agency’. In an early work on object agency, Alfred Gell sought to distance himself from the semiotic understanding of art. He developed the influential idea that objects may be seen as social agents: ‘I view art as a system of action, intended to change the world rather than encode symbolic propositions about it.’¹¹⁵ In relational approaches, however, for example in the work of Latour or the more current new materialism, agency is not present in things, but the result of the relations between them.¹¹⁶ This study adopts a relational approach, in which agency and meaning are created within relations among a variety of things, including humans. This will be further discussed below.

Theories of object agency have been criticised for focussing too much on objects and neglecting the human factor, and for attributing active agency to objects that might not actually possess it.¹¹⁷ For example, in their introduction to an edited volume exploring ‘the material aspects of religion in Ancient Greece’, the editors argue: ‘There is ongoing disagreement, for example, about the degree and nature of any agency that should be attributed to objects. But the essential point, that people’s habits, their perceptions and understanding of the world are formed by their physical experience of living in it, is uncontroversial.’¹¹⁸ For the present research, the theoretical details of agency need not be further discussed. It is enough to establish that the shift towards the inclusion of material aspects when studying (historical) societies and cultures had a large impact on the study of religion and on this book.

1.2.2 Ancient material religion and agency

The concept of ‘objects as agents’ has influenced the study of the materiality of religion.

112 Crellin, *Change and Archaeology*, 161-162. She discusses, amongst others, the approaches of Latour, Hodder and Ingold.

113 Crellin, *Change and Archaeology*, 161-162 and 164-165.

114 ‘Network’ comes from Latour; ‘entanglement’ from Hodder; ‘objectscape’ from Versluys and Pitt; and ‘assemblage’, for this project, from Crellin.

115 This is a simple summary of Gell’s complex ideas, but it suffices for the purpose of this work: A. Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford 1998).

116 Crellin, *Change and Archaeology*, 167, 199-201, 215-216.

117 See for example (including counter criticism showing the value of the new materialism approach) E. Mol, ‘New Materialism and Posthumanism in Roman Archaeology: When Objects Speak for Others’, *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 33.4 (2023) 715-729.

118 M. Haysom, M. Mili, J. Wallensten, ‘Introduction’ in: M. Haysom, M. Mili, J. Wallensten (eds.), *The Stuff of the Gods. The Material Aspects of Religion in Ancient Greece* (Stockholm 2024) 7-14: 7.

Material religion is a field of religious studies that researches the relation between humans, objects, and the divine: ‘A material approach [of religion] takes as its starting point the understanding that religion becomes concrete and palpable through people, their practices and use of things.’¹¹⁹ Scholars such as B. Meyer have argued in favour of this approach in which things are not understood as a result or product of religion, but as active players in the construction of religion.¹²⁰ This new approach steps away from what Meyer calls the ‘Protestant bias’, which favoured the ‘inside’ – concepts, ideas, beliefs, worldviews – over the ‘outside’ – rituals, objects, pictures, and so on.¹²¹ While this bias is the product of more phenomena than just Protestantism, it has certainly influenced the study of objects like amulets.¹²²

In the field of ancient religious studies, ‘materiality’ was picked up in several publications.¹²³ In 2015, J.N. Bremmer and D. Boschung published conference proceedings on the material aspects of ‘magical’ objects, presenting ‘these objects as agents that influenced the lives of those around them.’¹²⁴ A few years later, in 2018, S. McKie and A. Parker, published a volume on the ‘magical’ objects that ‘could have significant impacts on the social lives of those who

119 B. Meyer, *Mediation and the Genesis of Presence: Towards a Material Approach to Religion* (Utrecht 2012) 7.

120 See for example, Meyer, *Mediation and the Genesis of Presence*; B. Meyer, *et al.*, ‘The Origin and Mission of Material Religion’, *Religion* 40 (2010) 207-211.

121 Meyer, *Mediation and the Genesis of Presence*, 8-14. This Protestant or – in the words of H.S. Versnel – ‘Christian bias’ on ‘inside’ versus ‘outside’ religion also influenced research on the question of belief within ancient religion. Some scholars argued that, unlike Christianity, traditional Graeco-Roman religion was not a religion of belief, but of action. H.S. Versnel strongly argued against this stance, and I follow him in the argument that ‘the fact that Greek religion was basically a matter of ritual action in no way implies the consequence that Greeks did not believe in (the existence) of their gods’ because ‘how does one communicate with divine beings [...] without believing (that is taking as true) that these beings exist (in whatever sense of the word ‘exist’)?’ H.S. Versnel, *Coping with the Gods: Wayward Readings in Greek Theology* (Leiden 2011) 552, see 539-559. On relationships between belief and material religion see: D. Morgan, *Religion and Material Culture. The Matter of Belief* (London 2010) 1-7 for a historiography and 8-12 for the arguments of Morgan.

122 See for example the discussion on the normative discourse on amulets above and Skemer, ‘Binding Words’, 3. See also the discussion on the influence of modern religion in the study of Orphic Tablets as analysed by: M.F. McClay, *The Bacchic Gold Tablets and Poetic Tradition: Memory and Performance* (Cambridge 2023) 107-114.

123 For the rise in publications in the 2010s, see for example: D. Frankfurter, ‘Ritual Matters: Afterword’ in: C. Moser, J. Knust (eds.), *Ritual Matters: Material Remains and Ancient Religion* (Ann Arbor 2017) 145-150; R. Raja, J. Rüpke, ‘Archeology of Religion, Material Religion, and the Ancient World’ in: R. Raja, J. Rüpke (eds.), *A Companion to the Archaeology of Religion in the Ancient World* (Chichester 2015) 1-26. The idea of materiality has so far been less applied to early Christian sources, but see: Rebillard, ‘Material Culture’, 427-436; ideas on materiality and agency can be found in Frankfurter, *Christianizing Egypt*, especially 145-151.

124 J.N. Bremmer, ‘Preface: The Materiality of Magic’ in: D. Boschung, J.N. Bremmer (eds.), *The Materiality of Magic* (Paderborn 2015) 7-20: 12. How this ‘magical’ agency should be understood is, in this volume, best explained by Gordon, ‘Substances to Texts’, 133-176.

used them.¹²⁵ In 2021, E.-J. Graham published a groundbreaking re-evaluation of material in ancient Roman religion. She argues that material had in the past only been studied for its representational or symbolic meaning, thereby excluding the meaning of the material presence.¹²⁶ The book proposes that scholars ask questions on ‘what those material things did to people,’ instead of seeking to unravel what an object represented.¹²⁷ A few years later, K.A. Rask published her work on the personal experience of materiality in Greek religion.¹²⁸ She demonstrated that the study of use and experience in material religion is key to our understanding of objects such as ancient amulets; objects influence human experience and behaviour, and investigation of their material presence needs to be included.

The concept of agency plays a central role in the study of ancient material religion, but different approaches to agency coexist.¹²⁹ As argued above, ‘agency’ may be defined as the capacity to initiate change. This reflects an etic perspective on the impact of objects. Emic definitions of the agency of ancient objects highlight the active power or force attributed to them by their users. A.T. Wilburn uses the words ‘power objects’ to describe objects that ‘were believed to bring about change by harnessing divine power.’¹³⁰ D. Frankfurter argues that ‘a magical object can thus refer to any material thing that acts in the world as a subject – that carries agency.’¹³¹ Amulets that were believed to actively engage with danger and protect their wearers are an obvious example. Emic definitions of agency involve qualities that were believed to be inherently present in the object or activated by the supernatural (or a combination of several powers). Although the efficacy or emic agency that ancient users ascribed to the objects is of great importance in this study, my approach focusses on an etic understanding of the impact of objects on their users.

1.2.3 Amulets, materiality, and experience

Unsurprisingly, ideas from materiality studies regarding object agency have also influenced amulet research. New research focusses on the physical aspects of the objects and the

125 See: S. McKie, A. Parker, ‘Introduction’ in: A. Parker, S. McKie (eds.), *Material Approaches to Roman Magic. Occult Objects and Supernatural Substances* (Oxford 2018) 1-8: 5; also Houlbrook, Armitage, ‘Introduction’.

126 Graham, *Reassembling Religion*, 4-5.

127 Graham, *Reassembling Religion*, 5, see also 18.

128 Rask, *Personal Experience*.

129 Especially in D. Boschung, J.N. Bremmer (eds.), *The Materiality of Magic* (Paderborn 2015) in which at least 6 of the 13 papers focus on amulets. In the volume of McKie and Parker, amulets and objects that could be seen as amulets because of texts, iconography or use, are an important source of research as well: A. Parker, S. McKie (eds.), *Material Approaches to Roman Magic. Occult Objects and Supernatural Substances* (Oxford 2018). Whether amulets are ‘magic’ (or ‘religion’ or ‘medicine’ or something else) and how ‘magic’ should be defined, is a different discussion. Difficulties are evident from McKie and Parker, since they do not provide a definition of ‘magic’, although they do give an overview of the historiography: McKie, Parker, ‘Introduction’, 2-3.

130 A.T. Wilburn, ‘The Archaeology of Ritual in the Domestic Sphere: Case Studies from Karanis and Pompeii’ in: S. McKie, A. Parker (eds.), *Material Approaches to Roman Magic: Occult Objects and Supernatural Substances* (Oxford 2017) 103-114: 111.

131 Frankfurter, ‘Forces of Materiality’, 676.

context of use, including the physical environment in which the objects were made, used or deposited.¹³² Amulets are more than text carriers and the interplay between object and text has become a new research field. J. Dieleman, for example, argues that the texts written on papyrus amulets are ‘often part of an assemblage of amuletic objects’: the inscription, the images, the material, the amulet case, the thread, and the knots in the thread are all part of the object.¹³³ In other studies of amulets these elements are quite often not at all taken into account.¹³⁴

Amulets can also be studied with a focus on use. The archaeology of ritual has shown the possibility of studying amulets within their original physical context to better understand how they functioned.¹³⁵ A.T. Wilburn, for example, studied the archaeological contexts of powerful objects in the house.¹³⁶ The investigation of amulets that were worn, such as gemstones, and are still in their original mountings can also throw light on use and experience.¹³⁷ Was the object visible while being worn, for example, or was it hidden in an amulet case? Unfortunately, the archaeological context is often unclear or unknown, but instructions for the creation and use of amulets and sources that comment on their use also provide information on contexts of use of amulet use.¹³⁸

Some research combines several kinds of sources. As noted above, most scholars specialise in one type or aspect.¹³⁹ G. Bohak stresses, however, that ‘the producer and users of ancient amulets had no interest in a distinction that is of extreme importance from our perspective, namely, that between amulets made of perishable materials, and especially

132 McKie, Parker, ‘Introduction’, 5.

133 J. Dieleman, ‘The Materiality of Textual Amulets in Ancient Egypt’ in: D. Boschung, J.N. Bremmer (eds.), *The Materiality of Magic* (Paderborn 2015) 23-58: 24, see 23-29.

134 Dieleman, ‘Materiality of Textual Amulets’, 29. We can discern small developments. J.H. Dijkstra, for example, included images on amulets with Christian elements, which are usually excluded from research, and A. Mastrocinque studied the relation between the colour of gemstone amulets and their inscriptions. Dijkstra, ‘Interplay Between Image and Text’; A. Mastrocinque, ‘The Colours of Magical Gems’ in: C. Entwistle, N. Adams (eds.), *Gems of Heaven: Recent Research on Engraved Gemstones in Late Antiquity, c. AD 200-600* (London 2011) 62-68. See also research on non-textual amulets, such as: A. Parker, ‘Curing with Creepy Crawlies: A Phenomenological Approach to Beetle Pendants Used in Roman Magical and Medicinal Practice’, *Theoretical Roman Archaeology Journal* 2.1 (2019) 1-16.

135 A.T. Wilburn, ‘Building Ritual Agency: Foundations, Floors, Doors and Walls’ in: D. Frankfurter (ed.), *Guide to the Study of Ancient Magic* (Leiden 2019) 555-602: 556-557; A.T. Wilburn, *Materia Magica: The Archaeology of Magic in Roman Egypt, Cyprus, and Spain* (Ann Arbor 2012), for understanding possible contexts of amulets: 36-40, 48-49.

136 Wilburn, ‘Building Ritual Agency’; Wilburn, ‘Archaeology of Ritual’. See also, C.A. Faraone, ‘Protective Statues for Home and Workshop’ in: S. Crippa, E.M. Ciampini (eds.), *Language, Objects, and the Transmission of Rituals. An Interdisciplinary Analysis on Ritual Practices in the Graeco-Egyptian Papyri (PGM)* (Venice 2017) 59-78.

137 Dasen, Nagy, ‘Gems’, 435; Wilburn, *Materia Magica*, 39.

138 Wilburn, ‘Building Ritual Agency’, 556.

139 Metal tablets in the work of Kotansky, *Greek magical amulets*; one of the articles on the use of natural substances: J. Scarborough, ‘The Pharmacology of Sacred Plants, Herbs and Roots’ in: C.A. Faraone, D. Obbink (eds.), *Magika Hiera: Ancient Greek Magic and Religion* (Oxford 1991) 138-174; Faraone, *Vanishing Acts*.

organic materials, and those made of more durable substances such as metal or stone.¹⁴⁰ Most importantly, in 2018 C.A. Faraone published his monograph on amulets in which he did not focus on one specific category, but included all types of objects and sources. In line with his argument that amulets became inscribed from the start of the Roman period onwards, he includes both amulets with and amulets without text. Perhaps most importantly, he includes instructions for making amulets. Such instructions can be found in both ‘magical’ and medical handbooks and in encyclopaedias such as the *Naturalis Historia* of Pliny the Elder. Instructions are helpful because they not only provide information on amulets made from perishable materials and describe how they are put together, but also because they tell us why they were made and how they should be worn or used.¹⁴¹ This combination of various sources enables Faraone to deepen our understanding of amulets, their functioning and use.¹⁴²

Simultaneously, with a shift away from the purely textual amulets, more attention has been given to the producers of amulets and the physical and sensory experience of those using them.¹⁴³ T.S. de Bruyn, for example, discussed the early Christian scribes who inscribed papyrus amulets,¹⁴⁴ V. Dasen focussed on children and women as users of amulets.¹⁴⁵ Dasen also argued that amulets ‘evidence an embodied religious experience.’¹⁴⁶ In the words of F.G. Naerebout, humans ‘do ritual with their bodies’, and this certainly is the case for amulets. An amulet was created by human hands and ritual performance, such as movements and speech, may have been used to give the object efficacy. The object was then tied to the body and the wearer would feel the object while wearing it or perhaps felt the need to touch it.¹⁴⁷ In addition, as scholars such as A.T. Wilburn have shown, objects with emic power could be reactivated physically by, for instance, sweeping an apotropaic mosaic or re-reading a protective inscription.¹⁴⁸ During all these steps, people experienced amulets through their senses. G. Davis showed, for example, that touch and smell could have been of importance in the case of amber amulets, because warmth can release a pine

140 Bohak, ‘Amulets’, 84.

141 Faraone, *Transformation*, 15-22.

142 See for example his conclusion in which he maps the use of amulets: Faraone, *Transformation*, 238, 244-251.

143 Faraone, *Transformation*, 251-258; Kotansky, ‘Textual Amulets’, 507-509; 540.

144 De Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, *passim*, but see especially 6-9.

145 V. Dasen, ‘Probaskania: Amulets and Magic in Antiquity’ in: D. Boschung, J.N. Bremmer (eds.), *The Materiality of Magic* (Paderborn 2015) 177-204: 177, 185; Faraone, *Transformation*, 258-261.

146 V. Dasen, ‘Amulets, the Body, and Personal Agency’ in: A. Parker, S. McKie (eds.), *Material Approaches to Roman Magic. Occult Objects and Supernatural Substances* (Oxford 2018) 127-135: 129; Bohak, ‘Amulets’, esp. 85-89.

147 F.G. Naerebout, ‘Dance’ in: R. Raja, J. Rüpke (eds.), *A Companion to the Archaeology of Religion in the Ancient World* (Chichester 2015) 107-119: 107.

148 Wilburn, ‘Building Ritual Agency’, 599; Wilburn, ‘Archaeology of Ritual’, 111. For embodiment see G. Rouwhorst, ‘A Paradigm Shift in the Study of Early Christian Rituals: Methodological Perspectives’ in: A. Geljon, N. Vos (eds.), *Rituals in Early Christianity. New Perspectives on Tradition and Transformation* 164 (Leiden 2020) 12-26: 21-22.

scent.¹⁴⁹ J. Toner argued that ‘Religious practices [...] were fully embodied experiences, which used the senses to establish all kinds of religious meaning.’¹⁵⁰ Sensory experience is thus an important aspect of the use of amulets.¹⁵¹ Although these insights have so far been less applied to the study of amulets with early Christian elements, embodiment and sensory experience are gaining importance in the study of early Christian rituals as well.¹⁵²

As amulet research is developing, there is room for evolving approaches. Current research is still mainly involved with physical appearance, representational meanings and, especially, the texts written on amulets.¹⁵³ For example, research into late antique amulets has focussed mostly on written amulets with early Christian elements and on their makers.¹⁵⁴ This focus has several effects. To begin with, research tends to centre on ‘elite’ amulets made of expensive materials, because those made of perishable materials have not been preserved and amulets without texts often provide little information.¹⁵⁵ The study of the sensory experience of amulets is still underdeveloped. How amulets functioned in the lives of the users and the nature of their motivations for using them should receive more attention to understand the relation between object and user. The agency of amulets – in the etic sense of objects’ capacity to initiate change – needs more attention. Why were amulets continuously used over lengthy periods of time? Finally, as meaning is created within the relation between things, the main relational setting of amulets, i.e. that between amulets and space, needs further analysis. Amulets were used in specific locations such as human bodies and doors or windows – people not only experienced material objects, they experienced them in relation to space.¹⁵⁶

Taking these understudied aspects of amulet use into consideration, the present study aims to clarify why amulets were used and how their use influenced the lives of their users.

149 G. Davis, ‘Rubbing and Rolling, Burning and Burying: The Magical Use of Amber in Roman London’ in: A. Parker, S. McKie (eds.), *Material Approaches to Roman Magic: Occult Objects and Supernatural Substances* (Oxford 2018) 69–83.

150 J. Toner, ‘Introduction: Sensing the Ancient Past’ in: J. Toner (ed.), *A Cultural History of the Senses in Antiquity* (London 2014) 1–22: 2; S.A. Harvey, ‘The Senses in Religion: Piety, Critique, Competition’ in: J. Toner (ed.), *A Cultural History of the Senses in Antiquity* (London 2014) 91–113: 91.

151 Y. Hamilakis, ‘Archaeologies of the Senses’ in: T. Insoll (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of Ritual and Religion* (Oxford 2011) 208–225: 208. For the recent increase in sensory studies in relation to Roman religion see for example: A. Alvar Nuño, J. Alvar Ezquerro, G. Woolf (eds.), *Sensorium. The senses in Roman polytheism* (Leiden 2021).

152 See for example, Rouwhorst, ‘Paradigm Shift’, 19–21; F. Griffiths, K. Starkey, ‘Sensing Through Objects’ in: F. Griffiths, K. Starkey (eds.), *Sensory Reflections. Traces of Experience in Medieval Artifacts* (2018) 1–21.

153 In the *Guide to the Study of Ancient Magic*, amulets are not presented as a coherent whole. The publication features two studies on amulets: one on textual amulets (including textual gemstones) and one on gemstones. Kotansky ‘Textual Amulets’, Dasen, Nagy, ‘Gems’.

154 De Bruyn, Dijkstra, ‘A Checklist’; de Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*; Sanzo, *Scriptural Incipits*; Jones, *New Testament Texts*.

155 Kotansky, ‘Textual Amulets’, 507–509, 540.

156 See, for example, the inclusion of space in the work of Graham, *Reassembling Religion*, in chapter three on place.

We will step away from what E.-J. Graham calls the ‘tyranny of the written text’ and turn to the meaning of amulets as objects.¹⁵⁷

1.3 DEFINITION: WHAT IS AN AMULET?

Individual inhabitants of the Graeco-Roman world could use a broad spectrum of religious strategies to cope with the difficulties of life. One of these was the use of amulets. I will first enter upon a further exploration of the definition of ‘amulet’. The etic definition I propose, determines my approach and investigation.

Existing definitions of amulets show many similarities: an amulet is material, because it is an object; there is a relation with space, because an amulet must be placed at a specific location; amulets were believed to act in favour of the user.¹⁵⁸ Concerning the latter C.A. Faraone writes that, in the ancient world, people used amulets with the aim of: ‘protecting themselves, of curing some illness, or of gaining some benefit, usually understood in the abstract – for example, charisma, prosperity, or victory.’¹⁵⁹ Although definitions might also include exterior aspects of amulets, such as text or imagery, scholars tend to stress the use and the assumed efficacy of the objects. The objects were used because they were expected to do something, or, in the words of C. Bonner, an amulet ‘exerts power’.¹⁶⁰

One of the reasons to opt for a definition that highlights the power of amulets, is the fact that ancient amulets are so varied and cannot be straightforwardly categorised on the basis of certain physical characteristics. Amulets are not a clear-cut category like *defixiones* – if defined as curses written on lead tablets.¹⁶¹ In the ancient world, different words were used to describe different objects that could, in an etic sense, be understood as amulets. For example, a φυλακτήριον is understood as a protecting object (from the Greek verb φυλάττω: to protect, defend, guard).¹⁶² These types of objects were expected to function in a certain way. Similarly, a νικητικόν would be used to obtain victory,¹⁶³ and a χαριτήσιον to attract favour.¹⁶⁴ In addition, some objects derived their names from the fact that they had to

¹⁵⁷ Graham, *Reassembling Religion*, 9.

¹⁵⁸ For example, in the definitions in the works by Bonner and Faraone. Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets*, 2; Faraone, *Transformation*, 5.

¹⁵⁹ Faraone, *Transformation*, 5.

¹⁶⁰ Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets*, 2.

¹⁶¹ In practice this is more complex. See Gager for curse tablets: J.G. Gager, *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World* (Oxford 1992).

¹⁶² See for example: PGM VII. 579-90; A. Bendlin, ‘Phylakterion’, *Brill’s New Pauly Online*, last accessed September 2025; Kotansky, ‘Incantations and Prayers’, 107; Dasen, ‘Probaskania’, 185, 194; Bohak, ‘Amulets’, 87.

¹⁶³ See for example: PGM VII. 186-90.

¹⁶⁴ See for example: PGM VII. 186-90.

be tied to something, in Latin: *ligamentum*, *ligatura*, *alligatura*,¹⁶⁵ and in Greek περίαμμα, περίαπτον.¹⁶⁶ The Latin *amuletum*, from which the English word ‘amulet’ originates, is not often used in ancient texts; it refers to an object believed to offer safety.¹⁶⁷ In theory it is possible to phrase an emic definition of amulets – from the perspective of the ancient world, using its vocabulary. However, as the rich vocabulary shows, this would not be an easy task, because ancient authors rarely, if at all, discuss amulets conceptually or as an overarching category. Moreover, I have argued earlier that emic definitions are not very useful for the purposes of our research. Only an etic definition enables us to examine what brought these objects together, namely the connections between object, user and location and the way they were believed to function in a particular space.¹⁶⁸

1.3.1 A new definition of amulets

For the purpose of the present study I use the following definition of ‘amulet’:

An amulet is an object placed by an individual at a certain location in order to demarcate that space in the hope of warding off evil, expelling existing danger from this place and/or attracting supernatural benefits to it.

This definition contains several elements. First, amulets were *material presences*, objects that were used, sensed and had impact. They were chosen, made, used and experienced. Their materiality implies inherent embodiment. Although many of the amulets that have been preserved were made from expensive materials – gemstones, gold and silver – instructions for making amulets show both high- and low-cost practices; they could also be made from perishable materials such as plant leaves.¹⁶⁹ For a proper understanding of amulets as material presences, we must consider every aspect of their use. What were the various sensory experiences of amulets? What was the role of their material presence at the designated location? How does

165 *Adalligare* for example in Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 30.139; Bendlin, ‘Phylakterion’; Dasen ‘Probaskania’, 185.

166 Often the verb is used: περίαπτε ‘tie it on’ in *PGM* VII. 197-198; Dasen, ‘Probaskania’, 185.

167 The origin of the Latin word is uncertain: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 25.115. Bendlin, ‘Phylakterion’; Wünsch, ‘Charms (Roman)’, 463. The words most commonly used in modern English are amulet, talisman, phylactery, remedy and (lucky) charm. There is some discussion on the difference between ‘talisman’ and ‘amulet’ – scholars do not agree. Talisman refers to the Greek τέλεσμα (religious rite or ceremony). As far as I am aware, this term is not applied to the use of amulets in antiquity, and I will therefore not use the word ‘talisman’ in the present research. For more on the difference between an amulet and a talisman see: Faraone, *Talismans and Trojan Horses*, 4-5; Skemer, *Binding Words*, 6-11. All in all, the various English synonyms of ‘amulet’ (such as ‘talisman’ and ‘charm’) are used interchangeably by scholars; all refer to objects with similar functions. To avoid confusion, this book will only use the word ‘amulet’.

168 As a parallel see the paper by Versnel and how he formed his etic definition of ‘magic’ on the basis of the characteristics of magical action: Versnel, ‘Relationship Magic-Religion’.

169 For example, the leaf of an olive tree in *PGM* VII. 213-214.

the materiality of amulets compare to other religious strategies? The materiality of amulets provides a comprehensive perspective which enables us to study both their function and the impact on their users.

Second, amulets *demarcated the location* they were expected to function in.¹⁷⁰ The act of putting the object in place was seen as an integral part of the activation of its powers. The objects were always in proximity of the space designated for their operation. This was not just any location, but a boundary of the body or a spatial boundary, such as a door or a gate – a location where danger was believed to linger. The ancient users believed that the amulet had performative power or active agency in this place.¹⁷¹ Amulets share this characteristic with other ancient power objects, such as curse tablets and figurines.¹⁷² What distinguishes amulets from these other objects is that they were believed to demarcate the significant boundary locations they were placed in and radiated power in this definite space. They marked this space and set it apart. It was there that amulets were expected to ward off danger, to remove evil and disease, and/or attract supernatural benefits to receive victory or charisma.¹⁷³ An amulet for healing would be placed on the afflicted body part; an amulet for the protection of a house was placed at a door or window where danger could enter. This physical context is a central element in the use and functioning of the object. The efficacy of the proximity of an amulet in relation to a specific place underlies the motivation for using the object. This will be further analysed in the next chapter, where we will explore questions such as: how were amulets believed to act in the assigned space? how does this relate to our perception of ancient religious space? what was the impact of this relation between object and space on the user of the amulet? By studying amulets conceptually from the perspective of their functioning, all strands of amulet research can be combined.

Third, amulets were used by *human individuals*. People from all layers of society hoped that their amulets would act in their favour and would have a positive impact on their lives. Amulets were an aid for coping with a situation, fear or problem. Amulets were part of the individual's religious strategies of survival.¹⁷⁴ Life was precarious in the ancient world; disease and danger were omnipresent. Studying the problems that amulets were supposed to 'solve' provides insight

170 Faraone is one of the few scholars who tries to 'map' these locations. Faraone, *Transformation*, 244-251. For a new approach to locations see Wilburn, 'Building Ritual Agency'.

171 For the relationships between religious/'magical' objects and object agency see the discussion above and: Frankfurter, 'Forces of Materiality' and Frankfurter, 'Ritual Matters'. For the performativity of words see Austin, *Do Things with Words*, for that of rituals: Tambiah, 'Magical Acts', and for iconography: Faraone, *Talismans and Trojan Horses*, 118-119.

172 The term 'power objects' to describe this phenomenon is, for example, used by Wilburn, 'Building Ritual Agency', 556. This fits into the tradition of reviewing the 'magic'/religion balance and avoiding the use of the word 'magic'. Instead the idea of (ritual) power is used to describe performative strategies: Meyer, Mirecki, 'Introduction', Meyer, Smith, 'Introduction'.

173 For example, *PGM* VII. 186-190 which is both a favour (χαριτήσιον) and victory (νικητικόν) amulet.

174 J. Dieleman, 'Coping with a Difficult Life. Magic, Healing, and Sacred Knowledge' in: C. Riggs (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Egypt* (Oxford 2012) 337-361.

into the use of power objects, the users and the areas of life that were perceived as vulnerable. Amulets were used for hundreds of years and, as coping mechanisms, must have helped their users in one way or another – they likely also just made their users feel better.

The definition focusses on the users of amulets; it is not about individuals involved in the process of amulet use in general. The perspective of the makers has been studied before; T.S. de Bruyn's study of amulets with early Christian elements comes to mind.¹⁷⁵ However, in order to understand why amulets were in use for such a long time, we need to know about the users and their decisions in reaching out to amulets. Why did they continue to ask for amulets, choose them over other religious strategies, even when new Christian religious practices emerged? To understand the users and the role the objects could play in their lives, the use itself needs to be studied. Why and how was an object used? How did the users experience their amulets? How did the use of the object impact the emotional life of the user? Using such an approach both object and user can be better understood, and some new insights into the continued use of amulets in Late Antiquity may be obtained.

1.3.2 What is not included in this definition

My definition of amulets excludes certain objects and practices that other scholars might have included. D.C. Skemer, for example, includes objects that were meant to hurt or damage people.¹⁷⁶ The present volume does not discuss objects of this kind, such as curse tablets or figurines with erotic purposes.¹⁷⁷ Moreover, amulets are often discovered in graves, but my research focusses on the use of amulets during life. I do not discuss objects that were made for the afterlife, such as orphic tablets.¹⁷⁸ I do, however, include amulets made to be used during a person's life, which were subsequently taken into the grave, because they can be informative about decisions made during this person's lifetime.

There is a grey area of amulets: objects, texts, iconography or built structures that resemble or reflect amulets, but do not fit my definition. Amulets were created in ritual acts in which efficacy was believed to be added to the object. The structure of the perceived efficacy is different for every amulet, since the makers had several strategies at their

¹⁷⁵ De Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*.

¹⁷⁶ De Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 15; Skemer, *Binding Words*, 1; Kotansky, 'Incantations and Prayers', 107 includes *love* as one of the functions of amulets. See also: Dasen, Nagy, 'Gems', 437-443.

¹⁷⁷ In a paper that was published after his 2018 book, Faraone added 'erotic charm' as an example of an amulet for abstract benefits. As erotic rituals often focus on harming (or influencing) the 'other' (i.e. not the client) and are usually placed on boundary locations significant to this 'other' (not to the client), I do not consider them amulets. C.A. Faraone, 'Confronting Evil at the Boundaries of the City, the House, and the Human Body' in: M.G. Spathi, M. Chidioglou, J. Wallensten (eds.), *Apotropaia and Phylakteria. Confronting Evil in Ancient Greece* (Oxford 2024) 1-10. See also: Wünsch, 'Charms (Roman)', 462.

¹⁷⁸ For example, S. Kinyarad, L. Willer, 'Von Räubern und Grabesleiden: (un)sichtbarer Schutz durch Amulette in und aus Gräbern' in: W.E. Keil, et al. (eds.), *Zeichentragende Artefakte im sakralen Raum. Zwischen Präsenz und UnSichtbarkeit* (Heidelberg 2019) 95-120.

disposal, ranging from rituals surrounding the collection of material,¹⁷⁹ the use of spoken¹⁸⁰ or written¹⁸¹ words, the inclusion of iconography,¹⁸² rituals for consecration or activation¹⁸³ and for placing the object at the designated location.¹⁸⁴ Most of these individual strategies were not unique to amulets, but part of a range of religious strategies to deal with the difficulties of life. A combination of these strategies might also serve in the context of other religious practices with purposes similar to those of amulets. Inscriptions could, for instance, be directly added to structures such as doors or city walls for protection, healing or benefits.¹⁸⁵ I will refer to them as ‘amuletic inscriptions’. Another example is the use of protective iconography on surgical instruments, which could be seen as amuletic.¹⁸⁶ In brief, there is a big group of objects that are not amulets, but show amuletic strategies in the use of texts and/or iconography. These objects are not amulets in the strict sense of the definition, but they will be mentioned in this study to contextualise amulet use and to put into perspective the locations and situations that were perceived as vulnerable.

Amulets or medicine?

In the case of organic and other natural products, it can be difficult to distinguish amulets from other medical items. Ancient medical practices often included the help of the supernatural. Modern scholars usually attempt to distinguish between practical medical instructions and religious medical instructions. However, from an emic point of view, ancient individuals would not have seen these as separate practices.¹⁸⁷ Still, some etic distinctions can be made on the basis of the use and functioning of the objects in question. Early sources mention amulets (affixed to the body) as a separate category of medical treatment. In Plato’s *Republic*, Socrates says ‘neither medicines (φάρμακα), nor cautery, nor surgery, nor incantations, nor amulets (περίαιπτα) will help him.’¹⁸⁸ In his *Pythian*, Pindar writes about Asclepius ‘tending some with gentle incantations, giving others soothing herbs to drink or tying (περιρίπτω) on herbs (φάρμακα) to their limbs from every side,

179 Gordon, ‘Substances to Texts’, 140-151.

180 Frankfurter, ‘Spell and Speech Act’.

181 Frankfurter, ‘Magic of Writing in Mediterranean Antiquity’.

182 Dijkstra, ‘Interplay between Image and Text’.

183 A consecration ritual is for example described in: GEMF 15.251-319.

184 For possible locations, see for example Wilburn, ‘Building Ritual Agency’.

185 Apotropaic images were often placed at gates and doors: Faraone, *Transformation*, 4-9; B. Ogle, ‘The House-Door in Greek and Roman Religion and Folk-Lore’, *The American Journal of Philology* 32.3 (1911) 251-271.

186 On medical devices in relation to amulets: V. Dasen, ‘Healing Images. Gems and Medicine’, *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* 33.2 (2014) 177-191: 179.

187 V. Nutton, ‘From Medical Certainty to Medical Amulets: Three Aspects of Ancient Therapeutics’, *Clio Medica* 22 (1991) 13-22: 19; O.D. Cordovana, ‘Pliny the Elder Between Magic and Medicine’ in: A. Mastrocinque, J.E. Sanzo, M. Scapini (eds.), *Ancient Magic. Then and Now* (Stuttgart 2020) 63-80: 71.

188 Plato, *Respublica*, 426b. Translation: Faraone, *Transformation*, 292.

and still others he cures by incisions.¹⁸⁹ Pindar clearly distinguishes between speaking words, administering something soothing and tying on substances. For the purpose of this study only objects that are tied to the body will be regarded as amulets, to the exclusion of materials that were consumed to deal with the inside of the body.¹⁹⁰

Many medical instructions prescribe the external application of materials, for example to heal wounds.¹⁹¹ Oils, ointments or poultices made with natural substances would at first glance fit my definition – applying material to a specific location (in this case a part of the body) in order to heal. However, if we include every medical instruction that fits this etic definition, the boundaries of the concept ‘amulet’ would be stretched too much. In my research, amulets are considered within the ancient emic perception of religious space. Amulets demarcate an area and close it off, as will be explained in the next chapter. Plato and Pindar set ‘tied-on objects’ (περίαιπτα) apart from other medical practices. In ancient ritual practices, tying and binding are important to enclose the area of control and focus power. Because of this essential element of tying together the object, the disease, the human individual and the supernatural powers, I confine myself here to amulets that are tied on and exclude materials that need to be smeared or applied to the skin as a mass.

All in all, this book will use a definition based on the functioning and use of amulets to help understand amulets as a conceptual whole. This means including all aspects of amulet use. With a broad, etic definition this study aims to understand the whole process of amulet use and how this developed over time, especially after the arrival of Early Christianity.

1.4 APPROACH: AMULET USE AS A PROCESS

My approach to amulets has been inspired by recent developments in the study of Graeco-Roman curse tablets. Current approaches to curse tablets are holistic and include examination of the material (for example, some inscriptions refer to the ‘coldness’ of the lead), the related acts (the embodied experience of folding, nailing and depositing the object), and the location (the specific, often liminal, places where the tablets were deposited and have been found by archaeologists).¹⁹² Amulets can be approached in a similar relational

189 Pindar, *Pythian odes*, 3.47-54. Translation: Faraone, *Transformation*, 6.

190 It could be argued that a few amulets were indeed ‘consumed’, for example by licking them. (PGM XIII. 734-1077: 1040-1055) However, medicine and pharmacy are, of necessity, outside the scope of this study.

191 In GEMF 16, for example, instructions for healing scorpion or dog bites include anti-inflammatory materials (raw garlic, honey, and salt).

192 Inscriptions have always been crucial for the investigation of curse tablets as well. For the relation between material, act, location and inscriptions see for example: C. Sánchez Natalías, ‘The Medium Matters: Materiality and Metaphor in Some Latin Curse Tablets’ in: A. Parker, S. McKie (eds.), *Material Approaches to Roman Magic: Occult Objects and Supernatural Substances* (Oxford 2018) 9-16.

manner; the experience of the object did not stop at the level of the text written on the object. E.-J. Graham, for example, stresses that ancient objects acquired meaning within the relationships between places, objects, and bodies.¹⁹³

Inspired by the work of authors such as E.-J. Graham and R.J. Crellin, this book takes a relational approach and studies amulet use as a process. This processual approach eminently fits my research questions, since it helps to gain a deeper understanding of the motivations for amulet use and incorporates the element of time and thus the question of continuity and change. Before I delve into the approach adopted in this book, I will discuss relationism and assemblage theory as well as Crellin's views on studying change in relational contexts. Second, I will describe my own approach to amulet use as a process, including this process's different stages.

1.4.1 Agency, relationism, and change

In their work on objectscares, M. Pitts and M.J. Versluys argue that: 'privileging relationality fosters better understanding of what objects *did* in the past, and confronts the assumptions inherent in many studies in which objects are reduced to proxies for abstract processes.'¹⁹⁴ Relational approaches to objectscares, assemblages or networks do not consider objects or humans as separate entities, but as part of relations. Within these relationships, both humans and objects are able to act.¹⁹⁵ For example, humans can make and handle objects, but the material involved will influence execution, gestures and experience. The agency of ancient amulets likewise emanated from the relationship between objects, humans, and the environment, and was not inherently present in the inanimate object. Amulets could, in this sense, influence the human experience of the object, of the body and of the world. In addition, the influence of objects in their relationships with humans goes beyond the physical. Relationships imply meaning. One example is the impact art may have on emotions.¹⁹⁶ Amulets are experienced within the body-object-space relationship. Within this experience, the objects had agency, in the sense that they could impact the bodily and emotional well-being of their users.

Ideas about relationism may fruitfully be applied to ancient amulets.¹⁹⁷ The etic understanding of relations is fundamental for the exploration of the emic daily practice of amulet use. In discussing childbirth in Imperial Rome, A. Bonnell Freidin, for example,

193 This is one of the main arguments of: Graham, *Reassembling Religion*, 11-12, see also 29-37.

194 Original italics. Pitts, Versluys, 'Objectscares', 368.

195 This part of my research has been much influenced by Crellin's overview and explanations: see for example, Crellin, *Change and Archaeology*, 196-201. I have decided to not expand on theories such as posthumanism and new materialism here in order to keep to the point.

196 Crellin distinguishes material and expressive aspects of relationships. Crellin, *Change and Archaeology*, 282-283.

197 Pitts, Versluys, 'Objectscares', but for religious objects: Graham, *Reassembling Religion* or Harvey, 'The Senses in Religion', 92.

describes birthing amulets as part of a network of human and nonhuman actors.¹⁹⁸ She argues that, as amulets were meant to be tied onto something, they ‘by their very nature, participated in an assemblage or community.’¹⁹⁹ Amulets should be understood in relation to their designated boundary location and all further aspects of their use. The actual effects of amulets within these relations can be hard to grasp. This is where E.-J. Graham’s approach to agency in Roman religion and her idea of potential material affordances come in. In her view, ‘Material affordances are effectively the qualities of material things which might cause other things to behave, act, move, think, feel, or otherwise change, and which when brought together can make things happen.’²⁰⁰ In relation with other elements of an assemblage, the affordances of things determine their potential to have an effect. Graham argues that sensory perception plays a large role in studying an object’s role in an assemblage, because the size, shape, or smell of an object might be of impact.²⁰¹ While it can be difficult to grasp the effect of an amulet on its user, the potential effects of the material affordances of amulets can be analysed.

In addition to the material aspects of the object and the sensing human body there is the element of space. In a network or assemblage, human beings and objects interact with their environment, with nature, with built structures, with sacred places.²⁰² Studying the relationships with space is especially important in the case of amulets, because the connection between the sensing human body, the object itself, and the designated place is vital for the use and believed effect of the object. Proximity was an important condition for the effectiveness of an amulet.

In her search for an approach to studying change, R.J. Crellin uses relational approaches to create a new understanding of change. Under the influence of assemblage theory, new materialism and posthumanism, she proposes a relational approach to objects and humans. One of her key arguments runs as follows: ‘We take a new materialist approach that presents objects not as static things with shifting meanings imposed by humans, but instead we argue that objects too are always changing and multiple.’²⁰³ Meaning is created in relationships and these relationships are constantly changing. Elements of the relationship can be removed, new elements introduced.²⁰⁴ This does not need to be a result of human action. Change can, for instance, take place as a result of altered environmental circumstances.²⁰⁵ As assemblages are always changing, one needs to ‘understand the history that produces

198 A. Bonnell Freidin, *Birthing Romans. Childbearing and its Risk in Imperial Rome* (New Jersey 2024) 167.

199 Bonnell Freidin, *Birthing Romans*, 167-168.

200 Graham, *Reassembling Religion*, 29-30.

201 Graham, *Reassembling Religion*, 11-13, 33-34.

202 See for example in Graham, *Reassembling Religion*, also taking space into account in chapter three.

203 Crellin, *Change and Archaeology*, 146-147.

204 In relation to religion: Versluys, Woolf, ‘Artefacts and Their Humans’, 215-217.

205 Crellin, *Change and Archaeology*, 205-209.

the specificity of an assemblage.²⁰⁶ In other words, ‘the properties of any assemblage are historical: they are the result of past relations.’²⁰⁷ So while the relations between elements such as humans, objects and space are ever changing, they do build on earlier relations. This also means that objects are not static, they are dynamic and their meaning changes over time along with the changing relations they are in.²⁰⁸

In order to get to grips with the history of relations and the accompanying changes, Crellin proposes mapping the relations in an assemblage. This would result in a narrative of the past that goes beyond a mere tracing of developments. Crellin argues that, ‘mapping is an active process that creates connections and has multiple entrance points, whereas tracing is seen as a passive process.’²⁰⁹ An overview of the connections between all aspects related to the object under scrutiny allows the researcher to create a narrative of change.²¹⁰ This approach is not likely to reveal single causes of change, as ‘no part of an assemblage ever acts alone’.²¹¹ Explanations regarding the causes of change will always be situationally specific as well as historical, since change is understood as an ever evolving process.²¹² An example of a similar approach is the work of S. Hoffmann on the life cycle of Greek terracotta votive figurines.²¹³ Focussing on the different stages in the lives of the votives, she was able to map continuity and change in the figurines’ various characteristics, such as style, motifs, number, material, location and pantheon. Her conclusions tie in with Crellin’s ideas: there was no single cause for the decline in the use of these votives; it was a combination of changes in the various characteristics that ‘caused the practice to wash away’.²¹⁴

In addition, Crellin argues that ‘successful new innovations have to ‘fit’ within existing assemblages; they have to be understood in the light of the worlds they enter into.’²¹⁵ One of the methodologies developed for studying transformations is the investigation of ‘anchoring.’ In order to give meaning to or promote acceptance of something new, an innovation is often incorporated or ‘anchored’ in the old. Studying this process sheds light on the adoption of change.²¹⁶ The idea of anchoring has been applied to the study of

206 Crellin, *Change and Archaeology*, 205-206.

207 Crellin, *Change and Archaeology*, 211-212.

208 Versluys, Woolf, ‘Artefacts and Their Humans’, 215-217; Crellin, *Change and Archaeology*, 202.

209 Crellin, *Change and Archaeology*, 218-219.

210 Crellin, *Change and Archaeology*, 218-219.

211 Crellin, *Change and Archaeology*, 208-209.

212 Crellin, *Change and Archaeology*, 205-206, 209-210.

213 Hoffmann, *Between Deity and Dedicator*.

214 Hoffmann, *Between Deity and Dedicator*, 254, and see 236-254.

215 Crellin, *Change and Archaeology*, 212.

216 I. Sluiter, ‘Anchoring Innovation: A Classical Research Agenda’, *European Review* 25.1 (2007) 20-38: 21-23.

ancient religions to explore how new religions used the old to develop.²¹⁷ The interaction between tradition and innovation has played a role in amulet studies and the study of early Christianity.²¹⁸ For example, V. Dasen and Á.M. Nagy discuss how Graeco-Roman gemstones reveal ‘two contradictory statements’ regarding tradition and innovation as authors of instructions for amulets ‘claimed that their products represented a repository of ancient, often exotic knowledge and that they represented cutting-edge magical technology, designed to fit the personal needs of the customer.’²¹⁹ The interaction between tradition and innovation should therefore be incorporated into the investigation of continuity and change.

These approaches to objects and their connections and contexts have inspired my description and analysis of changes in amulets. Although it is impossible to interpret every individual amulet from the assemblage point of view, relational approaches and Crellin’s study of change will play a big role in the following chapters.

1.4.2 Amulet use as a process

Ancient amulets are not static: they were created to be used by humans, in specific situations and on specific locations. Amulets were tied on objects, they bound objects, human individuals, fears and diseases, geographical locations, and moments in time. Amulets functioned in relation to other things. To be able to understand the motivations for their continued use and the changes that affected them, the use of amulets must be seen as a process (see figure 1). In line with the investigation of object biographies, life cycles of objects or their *chaîne opératoire*, my research not only approaches amulets and their networks or assemblages synchronically, but also elucidates successive stages in the creation and use of amulets.²²⁰ Although there were wide varieties of amulets and amulet users, every process of amulet use was unique. Nevertheless, it is possible to discern a sequence of stages, each of which had an impact on the user of the amulet.

217 Sluiter, ‘Anchoring Innovation’, 36; O. Hekster, ‘Religion and Tradition in the Roman Empire: Faces of Power and Anchoring Change’, *Journal of Ancient Civilizations* 32.1 (2017) 13-34. Transformation is also one of the areas of current research interests in: R. Raja, J. Rüpke (eds.), *A Companion to the Archaeology of Religion in the Ancient World* (Chichester 2015).

218 Early Christianity, see for example: N.M. Vos, ‘New Perspectives on Early Christian Rituals: An Introduction’ in: A. Geljon, N. Vos (eds.), *Rituals in Early Christianity. New Perspectives on Tradition and Transformation* (Leiden 2020) 1-11: 5-7; Rouwhorst, ‘Paradigm Shift’, 23-24. Strathern has the same approach, but focusses on universal aspects of religion: A. Strathern, *Unearthly Powers. Religious and Political Change in World History* (Cambridge 2019).

219 Dasen, Nagy, ‘Gems’, 424.

220 In her research on the life cycles of votive objects S. Hoffmann used the term *chaîne opératoire* to look at the different stages in the creation and use of votive figurines and connect objects, people, emotions, and beliefs. Hoffmann, *Between Deity and Dedicator*, 25-26. While the idea of process in this book and *chaîne opératoire* in the work of Hoffmann have much in common, the latter mainly centres on the creation of an object. As my focus is on the users of amulets and not their makers, the idea of a process better suits this book.

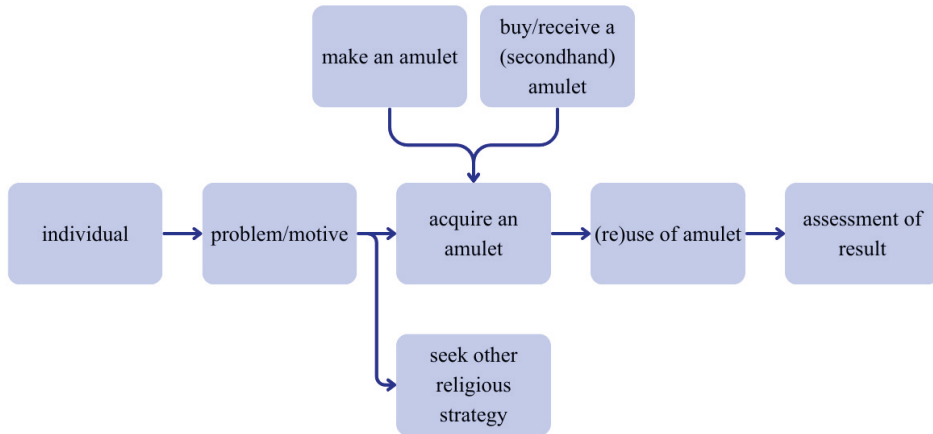


Figure 1. Process of amulet use. Made by author.

The process of amulet use can be divided into different stages and layers. It all starts with a *human individual*.²²¹ Although there must have been many similarities in the experience of participating in ancient religion, individual experience varied, depending on age, gender, and earlier experiences.²²² Individuals make their own choices and have different preferences in their everyday religious practices.²²³ Some sources provide specific information on the individual using an amulet, but this is rare. Still, the individual experience of using amulets must be taken into account when trying to understand the different stages in the process of amulet use. Here K.A. Rask's research on the personal experience of Greek material religion may be of assistance. In her view 'personal experience includes an individual's bodily engagement, mental and emotional perspectives, and first-person point-of-view as they engage the gods and the supernatural during major religious events, personally significant moments, and the occurrences of daily life.'²²⁴ In her research, Rask takes both the experience of material presence and the mental impact of experiences into account. Although her work focusses on a time period before the Roman conquest of the Mediterranean world, her approach to the impact of religious practices on the lived

221 In theory some amulets (think, for instance, of house amulets) could also be the initiative of a group .

222 On individual experience and ancient religion see: Graham, *Reassembling Religion*, for example 7, 18-21. Over the last few decades, the study of the individual in ancient religion has increased as a result of the efforts of scholars such as J. Rüpke. On the discussion about whether the concept of 'the individual' can be applied to the ancient world and for an overview of general ideas, see: J. Rüpke, *On Roman Religion: Lived Religion and the Individual in Ancient Rome* (Ithaca 2016) 8-25; J. Rüpke, 'Individual Choices and Individuality in the Archeology of Ancient Religion' in: R. Raja, J. Rüpke (eds.), *A Companion to the Archaeology of Religion in the Ancient World* (Chichester 2015) 437-450: 437-445.

223 Gordon and Simón describe the 'notion of individual agency' as the red thread of their volume – not the archaeological context of the objects: Gordon, Simón, 'Introduction', 20. See also Rask, *Personal Experience*, 168.

224 Rask, *Personal Experience*, 4.

experience can be applied to Imperial and late antique amulets as well.²²⁵

The individual interested in acquiring an amulet had a *motive* for the acquisition – a *problem* that had to be solved, for instance a disease, feelings of unsafety or fear of the evil eye. An overview of the problems amulets were supposed to be able to deal with provides insight into the fears of users and the areas of life amulets were expected to influence. A distinction can be made between motive and motivation.²²⁶ The motive is the reason why the amulet was required: it relates to the problem that had to be dealt with. While motives are often clearly stated in primary sources, for instance ‘for migraine headache’; motivations are hardly ever mentioned.²²⁷ Motivation is about the pull factors which prompted the individual to choose an amulet rather than another religious strategy. This is one of the main issues analysed in the chapters that follow.

After the individual’s decision to deal with the issue, an amulet had to be *acquired*. Some created their own amulets, while others received or bought them from local specialists or relatives – an example of the latter would be the reuse of an heirloom. Advice from friends and relatives or from a specialist was usually part of the acquisition process. The use of an amulet was not exclusive; it could be one of several religious strategies pursued at the same time. Creation processes of amulets have been frequently described in the sources containing instructions. The production of an amulet can be broken down into stages, but in practice the process was highly flexible.²²⁸ It was necessary to choose a material that would subsequently be gathered, bought or altered. Following this, text and/or imagery could be added to enhance the efficacy of the object. In addition, a consecration, activation or deification ritual might be performed. Some amulets would go through all of these stages, some only through those that were deemed absolutely necessary. There was no single clearcut production procedure nor a specific moment in time for the activation of the object. It should be noted that in this book the focus is on the experiences of the users and that in the creation process of amulets the user was not always the maker.

The amulet would then be connected to a space to be *used*. It would be installed, tied or in some other way attached to the designated area. During the time of its attachment or its use, there might be specific actions to be performed or specific requirements to be met, such as ‘keep it dry while wearing.’²²⁹ The use of the object included a variety of elements that created meaning, such as rituals and sensory experiences. Because human bodies perceive material presence through their senses, the evaluation of sensory perception plays

225 Rask, *Personal Experience*, 4-9.

226 This differentiation between motive and motivation was inspired by the work of S. McKie, *The Social Significance of Curse Tablets in the North-Western Provinces of the Roman Empire* (PhD Thesis Open University 2017) 121-123.

227 Migraine amulet in: *PGM VII*. 199-201, translation by J. Scarborough in GMPT.

228 For the object to be an amulet, only the use of something material that is placed at a boundary location is necessary. The rest is optional.

229 *PGM VII*. 206-207. Translation by J. Scarborough in GMPT.

a large role in understanding the experience of using amulets.²³⁰ The location is likewise of great importance and will, consequently, receive much attention in what follows. In his publication of 2018, Faraone pointed out that it is important ‘to map where and when amulets were placed on bodies, houses, or cities.’²³¹ A.T. Wilburn also shows that locations can and should be taken into account. He creates an overview of the use of both public and private ritual safeguards in ‘each component of a building’.²³² In this way, Faraone and Wilburn manage to elucidate the ‘lines of defense’ or ‘circles of protection’ ancient people created around themselves.²³³ Building on this approach, the present study will focus on the proximity of amulets to the area or body part they were supposed to act upon.

As a final step, the perceived result of amulet use was *assessed*. Users must have had ideas about how the amulet would benefit them. They desired an end result, namely that their problem or motive would be dealt with. While there probably was no formal assessment of every amulet’s efficacy, the steps individuals took after use – reuse the amulet, keep it, throw it away – provide insights into the ‘evaluation’. As will become clear, ideas about effectiveness influenced the motivations for choosing amulets, and even the actual impact the amulet may have had on its users. Even if the amulet did not in every respect meet the expectations of the user, the latter might believe that their lives would have been even worse without the object.

As will be made clear in the next chapters, amulet use is not always linear. At different stages of the process, reuse could play a role. When amulet use is put on a time frame, the possibility of circularity must be kept in mind. Although some amulets were used only once, others were, for example, used again by family members. They could be stored to be reused at a later stage or be reused immediately, but for a different purpose. In order to provide a fuller picture of the lives of amulets, I will also discuss other kinds of reuse, for instance the use of old ritual objects and materials to make new amulets.

The impact of amulet use

Studying amulet use as a process throws light on another level of use: that of the impact of the object on the lives of the users. Every step of the process as shown in figure 1 implies

230 Graham, *Reassembling Religion*, 12, 29. On sensory experience in ancient religion see A. Alvar Nuño, J. Alvar Ezquerra, G. Woolf, ‘Introduction’ in: A. Alvar Nuño, J. Alvar Ezquerra, G. Woolf (eds.), *Sensorium. The Senses in Roman Polytheism* (Leiden 2021) 1-34. For one way of studying this see: M. Patzelt, ‘Favete Linguis and the Experience of the Divine: A Cognitive Grounded Approach to Sensory Perception in Roman Religion’ in: A. Alvar Nuño, J. Alvar Ezquerra, G. Woolf (eds.), *Sensorium. The Senses in Roman Polytheism* (Leiden 2021) 103-124: 106-107. For sensory studies in general see: Griffiths, Starkey, ‘Sensing Through Objects’.

231 Faraone, *Transformation*, 238. Subsequently he discusses the ‘mapping’ of amulets onto ‘human habitats’, ‘human bodies’, the professionals and laypeople who created amulets, the medical understanding of the body and the use of amulets: Faraone, *Transformation*, 244-261.

232 Wilburn, ‘Building Ritual Agency’, 556-557.

233 Wilburn, ‘Building Ritual Agency’, 599-601.

impact. Since meaning is created within the relations between humans and things, the psychological level we describe as (perceived) impact must be included in a relational approach towards amulets. Bonnell Freidin, for instance, demonstrates that amulets can be understood as ‘technologies of hope’ that ‘managed uncertainty by drawing together diverse agency – including divine powers, natures, and human actors.’²³⁴ Exploring the insights developed in the fields of materiality, sensory religion, and psychology enables us to achieve a deeper level of understanding amulets. Different stages of the process of amulet use must have impacted the individuals using them. We might think of the role of the ritual specialist in building trust in the object’s efficacy, the meaning attached to using a family heirloom, the sensory experience of using the object, and the impact of the amulet on the experience of the designated space. Putting the impact of amulets into perspective requires an analysis of the potential experience of their material affordances.²³⁵

The psychological aspect of amulet use has received little attention in the past. However, some publications dealing with curse tablets, have begun to explore the psychological dimensions of these objects. In 1992 J.G. Gager wrote, ‘Did they work? Until recently, the very idea of asking such a question would have seemed absurd. Of course, this stuff doesn’t work!’²³⁶ Inspired by R.S.O. Tomlin, Gager suggested a new perspective: ‘What would happen, however, if we changed our initial assumption and began with the idea that these beliefs and practices must have worked in *some sense*.’²³⁷ Adopting the same approach, I would like to distinguish between two levels of amulet efficacy. The first is the level that might seem ‘absurd’: the functioning and result the owners of the amulets believed in. Scholars often research this level of effectiveness by examining the representational meaning of the visual elements, performative strategies, or analogies used in amulets.²³⁸ The second level of efficacy is the actual impact of the objects’ use. Ancient amulets have been used for centuries and their use continued after the arrival of Christianity – the objects must have had an impact.²³⁹

I address this second level of efficacy by examining the physical and psychological experience of the amulet. Amulets, often used in times of uncertainty and fear, must have had some psychosomatic effect on their users. Power objects would influence emotional and bodily well-being, simply because users had faith in them. The gynaecologist Soranus

234 Bonnell Freidin, *Birthing Romans*, 168.

235 This type of research fits new developments in the field of cognitive religion regarding cognitive processes behind religious experience in the ancient world. See for example: E. Eidinow, A.W. Geertz, J.A. North (eds.), *Cognitive Approaches to Ancient Religious Experience* (Cambridge 2022). In this study I focus on the material and bodily experiences of religion and their psychological effects.

236 Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 22.

237 Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 22-23. Based on R.S.O. Tomlin, ‘The Curse Tablets’ in: B. Cunliffe (ed.), *The Temple of Sulis Minerva at Bath, Vol. 2: The Finds from the Sacred Spring* (Oxford 1988) 59-277: 101.

238 Faraone, *Vanishing Acts*.

239 Gager, *Curse tablets*, 22.

of Ephesus (first/second century CE) made the following comment: ‘Yet one should not forbid their use; for even if the amulet has no direct effect, still through hope it will possibly make the patient more cheerful.’²⁴⁰ R.S.O. Tomlin described the possible psychological effects of curse tablets: not only relieving the users’ stress, but also causing psychosomatic illness in the cursed individual.²⁴¹ The impact of experiencing amulet use will be discussed in chapter three.

Amulet use in context

In the ancient world, individuals could reach out to a variety of religious practices to deal with their problems; the people discussed in this book chose amulets. They either made this decision themselves or were guided by a specialist. Individuals could also opt for a combination of religious strategies.²⁴² Amulets were not used in a vacuum and in order to understand users’ motivations, the use should be contextualised. The religious marketplace offered many religious coping strategies, for instance curse tablets and divination. Various religious practices dealt with the same issues as amulets: they were thought to be effective in the same areas of health, protection and success.²⁴³ In a paper on religion in Roman Egypt, J. Dieleman describes what he understands as a ‘protocol for survival’.²⁴⁴ When it came to dealing with misfortune, divinatory practices were the first layer in this protocol.²⁴⁵ Divination provided a means to get a grip on time. According to K. Beerden, divination may be understood as a way of dealing with uncertainty: ‘[divination] worked as a tool to diminish fear and turn it into hope.’²⁴⁶ The second layer would be to seek protection against misfortune. Strategies include use of amulets,²⁴⁷ use of apotropaic images, performance of protective rituals, and requesting protection at temples or churches.²⁴⁸ The third layer aimed at control – control over others and over social situations through strategies such as

240 Soranus, *Gynaecia* 3.42. Translation by O. Temkin, *Soranus’ Gynecology* (Baltimore 1991) 165.

241 Tomlin, ‘The Curse Tablets’, 101-104.

242 Dieleman, ‘Coping with a Difficult Life’, 337-338.

243 On the ‘magical’ marketplace, see Gordon and Simón: in their view, the choice to resort to what they call ‘magic’ is the result of an evaluation of various alternatives ‘for achieving the same, or analogous ends.’ Gordon, Simón, ‘Introduction’, 17.

244 Dieleman, ‘Coping with a Difficult Life’, 338. This paper is on Roman Egypt and Dieleman rightly stresses the characteristics of this region. Still, his ideas about the protocol for survival can also be applied to other regions, because as the layers of the protocol as described by Dieleman can be found in other regions as well. The supernatural entities and rituals may differ, but the strategies were used throughout the Roman Empire.

245 Dieleman, ‘Coping with a Difficult Life’, 345-346.

246 K. Beerden, *Worlds Full of Signs: Ancient Greek Divination in Context* (Leiden 2013) 221.

247 Dieleman, ‘Coping with a Difficult Life’, 347-349. The descriptions of alleviating fear through amulets, include, for example, amulets used during divination rites: GEMF 31.263-276 and PGM IV. 3086-3124: 3094-3095, and an amulet against fears (during the night) PGM X. 24-35.

248 See for example: Faraone, *Talismans and Trojan Horses*; Wilburn, ‘Building Ritual Agency’.

curses and erotic rituals.²⁴⁹ A fourth layer in the ‘protocol’ is formed by religious practices for healing. Among strategies to cope with disease, we again find amulets, rituals and visits to shrines, temples or churches. Religion was perceived as a vital element of healing and the strategies mentioned could remove the stress that went with ailments.²⁵⁰ As these examples show, amulets were chosen from a wide variety of available practices. If our aim is to understand the impact of the use of amulets, we must consider that use against the background of a range of religious strategies.²⁵¹

Amulet use continued over a large period of time, but did not mean that it did not evolve. This study starts from the assumption that amulet use should be studied as a process – a process that developed over time. I have taken a relational approach that incorporates all aspects related to the use of amulets. Moreover, as argued by Crellin, a relational approach can be used to map out change; it may be used to discriminate change as well as continuity. As relations are constantly changing, change is inevitable and continuity in itself is striking. Studying amulet use as a process allows me to map out both change and continuity and in this way throw light on the evolution (or lack of it) of amulet use in Late Antiquity with the arrival of Christianity.

249 Dieleman, ‘Coping with a Difficult Life’, 350-352. To underline matters: even though strategies may be similar, seeking protection for oneself is different from seeking control over others. E. Eidinow, *Oracles, Curses, and Risk Among the Ancient Greeks* (Oxford 2007) 4-5; Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 22-23 based on Tomlin, ‘The Curse Tablets’, 101; R. Gordon, ‘Desire, Gossip, Uncertainty and Magic in Graeco-Roman Antiquity’, *MHNH Revista Internacional de Investigación sobre Magia y Astrología Antiguas* 17 (2017) 65-102: 68-69.

250 Even Galen discussed prescribing and trying out amulets. C. Petit, ‘Galen, Pharmacology and the Boundaries of Medicine: A Reassessment’ in: L. Lehmhaus, M. Martelli (eds.), *Collecting Recipes: Byzantine and Jewish Pharmacology in Dialogue* (Boston/Berlin 2017) 51-79. This attitude can be found in late antique sources as well, Caesarius of Arles argues against amulets, but advises to: ‘Hurry to church, be anointed with holy oil, and receive the Eucharistic Christ’ to ‘receive health of soul as well as of body.’ Caesarius of Arles, *Sermones* 50.1. Translation by Mueller, *Volume 1*, 253-254.

251 This could be approached from the perspective of rational choice theory. However, since the focus of my research is not so much choice as the experience that followed after the choice had been made, I will not discuss choice. In addition, whether rational choice theory can be applied to the ancient world or not, is a discussion in itself. For more information and application to the ancient world see: F.G. Naerebout, ‘How Do You Want Your Goddess? From the Galjub Hoard to a General Vision on Religious Choice in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt’ in: L. Bricault, M.J. Versluys (eds.), *Isis on the Nile: Egyptian Gods in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt* (Leiden 2008) 55-73; A. Alvar Nuño, ‘Morality, Emotions and Reason: New Perspectives in the Study of Roman Magic’, *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 18.1 (2017) 307-326; Gordon, Simón, ‘Introduction’; A. Alvar Nuño, ‘Ritual Power, Routine and Attributed Responsibility: Magic in Roman Households, Workshops and Farmsteads’ in: R. Gordon, F.M. Simón, M. Piranomonte (eds.), *Choosing Magic. Context, Objects, Meanings: The Archaeology of Instrumental Religion in the Latin West* (Rome 2020) 77-91. For critical notes see also: R. Beck, ‘The Religious Market of the Roman Empire. Rodney Stark and Christianity’s Pagan Competition’ in: L.E. Vaage (ed.), *Religious Rivalries in the Early Roman Empire and the Rise of Christianity* (Waterloo, Canada 2006) 233-252; J. Rüpke, ‘Der “Rational Choice Approach Towards Religion” Theoriegeschichte als Religionsgeschichte’ in: W. Reinhard, J. Stagl (eds.), *Menschen und Märkte: Studien zur historischen Wirtschaftsanthropologie* (Vienna 2007) 435-449.

As Crellin argues, change happens at different rates, both slowly and quickly.²⁵² In addition, continuity and change affected different levels of amulet use. Some changes, for instance new Christian elements in text, and monks operating as new religious authorities, clearly stand out in the sources. Others need more research: if the material presence of amulets remained similar, did the sensory experience and its impact also remain the same? To answer these questions, we must examine the interplay between continuity and change and the meaning of innovation versus tradition.

1.4.3 Approach to sources

As mentioned in the preface, I used three types of primary sources to explore the central research topics of this study. First, amulets discovered in the archaeological record. I refer to them as ‘activated amulets’ to distinguish them from instructions or formularies prescribing amulets. Second, instructions for the creation of amulets in ancient (medical) handbooks. Third, (normative) descriptions of the use of amulets, particularly those found in various early Christian texts. This book does not present a complete corpus or publish new sources: the main goal is to gain insight into the way amulets functioned in the lives of their users and the matter of their use over a remarkably long period of time.

As this study focusses on changes over time, I include only those amulets that are known to have been created or used in a specific period – i.e. amulets that can be exactly dated between 100 BCE and 600 CE. As Faraone has shown in his 2018 publication, including a chronology can provide new insights into the patterns of amulet use.²⁵³ In my book I have included amulets that can be dated to a period not exceeding two centuries: for example: II, II-III, III, and III-IV.²⁵⁴ If a source cannot be dated in this way, it has not been included.²⁵⁵ This means, for example, that gemstones amulets will only be discussed occasionally since dating gemstones is highly problematic.²⁵⁶

I have studied my first type of source, activated amulets, with a focus on motivations for and impact of use. As a result, textual amulets are rather prominent. My research questions can be applied to amulets without text, but to answer them and gain insight into

252 Crellin, *Change and Archaeology*, 212-213.

253 Faraone, *Transformation*, see also: Faraone, *Vanishing Acts*, 76.

254 Faraone, *Vanishing Acts*, 76; Kotansky, *Greek Magical Amulets*, xviii. If an amulet can be dated to the second or third century or second and third century, I include them in the same group. On a different approach see: Kotansky, *Greek Magical Amulets*, xviii. On the problems of dating these types of sources see for example: Dosoo, ‘Magical Names’, 89.

255 However, Faraone, *Vanishing Acts*, does use an amulet (number 8 in his appendix) with the dates third to fifth century. He positions this object in the third to fourth century in the scheme he provides on page 76. On problems with dating see for example: Dasen, Nagy, ‘Gems’, 433; for Christian sources: Van der Vliet, ‘Christian Spells’, 328.

256 See for example Faraone, *Vanishing Acts*, 76.

thoughts, beliefs, and motivations for use, I need texts.²⁵⁷ The textual amulets I have studied can be found in published corpora. The corpora that form the core of this book are: metal lamellae in *Greek Magical Amulets* by R.D. Kotansky,²⁵⁸ papyrus and parchment amulets from Roman Egypt in the collection of the *Greek Magical Papyri*,²⁵⁹ and *Supplementum Magicum* by R.W. Daniel and F. Maltomini.²⁶⁰ For amulets with early Christian elements I used the checklist of T.S. de Bruyn and J.H.F. Dijkstra.²⁶¹

The instructions for making amulets provide the broadest perspective on use and will therefore receive much attention.²⁶² In the instructions, ancient authors describe how amulets should be made and used. Some instructions are minimal in terms of information, others are elaborate and provide particulars regarding the creation of the objects, give arguments for their efficacy, and elaborate on the believed functioning and the problems and fears of the prospective users. A detailed study of instructions makes it possible to take non-textual, non-preserved and non-elite amulets into account.²⁶³ In addition, while the surviving textual amulets often originated in Egypt, the instructions for making amulets come from all over the (former) Roman empire and show many parallels as well as evident connections with the activated amulets that have been found.²⁶⁴ The main handbooks I have included are those in the collection of the *Greek Magical Papyri* and GEMF, the works of Pliny the Elder, Dioscorides, Marcellus of Bordeaux, Alexander of Tralles, the *Medicina Plinii* and some of Galen's works.²⁶⁵

To deepen our understanding of developments in amulet use, especially in Late Antiquity, I discuss descriptions of amulet use in ancient literature. These vary from references to prominent men wearing amulets in Pliny the Elder to the condemnation of the

257 Non-textual amulets, such as *bullae* and *phalli*, do make an appearance in this book, but these types of sources cannot be the main focus. This will be further discussed below. However, as Faraone said, it is only with the introduction of texts that amulets become more recognisable for modern scholars: Faraone, *Transformation*, 1-4.

258 Kotansky, *Greek Magical Amulets*.

259 K. Preisendanz, A. Henrichs, *Papyri Graecae Magicae. Die griechischen Zauberpapyri*, 2 Vol., Second Edition (Stuttgart 1973-1974). For English translations: Betz, *Greek Magical Papyri in Translation*.

260 R.W. Daniel, F. Maltomini, *Supplementum Magicum*, 2 Vol. (Opladen 1990-1992).

261 De Bruyn, Dijkstra, 'A Checklist'. More information on the sources that have been used can be found in the bibliography.

262 In his book on the transformations of amulets, Faraone described instructions for the creation of amulets as 'in some ways more important, because scholars have generally ignored them.' Faraone, *Transformation*, 15, for the sources see 15-23.

263 See for example Faraone's ideas on the failure to recognize amulets without the texts and images that modern scholars associate with them. C.A. Faraone, 'Text, Image and Medium: The Evolution of Graeco-Roman Magical Gemstones' in: C. Entwistle, N. Adams (eds.), *Gems of Heaven: Recent research on engraved gemstones in Late Antiquity, c. AD 200-600* (London 2011) 50-61. In addition, Kotansky studies written amulets because others cannot inform on the same level: Kotansky, 'Textual Amulets', 507-509, 540.

264 Bohak, 'Amulets', 92. For an example of the widespread strategies: Kotansky, 'Textual Amulets', 550-553.

265 This list is not complete, but these authors' works contain the largest number of descriptions of amulets.

use of amulets by Bishop Caesarius of Arles.²⁶⁶ I only included descriptions that meet my etic definition. Although these sources should be treated with caution because they often have a negative normative stance, they contain valuable information on the continued use of amulets.²⁶⁷ In the fourth chapter, I will discuss the early Christian criticism of amulets to explore how these sources relate to activated amulets and the instructions for making them. The main focus will be on Augustine of Hippo, John Chrysostom, and Caesarius of Arles.

1.5 TOWARDS NEW QUESTIONS

Amulets have been studied for centuries and scholars' definitions show many similarities: amulets are material objects that were placed onto something to act in favour of the user. Investigations of ancient amulets usually focused on one specific area, time period, or type of amulet. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholars were interested in the backgrounds of amulet use, but regarded it as a practice for the uneducated. In the final decades of the twentieth century, the study of amulets regained popularity, but research tended to focus on the textual elements. A recent upsurge in the study of amulets with early Christian elements also mainly involves the texts that can be found on the objects. Amulets with texts are an important source of information, but there is much more to amulet use and a wide perspective seems the best way forward. In addition, although both traditional Graeco-Roman amulets and amulets with early Christian elements have recently attracted a good deal of attention, the transformation from the one to the other remains understudied.

The relatively new field of materiality studies inspires new questions about the relations between religious objects and their users. If objects had agency, and if this agency manifested itself within the entanglements of objects and people, amulets should not only be considered in relation to their users, but also as objects whose agency was affected by other objects, their designated location, and other factors. Materiality studies have already influenced amulet research in the sense that the archaeological context and human sensory experience are taken into account. In the investigation of materiality in ancient religion, much attention has been given to the emic power or agency that users attributed to their amulets. In addition, in an etic sense, amulets could have actual impact on the lives of their users, including the psychosomatic effect of enhancing emotional and bodily well-being.

266 For example, Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.29 and Caesarius of Arles, *Sermones* 13.5.

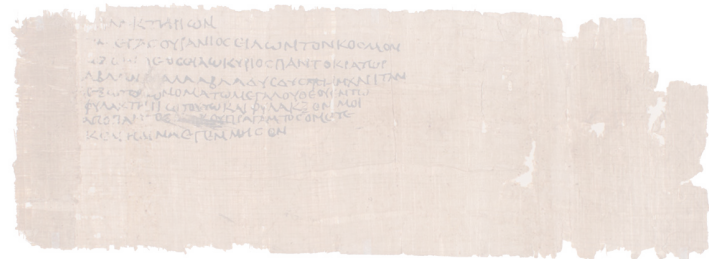
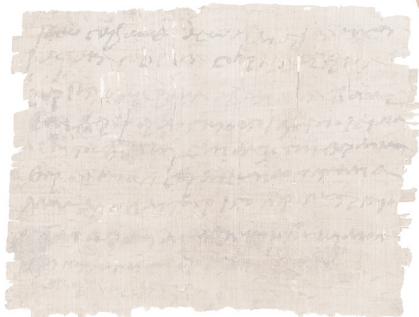
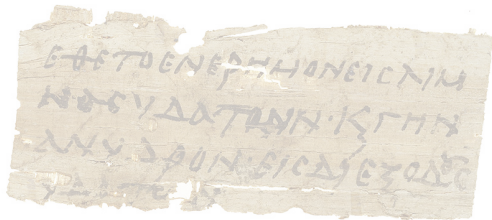
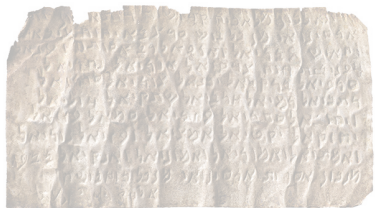
267 I follow Rebillard in his statement: 'It is my contention that sermons and pastoral treatises participate in processes of communication that leave direct and indirect traces in the texts themselves, and that the practice of "symptomatic reading" or reading "against the grain" allows us to recover these traces.' Rebillard, *Christians and Their Many Identities*, 6. See also Sandwell, *Religious Identity* for the attitude of Chrysostom's audiences towards amulets. For reading between the lines of sermons see also: W. Mayer, 'Preaching and Listening in Latin?: Start Here' in: A. Dupont, *et al.* (eds.), *Preaching in the Patristic Era. Sermons, Preachers, and Audiences in the Latin West* (Leiden 2018) 11-27.

An approach informed by materiality studies enables us to align the study of the object, its use in space, and its use by a sensing human body. Furthermore, such an approach may throw light on the question why amulets continued to be used into Late Antiquity and the evolution of their use.

There are many similarities in the scholarly definitions of amulets. They all focus on the object being a material presence that functioned in a certain way. The definition used in the present volume is also based on the functioning of the object and aims to analyse in what way amulets played a role in the lives of their users: an amulet is an object placed by an individual at a certain location in order to demarcate that space in the hope of warding off evil, expelling existing danger from this place, and/or attracting supernatural benefits to it. Amulets were material things, they affected people's lives, and as power objects they were believed to have agency, that is, they were able to initiate change. They would act in the user's favour (not against someone, as a curse would) and were effective in relation to a specific location (the user's body or possessions). Amulets were expected to deal with certain problems by demarcating significant boundary locations.

The sensory and psychological experience of the users is a crucial aspect of amulet use. Amulets were used and experienced by the bodies of people from different places, social backgrounds and religions, at various times. When the aim is to achieve a deeper understanding of amulets, we must study the users, their motivations, and their beliefs regarding the functioning of the amulet, as well as the impact of the proximity of the material presence of amulets on their users. The impact of the relationship between amulets and space may be singled out as one of the central themes of this book.

In the chapters that follow the use of amulets will be studied as a process. After examining individuals facing a problem or experiencing a psychological need, I will move on to the stages of acquirement and use, and finally to the assessment stage. This process did not take place in a vacuum and could be combined with other religious strategies. The process was different for every individual and every amulet, but generally involved the given stages. A important advantage of this approach is that it allows us to evaluate developments over time. Different aspects of amulet use can be mapped to throw light on long-term developments. For example, for new elements to be accepted, they had to be integrated into existing characteristics and relations. Change will always reflect the interplay of tradition and innovation. All in all, the aim of this book is to study amulet use as a process in which the materiality of the object, its demarcating function in relation to space, and the human experience are centre stage.



CHAPTER



2

REACHING OUT TO AMULETS

REACHING OUT TO AMULETS

Amulets were wanted by, made by, and used by human individuals. This chapter examines the first stages in the process of amulet use. First of all, it introduces the users: what do we know about the people who reached out to amulets? Second, it explores motives: why did these people use amulets? What issues were amulets expected to deal with? Third, it discusses matters regarding the acquisition of amulets. Whom to approach when an amulet was needed? Could people make amulets themselves? Fourth, it analyses the attachment of amulets and its demarcating function at the designated location. What did people expect the object to do? The study of the first stages of the process of amulet use provides insight into pull factors as well as motivations underlying the use of amulets.

2.1 HUMAN INDIVIDUALS USING AMULETS

Amulets might be worn by humans, but could also be attached to locations such as houses and vineyards. Let us therefore first explore the question for whom or what amulets were made.

2.1.1 Human bodies

Most amulets were made to be attached to human bodies. Many of these amulets carry texts showing that they were expected to ‘give favor, friendship, success, loveliness to him who bears the amulet (φυ[λα][ττ]κτήριον)’ or to ‘stay the pain of the foot of the bearer of this phylactery (φυλακτήριον).’²⁶⁸ Some amulets explicitly state that they should be worn and would benefit the person they were attached to: ‘protect the one who carries you’,²⁶⁹ or ‘the one bearing your holy and unconquerable power’, and ‘for the one bearing your glory’.²⁷⁰ These examples refer to some sort of wearable power relating to the supernatural the amulet addresses.²⁷¹

In general, it can be argued that amulets were made for all human bodies, regardless of gender or age. Many amulets, however, were specifically made for women and children. C.A. Faraone, for example, studied the amulets worn on the portraits found on mummified individuals in the Faiyum from the first to third centuries CE. These portraits depict

268 GMA 60. Translation by Kotansky, GMA 60, 354. P. Köln VIII 339. Translation by D.R. Jordan, R.D. Kotansky, ‘A spell for aching feet’ in: B. Kraurer, *et al.* (eds.), *Kölner Papyri 7.8* (Opladen 1997) 70-81: 76. For other examples see: GMA 48; P.Gascou 84; *PGM* XCVI.; SM 23; *PGM* XLVII. 1-7; *PGM* P15b; *PGM* LXXXIII. 1-20; *PGM* P17; P.Köln VIII 340; SM 30; *PGM* P18; SM 34.

269 GMA 59. Translation by Kotansky, GMA 59, 348.

270 GMA 58. Translation by Kotansky, GAM 58, 333.

271 See for example also: SM 31.

amulets worn only by female adults and children.²⁷² Pregnancy and childbirth were dangerous, and many amulets were specifically made for these situations. This is confirmed by literary sources: for instance, medical handbooks often suggest the use of amulets to induce childbirth and to make the birth itself quick and easy.²⁷³ The category of gemstones includes many amulets made for women. They are of the ‘wandering womb’ type: with the symbol of a key and a cupping device (representing the womb) the womb was ordered to stay in place and not disturb the wearer of the amulet.²⁷⁴ Childhood was a dangerous stage of life. Generic protective amulets, such as the *bulla* and *lunula*, are specifically associated with children because they were in need of protection. Amulets for specific problems are prescribed for children as well. Pliny describes many amulets for teething babies.²⁷⁵ Based on the iconographic and archaeological evidence, it could be argued that amulets were believed to be especially effective in the case of women and children, whose lives were most vulnerable.²⁷⁶ However, while many amulets referred to in the amulet instructions were specifically made for women or children (as can be deduced from their topics), no gender or age is mentioned in most of them.²⁷⁷

Although adult men wearing amulets are significantly less represented in visual sources, such as the Faiyum burial portraits, or in the archaeological record, men must have worn amulets, too.²⁷⁸ Research into the names on late antique papyrus amulets, for example, shows that both men and women used them.²⁷⁹ It is often argued that in ancient literature amulet use by men only features in contexts of critical illness or very specific danger.²⁸⁰ Pliny the Elder, for example, describes two former consuls wearing amulets. About one of them he writes: ‘Marcus Servilius Nonianus, (...) who was not so long ago afraid of ophthalmia, used to tie round his neck, (...) a sheet of paper fastened with thread, on which

272 Other arguments for the fact that amulets were more often worn by women and children: Faraone, *Transformation*, 47; C.A. Faraone, *Women and Children First: The Earliest Evidence for Ancient Greek Body Amulets* (Budapest 2019).

273 For example: Dioscorides, *Materia Medica* 2.164.1 and 3.150.2.

274 On the meaning and functioning of the womb in relation to amulets and rituals see: C.A. Faraone, ‘Magical and Medical Approaches to the Wandering Womb in the Ancient Greek World’, *Classical Antiquity* 30.1 (2011) 1-32.

275 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 30.136-139; Faraone, *Transformation*, 40-51.

276 Dasen, ‘Probaskania’, 178.

277 More than 150 amulets are described in Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*. Over 15 of these are for women specifically (because of medical reasons) and over 25 for children.

278 Faraone, *Transformation*, 46-51. In studying phallic amulets, A.M. Whitmore found these amulets in graves of adult men, but mostly in the graves of children. A.M. Whitmore, ‘Fascinating Fascina: Apotropaic Magic and How to Wear a Penis’ in: M. Cifarelli, L. Gawlinski (eds.), *What Shall I Say of Clothes? Theoretical and Methodological Approaches to the Study of Dress in Antiquity* (Boston 2017) 47-65.

279 Sanzo, ‘Early Christianity’, 236n.186; Dosoo even sees more men than women, but he argues that this might be because young boys were more often protected by amulets than young girls, because their lives were seen as more valuable: Dosoo, ‘Magical Names’, 94.

280 Dasen, ‘Probaskania’, 178; Faraone, *Women and Children First*, 34-35.

were written the two Greek letters rho and alpha.²⁸¹ K. Bélyácz and Á.M. Nagy have argued that ribbons tied to the ankles of warriors and heroes on Greek red-figure vases should be interpreted as amulets. Similar to ribbon amulets tied on by women, these threads were supposed to protect fighting men.²⁸²

Apart from the question whether amulets were used for female or male human bodies, we can ask additional questions about the socio-economic positions of amulet users. In general, it can be argued that amulets were used in every layer of society, but the sources often lack specific information. It is unclear if enslaved people, for example, wore amulets too. Personalised amulets often carry names, but usually no reference is made to social status. Ancient comments on the use of amulets give the impression that they were not used by the elite.²⁸³ If we read between the lines, however, we can find many examples of amulet use by elite adults. As noted above, Pliny wrote about two former consuls, who used amulets for eye problems.²⁸⁴ Elite male medical scholars, such as Galen, included amulets in their medical handbooks, which implies approval.²⁸⁵ In addition, certain types of amulets, textual ones for instance, were probably not cheap. Activated amulets that have been preserved were often made of precious materials: inscribed metal tablets made of gold or silver and worn in metal tubes, and precious gemstones set in gold jewellery. It is highly likely that the users of these expensive objects were part of the social elite.²⁸⁶ Kotansky also argues that ‘it was the ‘lettered’ variety of amulets that represented the work of a sophisticated, cosmopolitan, and belletristic élite.’²⁸⁷

It is evident from the sources that alternatives were available for those who could not afford the more expensive options. Developments in the use of the *bulla*, for example, demonstrate that expensive elite traditions co-existed with less expensive non-elite practices. Originally, only patricians were allowed to wear the golden amulet capsule, Pliny wrote how all others could wear a leather strap as amulet.²⁸⁸ In the first-century CE freedmen also received to right to wear the golden *bulla*.²⁸⁹ Eventually, such objects were

281 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.29. Translation by Jones, *Pliny, Books 28-32*, 20-24. In the same passage he also describes an amulet made of a living fly in a white linen bag. For men wearing rings with Harpocrates (whose image is often found on gemstone amulets) see: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 33.41.

282 K. Bélyácz, Á.M. Nagy, ‘Periammata. Amulettes sur les premiers vases attiques à figures rouges’, *Gemmae: An International Journal on Glyptic Studies* 3 (2021) 13-38.

283 Especially not by elite males, but mainly by the poor and initiated by women. Faraone, *Transformation*, 6-7, 23. For the early Christian world: M.W. Dickie, *Magic and Magicians in the Greco-Roman Period* (London 2001) 320.

284 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.29. See also Kotansky, ‘Textual Amulets’, 540-541.

285 Faraone, *Transformation*, 23. Galen rationalises the efficacy of certain amulets: Galen, *De simplicium medicamentorum* Kühn XI.859-861 and Kühn XII.207.

286 Dasen, Nagy, ‘Gems’, 434.

287 Kotansky, ‘Textual Amulets’, 540.

288 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 33.10.

289 For the developments in use of the *bulla* see: M. Szilágyi, ‘Late Roman Bullae and Amulet Capsules in Pannonia’, *Annual of Medieval Studies at CEU* 11 (2005) 9-27: 22-23.

also found in graves of adult women dating to the imperial period. This suggests *bullae* were worn by people from all layers of society. For those who could not afford a golden one, there were *bullae* made of less expensive materials such as bronze or leather.²⁹⁰

Since a variety of raw materials could be used to make an amulet, there is other evidence to suggest that amulets came at different price levels. A customer who was able and willing to pay more, would have more options. In her analysis of the ingredients referred to in the Greek Egyptian Magical Papyri, LiDonnici notes that many of the materials would have been available in most places. Some, however, would have to be imported from distant locations, which would have resulted in high prices for the finished product.²⁹¹ Not everyone would have been able to afford an expensive amulet, and when an amulet was needed at short notice because of an acute health situation, quick decisions had to be made on the basis of the current budget. In her analysis LiDonnici also noticed instructions for ‘simple spells for very practical results’, often including amulets. She adds that they ‘sometimes reflect a more rural setting, and very often reflect people of modest means without a great deal of spare time’.²⁹² When a certain ingredient was not at hand, it was sometimes possible to create an alternative. For instance, the travel handbook *Medicina Plinii* gives a recipe to create seawater in case people were travelling in interior districts.²⁹³ The handbooks often provide a variety of instructions, allowing the creation of a range of amulets for the same ailment and the use of alternatives when ingredients were not available. Similarly, for those who could not afford an expensive amulet, there were alternatives in different price ranges.

2.1.2 Houses and other possessions

Although humans were the main recipients of amuletic protection, amulets were also created to protect larger locations such as houses, arable land and workshops.²⁹⁴ Amulets created to protect larger structures such as houses, were occasionally also made with the intention of protecting those who lived or worked in them: ‘preserve this house with its occupants’.²⁹⁵ Handbooks for making amulets often include objects aimed at the protection of possessions and locations.²⁹⁶ And for these protective objects there was likewise a variety of price ranges; one might hang or plant certain plants, for instance laurel, near a door, or have a golden textual amulet made and hang it in the house.²⁹⁷ Locations were also

290 Szilágyi, ‘Late Roman Bullae’, 19-23.

291 LiDonnici, ‘Recipe Ingredients’, 62-90.

292 LiDonnici, ‘Recipe Ingredients’, 91.

293 *Medicina Plinii*, Prologue.

294 For example: protection against hailstorms: GMA 11 and *Codex Theodosianus* 9.16.3; house amulets: GMA 41; *PGM* P3.

295 *PGM* P3. Translation by M.W. Meyer in ACM, nr. 26.

296 Although instructions frequently focus on bodily health because they were written by physicians.

297 Laurel in Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 15.127. For other plants near doors and gates see for example: 21.108, 23.28. For a golden house amulet with holes, which suggests it had been hung: GMA 41.

mentioned on a variety of activated textual amulets that have been found,²⁹⁸ for example, papyrus amulets created to protect houses and metal tablets made to protect harvests against hailstorms.²⁹⁹ The latter would be put in or on the soil to direct their powers to the land they were supposed to protect. In addition, the amuletic powers of texts and/or iconography could be applied to built structures and larger locations. Examples include protective inscriptions and apotropaic iconography applied to boundary locations.³⁰⁰ One example is a group of eye-level inscriptions applied to the outside wall of a theatre in Miletos in the fourth or fifth century. Some of the inscriptions are shaped like gemstone amulets and the inscription at the bottom reads: ‘Archangels! Protect (φυλάσσω) the city of the Milesians and all the inhabitants!’³⁰¹

Ancient individuals thus lived in a world filled with amulets.³⁰² They would walk through landscapes demarcated by amulets. They would wear body amulets for their health and safety. In their houses they would be protected against dangers related to the evil eye and outside their crops would be protected against hailstorms. They saw amulets and amuletic texts on public buildings and city walls.

2.2 PROBLEMS AND MOTIVES: WHY WERE AMULETS USED?

Motives for using amulets can be grouped in three broad categories: healing, protection, and the provision of benefits. All motives derive from a personal issue, a problem, fear or hope.

2.2.1 Motives, fear and hope

In the ancient world, life was full of uncertainties, ranging from crop failure to the dangers of childbirth. Many scholars argue that individuals used ritual practices to cope with daily life.³⁰³ J. Dieleman describes how the supernatural was believed to influence both

298 It may be that we have fewer amulets to be used on/in certain structures and locations than amulets meant to be applied to human bodies, because in view of robbery the former were perhaps less often made of gold and silver. A. Mastrocinque, ‘Phylacteries in the Latin West: A Survey’ in: R. Gordon, F.M. Simón, M. Piranomonte (eds.), *Choosing Magic. Context, Objects, Meanings: The Archaeology of Instrumental Religion in the Latin West* (Rome 2020) 139-149: 140.

299 See for example: PGM P3, PGM P6a, PGM P2, PGM P2a and GMA 41. Arable land: GMA 11 – two similar tablets.

300 City wall: R.H. Cline, ‘Archangels, Magical Amulets and the Defense of Late-Antique Miletus’, *Journal of Late Antiquity* 4 (2011) 55-78. See also the evil eye mosaic in the Basilica Hilariana: Capitoline museums, *Antiquarium* AC 4951.

301 SEG 4.440. Translation by Cline, ‘Archangels, Magical Amulets’, 57-62.

302 See Faraone, ‘Confronting Evil at the Boundaries’.

303 See for instance: Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World*, 157-161; F. Graf, ‘How to Cope with a Difficult Life. A View of Ancient Magic’ in: P. Schäfer, H.C. Kippenberg (eds.), *Envisioning Magic. A Princeton Seminar and Symposium* (Leiden 1997) 93-114; Dieleman, ‘Coping with a Difficult Life’; Gordon, ‘Desire, Gossip’; Alvar Nuño, ‘Emotions and Reason’.

disaster and good fortune. Powers such as demons, gods, and other supernatural beings could be asked for assistance in controlling existing or possible treats. Dieleman considers such rituals as ‘vital forms of stress management in channelling feelings of vulnerability, insecurity, inequity, and impotence, while bolstering self-confidence. They instilled a feeling that everything had been done that could be done to avert disaster or defeat.’³⁰⁴ Gordon observes that there were ‘semi-institutionalized strategies, open to individuals in predicaments that for them were often crisis-situations.’³⁰⁵ J. van der Vliet uses the phrases ‘ritual way of solving problems’, ‘crisis management’ and ‘strategies for coping with misfortune’.³⁰⁶ In relation to the rituals described in the ‘magical’ papyri found in Egypt, H.D. Betz writes that ritual action ‘provides the illusion of security to the insecure, the feeling of help to the helpless, and the comfort of hope to the hopeless.’³⁰⁷

The motive for using an amulet (fear or a specific problem) is sometimes explicitly expressed: fear of the night,³⁰⁸ of ghosts,³⁰⁹ of harm done by sorcery or evil spirits,³¹⁰ fear of harm or death in case of disease,³¹¹ of harm done by hailstorms³¹² or during the performance of a ritual.³¹³ Other examples present amulets intended to take away a more general fear.³¹⁴ Pliny describes amulets ‘against fears and panic’,³¹⁵ and against ‘a child’s sudden terrors’.³¹⁶ An instruction for a phylactery to be used during a larger ritual described in the *PGM* asks ‘keep me (...) without terror during my lifetime.’³¹⁷ Another instruction in the *PGM* mentions a silver lamella to deal with a wide variety of ‘dangers’ including ‘phobias’.³¹⁸

Amulets were thus used to help cope with the fears of daily life, to bring their users hope and peace of mind. Pliny describes how certain amuletic actions were used to alleviate anxiety, and writes that an abundance of hope could bring delight.³¹⁹ Concerning the element of hope, the second-century CE gynaecologist Soranus writes ‘for even if the amulet (περίαιπτον) has no direct effect, still through hope it will possibly make the patient

304 Dieleman, ‘Coping with a Difficult Life’, 338, see 337-338.

305 Gordon, ‘Desire, Gossip’, 70.

306 Van der Vliet, ‘Christian Spells’, 331 and the latter in: J. van der Vliet, ‘Roman and Byzantine Egypt’ in: D. Frankfurter (ed.), *Guide to the Study of Ancient Magic* (Leiden 2019) 240-276: 225.

307 Betz, ‘Introduction’, xlviii.

308 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.98; 28.115; *PGM* X. 24-35.

309 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.98; *PGM* IV. 930-1114 (1055-1085).

310 GEMF 26; GMA 52; PCM I 11.

311 Mothers in fear: Caesarius of Arles, *Sermones* 52.5.

312 *Codex Theodosianus* 9.16.3.

313 GEMF 31.263-276. In addition, fear is mentioned almost as a symptom of disease such as in teething in children: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.257; *Medicina Plinii* III 10.4.

314 *PGM* XIII. 734-1077 (1040-1055).

315 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.115. Translation by Jones, *Pliny, Books 28-32*, 80-81.

316 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 32.137. Translation by Jones, *Pliny, Books 28-32*, 548-549.

317 *PGM* IV. 930-1114 (1055-1085).

318 *PGM* X. 24-35. Translation by R.F. Hock in GMPT.

319 For amulets to deal with fear see above and Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.25 and on hope 30.104.

more cheerful.³²⁰ In some cases, the aspirational aspect is more prominent than the desire to allay fear. A longing for charisma may be related to the fear of not having it, but may also be associated with hope for social advancement. In any case, amulet users decided to deal with their fears or hopes for a change of events.

2.2.2 Sphere of influence

Amulets were used for many different reasons, but the expectations of the people who used them can be grouped into three zones of influence: healing, protection, and providing benefits. I will discuss these three categories separately, but we will also see that it is not always possible to draw clear boundaries between them.

Healing amulets

Medical, ‘magical’, and encyclopaedic handbooks are a major source for descriptions of a wide variety of healing amulets. Pliny the Elder, for example, describes amulets for dealing with trouble concerning the throat, glands, skin, digestive system, groin area, eyes, teeth, and the (female) reproductive system as well as, more specifically, epilepsy, headaches, gout and fever. In relation to the latter Pliny explicitly argues that amulets are the ‘best’ option available on the ‘healing market’: ‘In the case of quartan fevers (malaria) ordinary medicines are practically useless, for which reason I shall include several *remedia* of them and in the first place those that they recommend we tie on (*adalligo*).’³²¹ He subsequently gives a long list of natural products that can be used as amulets. Fever is also most frequently mentioned by Pliny as a reason to create or use an amulet. His instructions vary in length: ‘the heart [of a chameleon], tied on (*inligatum*) with black wool of the first shearing, overcomes quartan fevers’ and ‘the Magi recommend that the patient himself should tie on himself (*adalligo*) *heliotropium*, four pieces if the ague be quartan and three if it be tertian, and to say in prayer that he will untie the knots only when the fever has left him, and to lie in bed without taking the plant off.’³²²

Although many amulets were used or prescribed in handbooks to generally provide ‘healing’, the sources (especially medical handbooks) also provide information about amulets for specific ailments such as gout, epilepsy and various fevers.³²³ In the case of a specific issue, the individual concerned and/or the maker of the amulet had to form a diagnosis and

320 Soranus, *Gynaecia* 3.42. Translation by Temkin, *Soranus’ Gynecology*, 165. For a work on the psychological effects of amulets dating to the late ninth or early tenth century see: J. Wilcox, J.M. Riddle, ‘Qustā Ibn Lūqā’s Physical Ligatures and the Recognition of the Placebo Effect’, *Medieval Encounters* 1.1 (1995) 1-25. See also: P. Sarischouli, ‘Hope for Cure and the Placebo Effect: The Case of the Greco-Egyptian Iatromagical Formularies’, *Trends in Classics* 13.1 (2021) 254-284.

321 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 30.98. Translation by Faraone, *Transformation*, 301n.131.

322 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.114-115 and 22.61. Translation by Jones, *Pliny, Books 28-32*, 80-81 and by W.H.S. Jones, *Pliny. Natural History. Books 20-23. Vol. VI* (London 1969) 336-337.

323 For example, in the works of Dioscorides, Galen, Pliny the Elder and pseudo-Pliny (*Medicina Plinii*), Marcellus of Bourdeaux, and Alexander of Tralles.

therefore must have had some conception of the nature of the ailment.³²⁴ Amulets were especially prescribed for internal diseases: problems with organs, such as the stomach or the womb, headaches, fevers (malaria), poisoning through animal bites and stings. Pains such as toothaches and common ailments such as eye problems are likewise frequently mentioned.³²⁵ Apart from Pliny's comment on amulets as the best option in the case of fever, there are no sources that mention an amulet as the preferred type of treatment for a specific ailment. In most cases an amulet would have been one of many options in the (religious) medicine cabinet. Authors such as Dioscorides describe different applications of a certain plant to cure the same ailment: 'When eaten or taken in a drink or tied on (περιαπτόμενα), this plant and its leaves can help people bitten by wild animals, especially by reptiles.'³²⁶ (Parts of) the plant could be used as an amulet (tied on), but also be taken orally; apparently amulets were not usually considered the only option in case of a specific diagnosis, but for some diagnoses they may have been the preferred option.

Conceptions about disease played an important role in the use of amulets for internal problems or pains. A diagnosis required some understanding of disease and the human body.³²⁷ Disease was often seen as something that had entered the body, was in conflict with it, and therefore had to be expelled.³²⁸ For instance, a fifth-century amulet orders the demon who had caused the disease to go away: 'Flee, hateful spirit, Christ drives you out.'³²⁹ After the disease had been expelled and the body healed, the amulet would theoretically have lost its purpose. It is therefore remarkable that many amulets for specific diseases have been found in graves. This could mean that the individual in question had died and the amulet was put into the grave as a personal object. It could also indicate that an amulet might acquire a different meaning over time. An example is a migraine amulet found in ancient Carnuntum, Austria. It was made in the first or second century and carried an inscription directed at forcing 'migraine' to leave the body. It was not, however, used for one specific migraine episode, but continued to be used and was eventually left in a third-century grave. This suggests that the object was kept and reused to prevent and protect against new migraine episodes. *PGM* IV, from the fourth century, describes a ritual to expel a demon from a body. After the exorcism, the victim had to wear an amulet to protect them against new evil entering.³³⁰

324 Kotansky, 'Incantations and Prayers', 116.

325 Dieleman, 'Coping with a Difficult Life', 352-353; Dasen, 'Healing Images', 179.

326 Dioscorides, *Materia Medica* 4.24. The translation is an adaption of L.Y. Beck, *Pedanius Dioscorides of Anazarbus. De materia medica* (Hildesheim 2005) 260. See also: Galen, *De simplicium medicamentorum* Kühn XI.813.5, Kühn XI.842.1, Kühn XI.852.5.

327 Kotansky, 'Incantations and Prayers', 116.

328 Dieleman, 'Coping with a Difficult Life', 352; Dasen, Nagy, 'Gems', 437; Kotansky, 'Incantations and Prayers', 117.

329 *PGM* P5b. Translation by A. Luijendijk, 'A Gospel Amulet for Joannia (P.Oxy. VIII 1151)' in: K.B. Stratton, D.S. Kalleres (eds.), *Daughters of Hecate. Women and Magic in the Ancient World* (Oxford 2014) 418-444: 420.

330 *PGM* IV. 1227-1264 (see 1250-1264); see also: *PGM* IV. 3007-86. More information in: R.D. Kotansky, 'Greek Exorcistic Amulets' in: P. Mirecki, M.W. Meyer (eds.), *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power* (Leiden 1995) 243-277: 261-263.

Most ailments occurred all over the Roman Empire and the option to treat them with amulets seems to have existed everywhere. On different levels, however, sources from Egypt stand out. First in number: due to climatic circumstances much more textual papyrus amulets have been found there than elsewhere. In addition, compared to other regions relatively more amulets for scorpion bites and fever were made in Egypt.³³¹ The relative prominence of scorpion amulets may be explained from the simple fact that scorpions were more widespread in Egypt than in, for example, the northern provinces. As for the amulets aimed at fever, there may have been other, less clear factors.

Fever is often referred to in the activated papyrus amulets from Egypt.³³² Malaria was common in the ancient world and fever is a symptom of many diseases.³³³ However, fever is not an Egyptian phenomenon; it also occurred in the rest of the Roman Empire. Although amulets related to fever form only a small category among the activated amulets found outside Egypt,³³⁴ they are among the types of amulets most frequently mentioned in the handbooks and encyclopaedias of the Greek and Roman world.³³⁵ While the activated fever amulets found in Egypt were made of papyrus, those found in other parts of the Roman Empire were made of metal – their survival is due to climatic circumstances. Most handbooks, however, describe the application of plants or animal parts, which had to be attached to the body in a cloth pouch or metal case.³³⁶ Some of the plant-based materials described in these instructions, for instance papyrus or olive leaves, only survived in the favourable climatic circumstances of Egypt.³³⁷ The rarity of fever amulets outside Egypt does not indicate that fever was not treated with amulets in other parts of the Roman Empire. What it does show is that, for fever amulets, in all regions perishable, natural (and cheaper) materials were preferred over metal tablets.

The foregoing discussion suggests that healing amulets were used all over the Roman Empire to deal with internal diseases and pain. Some were created for single occasions such as childbirth, others for recurring afflictions such as migraine and fever. The function of these amulets may have shifted from healing to preventing the return of the disease.

331 *PGM CXII*; *PGM P3*; *PGM XXVIIIa*. 1-7; *PGM CXIII*; *PGM XXVIIIb*. 1-9; *PGM XXVIIIc*; *PGM P2*.

332 On the gender division (mostly females and children) and a biological explanation for this see: Luijendijk, 'Gospel Amulet for Joannia', 422.

333 K. Dosoo, 'Healing Traditions in Coptic Magical Texts', *Trends in Classics* 13.1 (2021) 44-94: 71.

334 This research is not quantitative, but if numbers were to be put to these conclusions: in the *PGM* and *SM* more than twenty activated fever amulets can be found, while the *GMA* only includes one (*GMA* 56) from outside Egypt.

335 Metal fever amulets have survived, but not to an extent similar to the number of papyrus fever amulets found in Egypt. Examples are *GMA* 59 (from Egypt) and *GMA* 56 (from Israël).

336 See for example the discussion on the visual experience of amulets in chapter three.

337 Instructions for textual amulets from perishable materials from outside Egypt: *Medicina Plinii* III 15.7; Quintus Serenus, *Liber Medicinalis* 935-940; Alexander of Tralles, *De Febris* P. 1.407.4-7.

Protective amulets

Amulets were used to protect against a wide variety of dangers. Many of the non-textual amulets that have been found – *bullae*, *lunulae*, phallic objects, coins used as amulets, amber beads, and frontal Medusas – were used for general protection against all sorts of evils and dangers. Amulets could be efficacious at different scales of protection, with the human body being the smallest and whole cities as one of the largest. The body needed protection against disease, demons, the evil eye or sorcery, and visible threats such as the poisonous bite or sting of animals.³³⁸ A specific category in the Thebean ‘magical’ handbooks is the need for protection during a dangerous rite.³³⁹ Supernatural influence was commonly believed to be the force behind the danger. An amulet could block the harmful influence.

Amulets were also believed to be effective on a larger scale, for instance for the protection of a house, a workshop, or arable land.³⁴⁰ Amulets could provide general protection, but also protect such locations against specific dangers caused by external factors – for example poisonous creatures in the house,³⁴¹ curses or other harmful religious practises invoked or carried out by others,³⁴² or hailstorms damaging the harvest.³⁴³ Since the circles of protective influence were larger, they could include several people, for instance everyone living in a house.³⁴⁴ In essence, an amulet with a protective function kept evil or danger outside a marked area, thus protecting everyone and everything inside a demarcated space.

The texts written on amulets and the instructions for their creation and application provide insight in the objects’ social context. Amulets ‘mobilised’ the supernatural for protection against evil caused by other human beings. They would protect against the evil eye – the jealous glance could cause harm and had to be averted.³⁴⁵ Certain amulets and instructions are related to protection against supernatural intervention invoked by acquaintances, relatives or enemies. One amulet, for example, was created to protect Zoë from ‘sorceries and binding-spells’,³⁴⁶ another to protect Rufina from poison (and a lawsuit).³⁴⁷ Pliny prescribes hanging squill (*Scilla*, a herbaceous plant) in the doorway to ‘keep off evil

338 For example: demons and disease (fever): *PGM* LXXXIX.; scorpions: *PGM* CXIII.

339 Faraone discusses this type of sources as a separate category in Faraone, *Transformation*, 263-265.

340 For a short overview of all possible amuletic protective strategies see: Faraone, ‘Confronting Evil at the Boundaries’.

341 *PGM* P2.

342 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 20.101, see also 30.82, 32.23, 32.44.

343 *Codex Theodosianus* 9.16.3.

344 ‘Preserve this house with its occupants from all evil’ in *PGM* P3. Translation by M.W. Meyer in ACM, nr. 26.

345 See Chapter 1.

346 GMA 52.

347 GMA 36.

enchancements',³⁴⁸ and an amulet made of gold 'to render less harmful poisonous charms.'³⁴⁹ Ancient individuals could reach out to a multitude of religious strategies, including binding spells and charms, to harm others. The use of protective amulets shows that these 'harming' strategies were feared, but could be countered with protective practices.

In summary, amulets were used to ward off external dangers. Such dangers (disease, bad weather, bites of dangerous animals) were often uncontrollable and unpredictable. Other human beings might also be a source of danger. Amulets protected human bodies, houses and other larger locations against such dangers.

Amulets for attracting benefits

Amulets could also be used to attract certain benefits – they addressed supernatural powers in order to acquire, for instance, victory, favour, or success.³⁵⁰ Many examples show a combination of requests; for example, an amulet which has been dated to the fourth or fifth century contains the following: 'O Power of the angels and characters (χαρακτῆρες), give victory (νίκη), favour (χάρις), for John and Georgia and for this house.'³⁵¹ A third-century papyrus amulet asks, 'give me victory, repute, beauty before all men and before all women.'³⁵² This type of amulets could be used for various occasions (victory in court or at the races) and for various locations (good luck for a house or fortune for a business).³⁵³ Amulets for securing benefits often show a world in which religion was used to influence social situations, for instance official processes (court cases),³⁵⁴ competitive occasions (sports, combat),³⁵⁵ and financial/commercial processes (business).³⁵⁶ In other cases the amulet was just expected to bring good luck.

Amulets providing benefits were not intended to harm others, but to ensure the best possible outcome or condition for the person or location in question. They were believed to enhance the position of the person or location demarcated by the amulet. Incidentally, similar outcomes could be brought about through other religious strategies, such as cursing. People could use an amulet to secure victory or a curse to ensure the failure of their opponents. This will be further analysed in the context of ancient law in the next chapter.

348 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 20.101.

349 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 33.8.

350 On the different cultural backgrounds of these amulets see: J.F. Quack, 'From Ritual to Magic. Ancient Egyptian Precursors of the Charitesion and their Social Setting' in: G. Bohak, Y. Harrari, S. Shaked (eds.), *Continuity and Innovation in the Magical Tradition* (Leiden 2011) 43-84.

351 GMA 41. Translation by Kotansky, GMA 41.

352 *PGM* XCII. 1-16. Translation by Daniel, Maltomini, SM 63, 62.

353 Court: GMA 58; at the races: *PGM* VII. 390-93; house: GMA 41; business: GEMF 15.145-155.

354 Judicial: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 29.67. Many describe favour in relation to a king, see Quack, 'From Ritual to Magic' and see Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 37.124.

355 Races: *PGM* XXVII. 1-5.

356 Business: *PGM* IV. 2359-72.

Variations and combinations: amulets in context

So far, I have distinguished three different functions of amulets: healing, protecting, and attracting benefits. In practice, however, the use of amulets was not necessarily directed towards one specific effect; functions could be combined. An amulet of the first or second century requests both health and victory: ‘give health and victory (to) Tiberius Claudius Similis.’³⁵⁷ GMA 45, a fifth-to-sixth-century gold lamella, was supposed to provide both health and favour: ‘Make healthy, give favor’.³⁵⁸ In addition, users could combine different amulets.³⁵⁹ One amulet capsule might contain multiple amulets and multiple amulets could be worn at the same time. GMA 65 and 66, for example, were both made for a person named Abbagaza. They were rolled up in the same amulet case and found together. One amulet only mentions being a phylactery, and was thus presumably made to protect. The other was made ‘against every spirit and sickness’ and its text ends with the request to ‘heal Abbagaza’.³⁶⁰ It is possible that both amulets were made at the same time, to bring various kinds of ‘luck’ to the wearer. Multiple amulets have especially been found in funerary contexts.³⁶¹ The migraine amulet from the first or second century discussed above, for example, was found in a grave, rolled up with another silver *lamella* dated to the third century which carries a short inscription containing a powerful name, but no reason for its use.³⁶² A third and fourth *lamella* were found in the same grave, one made of gold and the of silver. They are both dated to the third century and were also rolled up together; both likewise contain powerful names and formulae, but no motives. The person buried in this grave thus carried four amulets made of precious metals, one of which was of a period much preceding this person’s decease. Whatever this person was dealing with at the time of their death or was believed to be confronted with in the afterlife, one amulet was clearly not enough.³⁶³

Amulets were among the many religious strategies people used to heal themselves, to protect themselves and their possessions, and to attract victory. Other religious practices functioned in the same spheres of influence. Most handbooks mention amulets as one of several possible strategies. In the ‘magical’ handbooks from Roman Egypt, instructions for amulets are combined with instructions for curses, erotic rituals, and divinatory rituals.³⁶⁴ The criticism of the early Christian bishops on the religious practices of their flocks

357 The request is in Latin, but in Greek script. Norwich Castle Museum and Art Gallery, registration number: NWHCM: 2005.297. Translation: R.S.O. Tomlin, ‘A Bilingual Charm for Health and Victory’, *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 149 (2004) 259-266: 261.

358 GMA 45. Translation by Kotansky, GMA 45.

359 Earlier examples: beads in amuletic shapes were often combined to form amulet necklaces. Faraone, *Transformation*, 32-35 and 55-61.

360 GMA 65 and GMA 66. Translations by Kotansky, GMA 65 and 66, 378-379.

361 See for example: GMA 10 and GMA 12.

362 GMA 13-16.

363 GMA 13-16. See also: Barb, ‘Griechische Zaubertexte’.

364 See for example Betz, *Greek Magical Papyri in Translation*.

also demonstrates that ancient amulet users had a large toolbox of religious strategies to choose from: ‘why do miserable men try to bring numerous evils upon themselves through charmers, fountains, trees, diabolical phylacteries (*diabolica fylacteria*), sorcerers, soothsayers, seers or oracles?’³⁶⁵ Still, the handbooks rarely explicitly state that an amulet user also had to offer a sacrifice or perform another ritual. The archaeological record shows that multiple amulets could be worn simultaneously, but yields no clear evidence of amulets being combined with other religious strategies.³⁶⁶ Within amulet texts, however, traces can be found of the combination of different practices. One example is a judicial victory amulet made for Proclus that was meant to offer assistance as an amulet as well as harm the opponents as a curse, all to obtain a successful outcome in court.³⁶⁷ Liturgical rituals found their way into the texts written on amulets with Christian elements.³⁶⁸ Furthermore, during the time the amulet was used or during the rituals of creating and activating the object, a variety of other ritual practices could take place, such as consuming drinks or pills,³⁶⁹ or performing a speech act.³⁷⁰ Pliny describes the combination of an amulet and a bath: ‘Headache is cured by the root of any kind of panaces (...) attached for an hour (*adalligata*), or longer if the patient can stand it, a bath being taken at the same time.’³⁷¹

Amulets were thus made for a wide variety of reasons, but all fall within the categories of healing, protecting, and providing benefits. Within these areas, individuals could decide to reach out to amulets and not to other religious practices. These categories are not strictly demarcated, but could be combined in one and the same object and with other practices.

2.3 HOW TO ACQUIRE AN AMULET

Once the decision to reach out to amulets was made, the amulet had to be acquired. An amulet could be homemade, made by a specialist or received from a relative or a friend. What follows, makes it clear that the specialist had a very large role in the user’s experience of the amulet. I will first briefly discuss the main aspects of the creation process of amulets. Next, I will examine the possible makers of amulets and their roles.

365 Caesarius of Arles, *Sermones* 13.3. Translation by Mueller, *Volume 1*, 77.

366 See for instance the necklaces with amuletic iconography discussed by Faraone, *Transformation*, 54-78; for the combination of multiple amulet tablets see: GMA 10, GMA 12, GMA 13-16 and GMA 65-66.

367 GMA 58.

368 Baptismal exorcisms in GMA 35 and *PGM* P13.

369 Drink: Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 28.20, 28.52; pills: Alexander of Tralles, *Therapeutica* P. 1.571.16-19.

370 *PGM* IV. 475-829.

371 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 25.134. Translation by W.H.S. Jones, *Pliny. Natural History. Books 24-27. Vol. VII* (London 1966) 230-231.

2.3.1 How to make an amulet

Amulets could be made in a variety of ways and involve a variety of rituals. The first step in the creation of an amulet was the choice of a material. Amulets were often made from organic material (vegetable or animal), gemstones, or metal. Some materials, for instance certain gemstones, were chosen because they were thought to have supernatural qualities;³⁷² other materials because they ‘suited’ the purpose of the spell through metaphors, analogies, sympathies, and antipathies.³⁷³ For example, Pliny describes how animal teeth can help with the problems of teething infants. This practice is based on the idea of sympathy involving the assumption that like would ban like and the same would heal the same.³⁷⁴ According to the gynaecologist Soranus, ‘Some people say that some things are effective by antipathy, such as the magnet.’³⁷⁵ In addition, materials could be chosen for practical reasons – papyrus as writing material, for example.³⁷⁶ Sometimes the gathering or preparation of the material involved certain rituals. Examples are the cutting off of animal parts and plant picking rituals: ‘the spell to be spoken: I am picking you, such and such a plant, with my five-fingered hand.’³⁷⁷

The gathering of the material might be followed by writing or drawing something on it or the performance of a speech act.³⁷⁸ In Plato’s *Charmides*, Socrates gives a description of a remedy for headaches: the simultaneous performance of a speech act and application of a leaf to the forehead.³⁷⁹ From the Imperial period onwards, the formulae involved in the speech acts were written on the object.³⁸⁰ Instructions have been found for making amulets from plant leaves with directions for the addition of imagery: ‘On the shiny side of an olive leaf write (drawing of sun symbol), and on the dark side write (drawing of crescent

372 Faraone, *Transformation*, 48-49.

373 Antipathy in relation to magnets: Soranus, *Gynaecia* 3.42. Dasen, ‘Personal agency’, 127-129; Wilburn, *Materia Magica*, 85.

374 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.257-258; 32.137-138. Dasen, ‘Personal agency’, 129. See for example, Versnel, ‘Poetics of the Magical Charm’, 118-126; Faraone, *Transformation*, 66.

375 Soranus, *Gynaecia* 3.42. Translated by Temkin, *Soranus’ Gynecology*, 165.

376 For example, Bohak, ‘Amulets’, 85-86: ‘when it came to inscribed amulets, the material of which they were made often was of lesser importance, since it was the text upon them that really mattered’. However, I would like to argue that conscious choices were also made in favour of simple writing materials, such as papyrus, that had to be clean or new.

377 PGM IV. 286-95, see also PGM IV. 2967-3006. On plants see: Scarborough, ‘Sacred Plants, Herbs and Roots’. For animals see: PGM VII. 186-90.

378 See for example: Frankfurter, ‘Magic of Writing in Mediterranean Antiquity’.

379 Plato, *Charmides* (155e-156e). Kotansky names this amulet of Socrates the ‘first explicit reference to an amulet applied with an incantation’: Kotansky, ‘Incantations and prayers’, 109. C.A. Faraone, ‘A Socratic Leaf Charm for Headache (Charmides 155b-157c), Orphic Gold Leaves, and the Ancient Greek Tradition of Leaf Amulets’ in: J. Dijkstra, J. Kroesen, Y. Kuiper (eds.), *Myths, Martyrs, and Modernity Studies in the History of Religions in Honour of Jan N. Bremmer* (Leiden 2010) 145-166; Faraone, *Transformation*, 81, 82.

380 Faraone, *Transformation*, 1.

moon).³⁸¹ Textual amulets present a variety of linguistic strategies. Greek was the dominant language – also for amulets in the Latin-speaking world – but different languages were often combined. We find bits of Hebrew, for instance, or ancient Egyptian languages, and also unintelligible words.³⁸² In addition, powerful names might be added, such as the names of the archangels (Michael, Gabriel, etc.), or Hebrew names and titles for God (Sabaoth, Adonai, etc.). These figure prominently in Greek amuletic texts.³⁸³ One illustration is a papyrus amulet of the second or third century carrying a text that stresses the urgency of the situation: ‘ABŌ . . . SESENGEN SPHRANGĒS MICHAĒL SABAŌTH LAPAPA . . . GABRIĒL SOURIĒL RAPHAĒL, protect Sophia whom Theoneilla bore from every shivering fit and fever, immediately, quickly.’³⁸⁴

Words could also be written in shapes or arrangements that added power to their meaning. A well-known example are the ‘vanishing acts’ in which a word is written multiple times in consecutive lines, every time omitting the first and/or last letter so that the word seems to slowly disappear.³⁸⁵ Apart from legible charms, bits of unintelligible script and drawings could be added to amulets.³⁸⁶ *Charaktêres* were, for example, added to all sorts of amulets from all over the Roman Empire: signs, often consisting of stripes and circles or dots, whose meaning generally remains obscure.³⁸⁷ One example is the following charm that was written on the back of a gemstone amulet:

381 *PGM* VII. 213-214. Translation by J. Scarborough in GMPT. See also: Alexander of Tralles, *De Febribus* P. 1.407.4-7; *PGM* VII. 800-828 (protection during ritual); *PGM* CXIXb. 1-5; GEMF 31.263-276 (protection during ritual).

382 On the dominance of Greek in the Latin speaking world, see for example in the work of Kotansky, GMA: GMA 28 in Greek, found in Rome; GMA 13-16 in Greek, found in Austria; GMA 2 in Greek script, including Hebrew formularies, found in Wales; GMA 10 in Greek, found in France; GMA 11 in Greek, found in France; GMA 7 in Latin written in Greek script, found in Germany; GMA 4 in Greek, found in Germany; GMA 12 in Greek, found in Germany; GMA 17 in Latin with Greek *voces magicae*, found in Austria; GMA 8 in Latin with Gallic and Greek mixed in, found in France; GMA 18 in Greek with Latin words mixed in, found in Hungary.

383 Dosoo, ‘Magical Names’, 126-127.

384 *PGM* XLIII. 1-27. Many of the ‘magical’ words and names are names of supernatural beings with Egyptian, Greek and Semitic roots and/or ‘magical’ sounds. Frankfurter, ‘Magic of Writing’, 199-203; Dieleman, ‘Coping with a Difficult Life’, 347.

385 Faraone, *Transformation*, 217; Faraone, *Vanishing Acts*.

386 Faraone, *Transformation*, chapter 7, 8 and 9; Dijkstra, ‘Interplay between Image and Text’.

387 Frankfurter, ‘Magic of Writing’, 205-210; J. Dieleman, *Priests, Tongues, and Rites: The London-Leiden Magical Manuscripts and Translation in Egyptian Ritual (100-300 CE)* (Leiden 2006) 81, 97; Faraone, *Transformation*, 181. For example, on GMA 6, 10, 12, 14, 15, 16, 18, 23.



Figure 2. Gemstone amulet with charaktères above and below a wish for digestion. CGS-01125, reverse. Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, Leiden.

The next step was the activation of the amulet. Some instructions for making amulets specify a certain ritual act to activate the amulet, for example: ‘put frankincense over them’ (i.e. over the *charaktères* on the amulet).³⁸⁸ It is not always made clear what form the activation took: ‘and when you have consecrated [it], wear [it]’ or ‘and when you have consecrated it, wear it in purity’ or ‘consecrate it’.³⁸⁹ The final possible step was installing the amulet. To do this, the materials had to be put in some kind of a container made of cloth, leather or metal – a pouch or a case. Although there could be meaning in the type of container, such as mule hide for a contraceptive amulet, the material would often have been chosen for practical reasons.³⁹⁰ In summary, in the process of making an amulet there were two essential steps: choosing the material and installing the object. A variety of other steps could be added.

388 *PGM XXXVI*. 275-278 (frankincense); see also: *PGM IV*. 475-829 (kissing and licking); *PGM IV*. 2785-2890 (cleaning and dipping). See also: *PGM IV*. 3007-86 (the conjuration seems to be the invocation that will only work when combined with other elements such as blowing); GEMF 15.251-319 (conjuration ritual). Some scholars describe this activation or animation of the material as a central element of amulets: Faraone, *Talismans and Trojan Horses*, 4; Bendlin, ‘Phylakterion’; Faraone, Obbink, ‘Preface’, v-vii; Gordon, ‘Substances to Texts’, 137, 152.

389 *PGM VII*. 579-590; *PGM X*. 24-35; *PGM XXXVI*. 35-68; make offerings: *PGM IV*. 2622-2707. That amulets were ritually activated as if they were deified statues is pointed out in J. Dieleman and I.S. Moyer’s study of an Egyptian consecration ritual in GEMF 15.314-399; I.S. Moyer, J. Dieleman, ‘Miniaturization and the Opening of the Mouth in a Greek Magical Text (*PGM XII*.270-350)’, *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions* 3.1 (2003) 47-72: 51, 67.

390 GEMF 29.29-31 and *PGM XXXVI*. 320-332.

(Emic) agency developed gradually during the creation process.³⁹¹ As R. Gordon argues, ‘in the case of magical action, the practitioner’s exercise of knowledge (...), invests the material objects used or made with a specific agency to effect a given alteration in the milieu.’³⁹² D. Frankfurter argues that several ritual steps could be taken during the creation process to add to the believed agency of the object: ‘Amulets, whether legible or not, involve words and names, symbols and icons, which transform the substance – metal, gemstone, or scrap of papyrus – into a thing that works against disease or demons.’³⁹³ In addition, the context of use added to the believed agency of the object. In the words of S. McKie and A. Parker, ‘The importance of these materials was intimately connected to context; the times, places, and ways in which they were used mattered a great deal for their efficacy.’³⁹⁴

2.3.2 Who made amulets

Individual users could create their own amulets or have an amulet made for them by friends or family members. Furthermore, amulets were made by specialists. Unfortunately, we know very little about the commercial side of amulets. The handbooks give instructions for making amulets, but we do not know exactly who used these instructions, nor do we have any information about buying and selling. In general, amulets were made by a wide variety of people and the involvement of specialists probably varied.

Amulets could be created at home by and for the people who used them. For example, in the prologue the author of the *Medicina Plinii* describes his handbook as a collection of instructions for travellers: ‘as a summary’.³⁹⁵ Travellers could collect the ingredients mentioned in the book and perform the rites themselves.³⁹⁶ The *Medicina Plinii* and the books of Pliny the Elder’s *Naturalis Historia* from which it was derived, were especially created to avoid doctors or charlatans by having home remedies at hand.³⁹⁷ Amulets could also be made in a family context. An amulet instruction dated to the second or third-century amulet states, ‘and you shall not share it except with legitimate offspring’.³⁹⁸ Handbook instructions as well as activated amulets made for family members have survived in what looks like a fourth-century family archive found in an abandoned house in ancient Kellis.

391 See also: Rask, *Personal Experience*, 32-33.

392 Gordon, ‘Substances to Text’, 139.

393 Frankfurter, ‘Forces of Materiality’, 659.

394 McKie, Parker, ‘Introduction’, 5.

395 *Medicina Plinii*, Prologue. Translation by Y. Hunt, *The Medicina Plinii. Latin Text, Translation, and Commentary* (London 2021) 15.

396 *Medicina Plinii*, Prologue.

397 Cordovana, ‘Pliny the Elder between Magic and Medicine’, 64. On whether people could collect the necessary ingredients themselves, see: Faraone, *Transformation*, 252-253. On specialists providing ingredients, see the work of LiDonnici, ‘Recipe Ingredients’.

398 GEMF 26.28-29. Translation M. Zellmann-Rohrer in GEMF.

One of the amulets seems to have been made on the basis of the handbook instructions.³⁹⁹ Other late antique sources also provide indications of amulet use in a family context, but nothing suggests that the phenomenon was typical of Late Antiquity.⁴⁰⁰ Ancient critics of creators of amulets in the personal sphere often mention that these were female. Pliny the elder, for example, states that using powerful charms and ‘magic herbs’ was an area of women: ‘the science of them is the one outstanding province of women. At any rate tales everywhere are widely current about Medea of Colchis and other sorceresses, especially Circe of Italy.’⁴⁰¹

Although some amulets were created by laypeople, modern scholars assume that most were made by specialists from different backgrounds. That being said, they do not have a very clear idea of who these specialists were.⁴⁰² The ritual specialists using the Greek Egyptian papyri did not specialise in making amulets, but combined this with other religious practices such as cursing. They would have been able to read and write since they often worked with handbooks and created textual amulets.⁴⁰³ Because of the level of literacy required for this craft they are often assumed to have been male.⁴⁰⁴ Special skills were required for making amulets from particular materials. Smiths and cutters were probably engaged for working the more durable ones, such as metals and gemstones. These craftspeople very likely also consulted handbooks.⁴⁰⁵ Professional root cutters may have been involved in the creation of amulets from plant-based materials.⁴⁰⁶ In this way, specialists of various kinds might be involved in the creation of amulets.

399 M. Brand, *Religion and Everyday Life of Manichaeans in Kellis: Beyond Light and Darkness* (Leiden 2022) 104. Handbook: P.Kellis I Gr. 85ab, amulet: P.Kellis I Gr. 87. Another amulet: P.Kellis inv. 92.35b. For other people who possessed instructions for making amulets at home see: Dosoo, ‘Magical Names’, 81-85 including examples beyond the period of this study.

400 PGM P6c is a fifth-century amulet for a family. See also the discussion on family context related to the sermons of bishops in section 4.3B of this book.

401 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 25.10. Translation by Jones, *Pliny, Books 24-27*, 142-143. See also Dickie, *Magic and Magicians*, 175 and 274-281.

402 Little is known about the specialists, because as sources we only have handbooks, the products made with the help of these handbooks, and very diverse criticism of ‘magicians’. I will not discuss the matter of the religious backgrounds of the specialists, such as the references to the Magi in Pliny the Elder or antisemitic suggestions about ‘magicians’ being Jewish in Late Antiquity. See, for example: Lacerenza, ‘Jewish Magicians’.

403 For general information see, for example: Faraone, *Transformation*, 251-258.

404 Although women, nuns for example, should not be excluded: Luijendijk, ‘Gospel Amulet for Joannia’, 425-256; de Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 241-242.

405 See for example the relationship between papyrus versus gemstone handbooks and amulets in: C.A. Faraone, ‘The Late-Antique Transfer of Circular Gem-Designs to Papyri and Foil: The Ouroboros and Solomon’s Seal’ in: R.M. Hernández (ed.), *The Iconography of Magic. Images of Power and the Power of Images in Ancient and Late Antique Magic* (Leuven 2022) 81-101. On the relation between gemstone handbook instructions and the activated amulets found in the archaeological record see: P. Vitellozzi, ‘Relations Between Magical Texts and Magical Gems Recent Perspectives’ in: S. Kiyanrad, C. Theis, L. Willer (eds.), *Bild und Schrift auf ‘magischen’ Artefakten* (Heidelberg 2018) 181-253.

406 Scarborough, ‘Sacred Plants, Herbs and Roots’; Faraone, *Transformation*, 254.

A third-century letter from Oxyrhynchus gives insight into the process: ‘The amulet against tonsillitis for the gold plate, send it to Sarmates, having copied it on a slip of papyrus word for word.’⁴⁰⁷ The amulet was meant for a patient suffering from tonsillitis. The individual writing the letter decided on the text (the amulet) and the material (gold). The recipient had to copy an instruction – from a handbook perhaps – on papyrus and send it to Sarmates. The latter may have been a goldsmith, or someone specialising in writing in gold.⁴⁰⁸ This letter also shows how elaborate the process of creating an amulet could be. Whether amulets were made on request – like the amulet in the letter – or were also available from stock (or a combination) is a matter of debate. These practices will be discussed below.⁴⁰⁹

The descriptions of amulets in medical handbooks suggest that doctors, too, prescribed, made, and used amulets.⁴¹⁰ The gynaecologist Soranus writes how ‘followers of Hippocrates among others’ prescribed drugs and amulets for a quick birth.⁴¹¹ What most of the medical authors including Soranus, however, have in common, is that they condemn the use of amulets or are sceptical about it. Galen writes that he will not stoop to the use of amulets.⁴¹² On the other hand, these medical authors often described amulets in their works; Galen recorded that he tested some and goes on to rationalise their effect.⁴¹³ Antique authors already recognised this dual relationship with amulets: the sixth-century physician Alexander of Tralles wrote that, even though others criticise the use of amulets, it is not wrong to prescribe them when other types of treatment – ingesting something for example – fail. Alexander added that even Galen made use of amulets.⁴¹⁴ People were aware that physicians were not always to be trusted. As mentioned, the motivation for creating the do-it-yourself medicinal travel handbook *Medicina Plinii* was the risk of meeting an expensive charlatan.⁴¹⁵

Religious authority?

We know very little about the identity of amulet makers and this uncertainty extends to those who made or owned the handbooks that can still be studied today. The owners and makers may have been ‘freelancers’, and some of them may have been affiliated with

407 SM 5. Translation by Daniel, Maltomini, SM 5.

408 For this analysis see Faraone, *Transformation*, 254.

409 See for example: R. Gordon, ‘Managing problems: Choices and Solutions’ in: J. Rüpke, G. Woolf (eds.), *Religion in the Roman Empire* (Stuttgart 2021) 166-209: 195-195.

410 Scribonius Largus (for example: *Compositiones* 163); Dioscorides (for example: *Materia Medica* 2.47); Galen, *De simplicium medicamentorum* Kühn XI.858-861. Many medical authors, however, are very critical of the use of amulets: Galen, *De simplicium medicamentorum* Kühn XI.792-793. Nevertheless, they include them in their works, see also Soranus, *Gynaecia* 3.42.

411 Soranus, *Gynaecia* 4.13. Translation by Temkin, *Soranus’ Gynecology*, 195-195.

412 Galen, *De simplicium medicamentorum* Kühn XI.792-793.

413 Galen, *De simplicium medicamentorum* Kühn XI.859-861; Kühn XII.207.

414 Alexander of Tralles, *Therapeutica* P. 2.319.4-11 and P. 2.579-585.

415 *Medicina Plinii*, Prologue.

temples – textual amulets, in particular, suggest a relation with a religious scribal context. For most of the Graeco-Roman world there are no sources to support these suggestions.⁴¹⁶ The curse tablets found in the sanctuary of Sulis Minerva in Bath, however, show that the creation of religious objects could take place within a temple context.⁴¹⁷

For the case of Roman Egypt, it has been argued that writers of papyrus handbooks and makers of amulets belonged to a scribal culture with knowledge of different languages, such as demotic and Greek.⁴¹⁸ On this basis it has been proposed that scribes must have operated within a temple context.⁴¹⁹ It has, for example, been contended that the larger corpus of ‘magical’ papyri from Roman Egypt originated in temples.⁴²⁰ M. Escolano-Poveda argues that this relationship changed over time. She states that this connection was still strong in the third century CE, but that, from the fourth century onwards, ‘magical needs were probably taken care of by other individuals, who might be (...) related to the priests who composed and copied the texts in the previous centuries.’⁴²¹ R.G. Edmonds demonstrated that the papyri do not consider temples as the main source of authority. Although scribal knowledge may have been gained in a temple context, scribes were not necessarily connected to temples.⁴²² In Late Antiquity, as will be shown in chapter four, amulets were still made by religious specialists who could read and write, including priests, monks, and other members of the clergy related to Christian institutions.⁴²³

Handbooks as a source of knowledge

Although a wide variety of specialists was involved in making amulets, they could all make use of handbooks. Handbooks made and used by specialists have survived, for

416 On the role of Jewish magicians see: Lacerenza, ‘Jewish Magicians’.

417 Although McKie argues that only 167 of the 607 curses (from the Latin West) he studied contained evidence of specialist involvement. S. McKie, *Living and Cursing in the Roman West. Curse Tablets and Society* (London 2022) 27; Alvar Nuño, ‘Emotions and Reason’, 309: ‘as in the case of binding-curses, there existed semi-institutionalised pragmatic solutions which drew upon the authority of the dominant religious system of temples and shrines, which were available to individuals in need.’

418 The discussion on the relation with temple culture and the changes taking place in Roman Egypt still continues, see: M. Escolano-Poveda, *The Egyptian Priests of the Graeco-Roman Period. An Analysis on the Basis of the Egyptian and Graeco-Roman Literary and Paraliterary Sources* (Wiesbaden 2020) 131-132; on religious change in Egypt see for example: J.H. Dijkstra, *Philae and the End of Ancient Egyptian Religion: A Regional Study of Religious Transformation (298-642 CE)* (Leuven 2008) 14-23.

419 For other arguments, see for example: R.L. Gordon, ‘Getting it Right. Performative Images in Greco-Egyptian Magical Practice’ in: M. Arnhold, H.O. Maier, J. Rüpke (eds.), *Seeing the God. Image, Space, Performance, and Vision in the Religion of the Roman Empire* (Tübingen 2018) 101-123: 104-106; Betz, ‘Introduction’, xlvii-xlviii. For the discussion see amongst others: Edmonds, ‘Rhetoric of Authority’, 30-32, as well as 32-34 and 45-47.

420 Escolano-Poveda, *The Egyptian Priests*, 127-131.

421 Escolano-Poveda, *The Egyptian Priests*, 131-132.

422 R.G. Edmonds, ‘And You Will Be Amazed: The Rhetoric of Authority in the Greek Magical Papyri’, *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 21-22.1 (2020) 29-49: 45-49.

423 For example: Shenoute of Atripe, *Acephalous work A14* par. 255-262 (Orlandi 18-20); Caesarius of Arles, *Sermones* 50.1. Dickie, *Magic and Magicians*, 274-281.

instance the collections published in the *PGM/PDM/PCM* and medical handbooks such as the *Medicina Plinii* already referred to. In addition, many activated amulets show signs of having been copied from handbooks. Some amulets, for example, include a title or an instruction, probably accidentally.⁴²⁴ In a very early first-century BCE silver lamella the textual instruction to draw ‘the picture of the god’ was written on the object, instead of the required drawing.⁴²⁵ In a papyrus of the fifth or sixth century CE the phrase ‘a certain man or woman’ was copied instead of the name of the actual person for whom the amulet was made.⁴²⁶ The handbooks consist of collections of formularies for all sorts of ailments and anxieties. The authors often refer to the sources from which they copied their spells. E. Suárez de la Torre studied the *PGM* to conclude that the ‘library’ they used must have included oracular collections, hymnic literature, medical and botanical literature, and many other textual sources.⁴²⁷ The sources of the handbook makers had a wide geographical background and combine elements of many different religions.⁴²⁸ In addition, the medical handbooks show that copying of handbooks continued over long periods of time. In the fifth century, Marcellus of Bordeaux gathered knowledge from the third-century work *Medicina Plinii*, based on the work of Pliny (first century).⁴²⁹ The creators of amulets were thus able to make use of very diverse knowledge and combine different elements.

2.3.3 Personal contact with a specialist

While the handbooks provide much information on the processes of making amulets, the route from these handbooks to activated amulets is unclear.⁴³⁰ However, when a specialist was involved, they were an important factor in the impact the use of an amulet might have. Amulet users placed their trust in these individuals. In some cases, people may have approached specialists with a general request for ‘help’, but some must have asked specifically for amulets. The sources do not tell us how specialists made their diagnosis and decided what type of treatment or amulet was necessary, nor how much input the customer was able to give. Still, there must have been at least some form of contact between specialist and customer. Most of the sources have been written from the perspective of the specialist

424 See for example: P.Oxy. LXXXII 5308, creation of a drawing (text was copied instead of drawing made) and in GMA 31 the title of the instruction was accidentally copied. The use of handbooks is also apparent from almost identical texts such as GMA 11.

425 GMA 48. Translation by Kotansky, GMA 48, see page 255-256 for discussion.

426 SM 32. Translation by Daniel, Maltomini, SM 32, discussion on page 92.

427 E. Suárez de la Torre, ‘The Library of the Magician’ in: M. Piranomonte, F.M., Simon (eds.), *Contesti magici-Contextos mágicos. Atti del Convegno internazionale* (Rome 2013) 299-306.

428 Lacerenza, ‘Jewish Magicians’, 407. Often the argument is used that ‘foreign magic’ seemed to be extra efficacious and was therefore often included in handbooks. Escolano-Poveda, *The Egyptian Priests*, 317-318.

429 K. Brodersen, ‘Introduction’ in: Y. Hunt, *The Medicina Plinii. Latin Text, Translation, and Commentary* (London 2021) 1-10: 5-6.

430 Dieleman, *Priests, Tongues, and Rites*, 219.

(the handbooks) or from that of individuals criticising the use of amulets, which is why our knowledge of the users' perspective is deficient. In modern ideas about healing, the role of doctors is of central importance: their behaviour influences the experience of the patient and the efficacy of the treatment.⁴³¹ What was the influence of ancient specialists on the experience of the amulet user?

Ready-made or custom-made

After the decision to deal with a personal issue had been made, a specialist could be contacted. It is possible that the customer had already decided they wanted an amulet, but this may also have been established after the specialist's diagnosis.⁴³² Whether amulets were ready-made and bought as finished products or made to order to suit the needs of the customer is a matter of debate. In all likelihood both were possible.⁴³³ Amulets with generic protective or healing purposes may very well have been kept in stock to be used directly.⁴³⁴ The works of Pliny the Elder and Marcellus of Bordeaux contain instructions for collecting or preparing certain ingredients for amulets (both plant- and animal-based) to be stored and used when needed: 'For this purpose they [mulberry buds] are stored away and kept.'⁴³⁵ The ingredients for this amulet would have been kept in the medicine cabinet of the specialist.⁴³⁶

On the other hand there were the personalised amulets. The handbooks show that specialists had a wide variety of spells and formularies at their disposal. They could pick and adjust instructions for every individual situation. In Oxyrhynchus, three fever amulets datable to the fourth century were written by the same specialist for three different customers. The texts are very similar, suggesting the use of a handbook formula to which the names could just be added: 'Truly guard and protect Aria' and 'Guard and protect

431 See for example: D.E. Moerman, *Meaning, Medicine, and the "Placebo Effect"* (Cambridge 2002) 32-46; J.W. Welch, 'Ritual in Western Medicine and Its Role in Placebo Healing', *Journal of Religion and Health* 42.1 (2003) 21-33. In alternative medicine: T. Kaptchuk, 'The Placebo Effect in Alternative Medicine: Can the Performance of a Healing Ritual have Clinical Significance?', *Annals of Internal Medicine* 136.11 (2002) 817-825. See also: N.H. Korsvoll, 'Introduction: Using Placebo Research to Explore Belief and Healing in Late Antiquity', *Trends in Classics* 13.1 (2021) 1-20: 9-13.

432 D. Frankfurter, 'The Threat of Headless Beings: Constructing the Demonic in Christian Egypt' in: M. Ostling (ed.), *Fairies, Demons, and Nature Spirits. 'Small Gods' at the Margins of Christendom* (London 2018) 57-78: 61-62.

433 Gordon, 'Managing Problems', 195-196.

434 M.W. Zellmann-Rohrer, E.O.D. Love, *Traditions in Transmission. The Medical and Magical Texts of a Fourth-Century Greek and Coptic Codex (Michigan Ms. 136) in Context* (Berlin/Boston 2022) 71-72.

435 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 23.137-138. Translation by Jones, *Pliny, Books 20-23*, 506-507. See also: Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 2.7, 8.24, 28.51, 28.52; Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 23.137-138.

436 Other examples: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 21.166 and Marcellus, *De Medicamentis*, 2.7, 8.24, 28.51, 28.52. Another possible example of 'stock' of a ritual specialist is the chest found in Pompeii with many seemingly religious objects, among which perhaps amulets. Interpreted as the stock of a religious specialist by Gordon, 'Managing Problems', 195.

Eulogia'.⁴³⁷ The sentences that follow are similar and refer to protection against fever: 'from the one-day chill and from the daily chill and from the nightly chill and from the mild fever.'⁴³⁸ The third amulet, however, is twice as long. It not only asks to 'guard and protect Eulogia' against fever, but also against 'plague attack, madness, evil convulsion', and subsequently includes a variety of adjurations and prayers.⁴³⁹ This suggests that there was some room for individual input and adaptation of the handbook text.⁴⁴⁰ In addition, highly personalized textual amulets have been found. Although these may have been created with the help of handbooks, they also strongly reflect the customer's input. One example is an amulet made for Proclus to be used during a lawsuit, which contained names of the parties involved: 'give favor, glory, victory to Proclus whom Salvina bore, before Diogenianus the *dux* of Bostra in Arabia; before Pelagius the *assessor*'.⁴⁴¹

Possessing a unique, personalised amulet must have had an impact on the experiences of the user. Still, most amulets (also) contain standard formularies. This raises the question whether personalisation was at all necessary. The specialists knew best and used the most authoritative phrases known to them to address the supernatural – and these were often formulaic.

Personal ritual contact

Relationships between specialists and customers could vary widely – from very limited to very intensive. When personal contact was quite intensive, the specialist could have a big impact. In communicating their needs and problems, the customer may have experienced a special connection or relationship with the ritual specialist, the person they placed their faith in. In this relationship, users could gain knowledge about the object they were going to use and form their expectations.⁴⁴²

In some cases, the role of the specialist went much further than making the amulet. As R. Gordon argues, the 'crucial moment' of an ancient healing event 'is the point at which the practitioner intervenes to create a social situation between him- or herself, the patient and the disorder.'⁴⁴³ If we apply this to amulets, this moment of intervention is the attachment of the object to the body of the customer or the ritual that was performed when the amulet was placed at a door or window.⁴⁴⁴ One example is the performance of

437 PGM P5a. Translation by Marvin Meyer, ACM 15, 39-40. P. Oxy. LXXXII 5307. Translation by F. Maltomini, P. Oxy. LXXXII 5307, 91.

438 PGM P5a. Translation by Marvin Meyer, ACM 15, 39-40.

439 P. Oxy. LXXXII 5306. Translation by F. Maltomini, P. Oxy. 82 5306, 79.

440 P. Oxy. LXXXII 5306 and 5307; PGM P5a.

441 GMA 58. Translation by Kotansky, GMA 58.

442 See for example, Gordon, 'From Substances to Texts', specifically on rhizotomists.

443 R. Gordon, 'The Healing Event in Graeco-Roman Folk-Medicine' in: P.H.J. van der Eijk, H.F.J. Horstmanshoff, P.H. Schrijvers (eds.), *Ancient Medicine in its Socio-Cultural Context: Papers Read at the Congress held at Leiden University, 13-15 April 1992*, Vol. 2 (Amsterdam 1995) 363-376: 366.

444 For example: ritual during an attack of epilepsy in Alexander of Tralles, *Therapeutica* P. 1.561.3-9.

a speech act while attaching the amulet. Pliny writes: ‘the patient himself should tie on himself (*adligari*) *heliotropium* (...) and to say in prayer that he will untie the knots only when the fever has left him’.⁴⁴⁵ Some instructions prescribe the repetition of the ritual for the next few days.⁴⁴⁶ In one of his instructions, Marcellus of Bordeaux describes how a Greek text for a sore throat should be written down and attached to the neck of the patient. The instruction stresses that no third party be allowed to come near the writings, thus adding to the special bond between the only two people who knew the text: the specialist and patient.⁴⁴⁷ A.M. Luijendijk discusses the role of the specialist in performing rituals surrounding early amulets with Christian elements. She suggests that amulets may have been read aloud by the specialist, who would make the sign of the cross every time a cross was drawn on the amulet.⁴⁴⁸

The specialist could thus be in close contact with the customer while installing or applying the object, but the opposite could also be true, for example when an amulet was bought from stock. Financial considerations probably played a role here.⁴⁴⁹ In addition, according to several instructions, especially for fever, there should be no contact with the specialist for a specific number of days.⁴⁵⁰ According to other instructions, the object had to be attached to the customer without their knowledge.⁴⁵¹ Being in close contact with a specialist is thus not a given in amulet use, and the experience of the customer-specialist relation will have differed from case to case.

The use of handbooks: authority and marketing

Apart from the very short instructions for making an amulet and the rituals accompanying their use, the handbooks often contain comments on their sources. Pliny for example uses the following phrases: ‘Masurius tells us’, ‘Caecilius has told us’, ‘Chrysippus the philosopher has told us [about a fever amulet made from an animal] but what the animal is Chrysippus has left no account, and I have met nobody who knew. Yet a statement

445 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 22.61. Translation by Jones, *Pliny, Books 20-23*, 312-313. See also: Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 20.66. Applying oil to the skin of the patient as well: GEMF 16.1098-1104. Giving a drink: Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 28.52. Giving a pill, Alexander of Tralles, *Therapeutica* P. 1.571.16-19.

446 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 24.180-181; Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 12.48, 28.20.

447 Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 15.89. Similar in an instruction where animal parts were used as amulet and should not be touched by a third party: Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 2.7.

448 Luijendijk, ‘Gospel Amulet for Joannia’, 421.

449 As the PGM instructions for example include both very expensive and more budget friendly ingredients: LiDonnici, ‘Recipe Ingredients’, 90-91.

450 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.107, 30.100-101, 32.113.

451 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 20.6; *Medicina Plinii* III 16. See also: Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 28.52.

made by so great an authority it was necessary to mention.⁴⁵² Similarities in handbook instructions show that ancient authors often copied each other or used the same source. The same instruction for an epilepsy amulet made with a white and a black stone found inside a swallow or in a swallow's nest appears in Dioscorides, Pliny, *Medicina Plinii*, Alexander of Tralles, and Marcellus of Bordeaux (although in the latter as a remedy for eye problems and fever).⁴⁵³ While the similarities are obvious, these authors do not refer to each other.⁴⁵⁴ Apparently, only a few names were worth mentioning. Still, by frequent reference to authoritative sources, handbook composers indicated that they were aware of and combined the best available knowledge.

Apart from stressing the authority of their predecessors, handbook composers also highlight the popularity and efficacy of their spells. Pliny describes an amulet for urinary complaints as 'wonderfully famous as a remedy',⁴⁵⁵ a colic remedy as 'well known to be excellent for colic',⁴⁵⁶ and an epilepsy amulet as 'highly praised'.⁴⁵⁷ Similarly, GEMF 15.314-399, a ring worn to achieve success carries the following text: 'The world has nothing greater than this (ring)'.⁴⁵⁸ The efficacy of the spell is often mentioned. GEMF 31.263-276 claims: 'For it is the greatest protective charm for the rite so that you fear nothing'.⁴⁵⁹ In some instructions the authors note the amulet's effectiveness; it will quickly or immediately relieve pain or other symptoms.⁴⁶⁰ Galen describes how he tested some amulets himself and goes on to rationalise their effect to make them fit his understanding of the medical world.⁴⁶¹ Alexander of Tralles prescribes fever amulets he says to have used frequently.⁴⁶²

While the handbooks contain many references to authority and efficacy, it remains

452 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.142 translation by Jones, *Pliny, Books 28-32*, 100-101; 29.85 translation by Jones, *Pliny, Books 28-32*, 238-239; 30.103-104 translation by Jones, *Pliny, Books 28-32*, 344-345.

453 Dioscorides, *Materia Medica* 2.56; Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 30.91-92; *Medicina Plinii* III 21.2 and 21.3; Alexander of Tralles, *Therapeutica* P. 1.561.3-9; Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 8.45.

454 For example: plant from the head of a statue for headache: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 24.170; *Medicina Plinii* I 1.4; Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 1.43 and 2.20-21. Horse teeth for teething babies: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.258; *Medicina Plinii* I 14.1, Quintus Serenus, *Liber Medicinalis* 1031-1034.

455 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.217. Translation by Jones, *Pliny, Books 28-32*, 146-147.

456 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 30.63. Translation by Jones, *Pliny, Books 28-32*, 318-319.

457 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 30.92. Translation by Jones, *Pliny, Books 28-32*, 336-337.

458 Translation by P. Sarischouli in GEMF.

459 Translation by C.A. Faraone, A. Nodar, S. Torallas Tovar in GEMF. See also: greatness in Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 10.81 and 21.8; it always works in Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 29.133.

460 'Quick' in Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 15.108, 'automatically' in Dioscorides, *Materia Medica* 3.12.2; 'immediately' in Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 24.170. See also: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 30.26, 30.104; Dioscorides, *Materia Medica* 4.8.2.

461 See for example: Galen, *De simplicium medicamentorum* Kühn XII.207; Kühn XI.859-861. D. Gourevitch, 'Popular Medicines and Practices in Galen' in: W.V. Harris (ed.), *Popular Medicine in Graeco-Roman Antiquity: Explorations* (Leiden 2016) 251-271: 268.

462 Alexander of Tralles, *De Febris* P. 1.407.4-7 and P.1.437.1-5. Marcellus of Bordeaux on a tried and tested amulet: *De Medicamentis* 3.2.

debatable whether the intended readership included buyers of amulets. Since the handbooks themselves were used by the specialists and not by the prospective customers, it could be argued that the marketing language did not reach the latter. M. Escolano-Poveda and K.A. Fraser stress the secrecy of the Greek-Egyptian handbook collections and the fact that they were made and read by ritual specialists only. They argue that the formularies stressing authority or efficacy cannot have been intended for an external readership. These elements were useful for the specialists as ‘matters of self-definition’⁴⁶³ and to strengthen their expertise (in their dealings with the supernatural world).⁴⁶⁴ In a parallel argument relating to curse tablets, R. Gordon states that the formularies written on objects were never intended to be read by anyone outside from the supernatural world since the objects were folded and subsequently deposited.⁴⁶⁵ Innovations in the use of texts (and images) were not intended to convince the clientele, but to influence the supernatural world. Gordon describes this as ‘personal re-assurance’ of the specialist and as a constant matter of ‘how can I most effectively influence my addressee?’ (i.e. the supernatural).⁴⁶⁶ However, unlike Escolano-Poveda and Fraser, Gordon is not referring to the marketing language, but to texts on rolled up or folded amulets put in a container, which were likely never opened.⁴⁶⁷

These observations leave open the possibility that specialists advertised their expertise as a marketing strategy. After all, even if the handbooks were only meant to be read by the specialists, why would their language not have been used in the contact with a customer? In sources criticising amulet use, the persuasive language of the specialist is often included in the caricatures of amulet makers.⁴⁶⁸ The bishop Caeasarius of Arles mentions the references to the objects’ power amulet makers (clerics) made when trying to sell them. According to him, prospective users were ‘told [by clerics] that the phylacteries (*filacteria*) contain holy facts and divine lessons.’⁴⁶⁹ In helping their customers find the right remedy for their ailment or the right solution for their problem, specialists are likely to have highlighted their familiarity with authoritative sources and efficacious spells.

In the end, the authoritative arguments probably had an impact on those looking for help. Marketing strategies would have been applied by specialists to convince people to

463 K.A. Fraser, ‘Roman Antiquity. The Imperial Period’ in: D.J. Collins (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Magic and Witchcraft in the West* (Cambridge 2015) 115-147: 121, see 120-122.

464 Escolano-Poveda, *The Egyptian Priests*, 130-132.

465 Escolano-Poveda, *The Egyptian Priest*, 130.

466 R. Gordon, ‘Shaping the Text. Innovation and Authority in Graeco-Egyptian Malign Magic’, *Kykeon. Studies in Honour of H.S. Versnel* 142 (2002) 69-111: 76, 97. In this study, the innovations in the use of text are not studied in detail, because much of the earlier research investigates the theme, see for example, Faraone, *Vanishing Acts*.

467 As is discussed in chapter three in 3.3.1 on the experience of visibility.

468 In Pliny describing the lying Magi for example: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.100; Shenoute of Atripe, *Acephalous work A14* par. 255-262 (Orlandi 18-20); selling of objects: John Chrysostom, *In epistulam ad Colossenses* 8.5 (PG 62.357-359); John Chrysostom, *Adversus Iudaeos* 8.5 (PG 48.935); *Medicini Plinii*, Prologue.

469 Caesarius of Arles, *Sermones* 50.1. Translation by Mueller, *Volume I*, 253-254.

make use of their services or to assist them in choosing a specific ritual or object.⁴⁷⁰ A ritual specialist had to ‘win over his audience in a competitive market’.⁴⁷¹ J. Dieleman distinguishes possible elements of persuasion in the language of the priests (stressing the origin, authenticity, and efficacy of a spell) and stresses that these elements would only have been effective as a marketing strategy, directly or indirectly, if the values attached to them were widely shared within the intended group of readers.⁴⁷² To have an effect, the words must have resonated with the prospective users and impacted them, increasing their faith in the specialist and creating a sense of security. The specialist would bring authority and trust to the experiences of amulet use.

It seems possible to conclude that a ritual specialist impacted the experiences of the amulet user, by providing knowledge and creating expectations as well as by inspiring trust. Nevertheless, every amulet experience will have been different.

2.4 THE EFFICACY OF AMULETS: INSTALLING THE OBJECT IN SIGNIFICANT LOCATIONS

After an amulet was acquired, it had to be placed at the designated location. This installation marked the start of the object’s use and operation. In this section the relationship between amulet and location will be analysed to understand what the users expected the object to do. Where was it installed and how could it function within its relationship with the location? Users of amulets expected to be healed, protected (to be safe) and/or enhanced (receive charisma or victory). The object would have the agency to perform these tasks. But how could a small object worn around the neck protect the whole body and how could an object on a stick protect an entire vineyard?

2.4.1 Amulets and locations

In both Greek and Latin amulets are described with words that can be translated as ‘what is attached around’, or ‘tied-on object’ (Greek: *περίπτον* and Latin: *ligatura*).⁴⁷³ Especially in instructions for amulets worn on the body, wearing or tying the object is one of the last steps in setting the operation in motion.⁴⁷⁴ As I mentioned earlier, Greek vases carry images of men and women wearing threads or ribbons around various body parts. Scholars explain the

470 R.G. Edmonds, *Drawing Down the Moon: Magic in the Ancient Greco-Roman World* (Princeton 2019) 183-184. On 184: ‘so the rhetoric of the performance must serve to persuade that audience that the performer has the proper authority to perform the rite.’

471 Edmonds, ‘Rhetoric of Authority’, 42.

472 Dieleman, *Priests and Tongues*, 203-204, 254-261.

473 For example: Greek: *περίαμμον*, *περίπτον*, Latin: *ligamentum*, *ligatura*, *alligatura*.

474 For example, in the collection of healing amulets in *PGM VII*. 197-198, 206-207, 213-214, 218-219.

tying and wearing of these threads as acts with amuletic purposes.⁴⁷⁵ Knotting was believed to be a powerful ritual act, binding the forces in play.⁴⁷⁶ PGM VII. 209-210, for example, describes the tying of knots in a cord for healing purposes.⁴⁷⁷ As early as 1910, Deubner wrote about tying amulets to the body, describing how ribbons could enclose certain body parts to protect them. He uses the following phrase to explain their functioning: 'The evil cannot step over the magic boundary.'⁴⁷⁸ Similarly, Siebert argues that a *licium*, a thread, could 'close off' and in this way ward off evil.⁴⁷⁹ Amulets supposed to act for the human body, were attached to it. By tying the object to the body, its force was connected to the designated location. Amulets were also attached to larger locations such as houses and arable land. After their installation, amulets were believed to affect the locations in question. A text written on a late antique amulet states: 'Do not permit them [evil things] ever to visit (...) for approximately two hundred miles around'.⁴⁸⁰

Amulets thus had a special relation with the location they were attached to. They were expected to provide protection, healing or other benefits to this space. This does not mean that amulets could be placed at any spot within this location; the exact place for the amulet seems to have been chosen with great care. Putting amulets on significant boundary locations enabled their users to demarcate an area and create a special space, marked by the amulet as protected or favoured by the supernatural. Examining the experience of danger and the approaches to space provide a deeper understanding of this practice.

2.4.2 Marking religious space

Ancient Greek and Roman religion knew many rituals to mark a space for religious reasons.⁴⁸¹ The ritual of *circumambulatio* is an obvious example. This ritual involved walking in a circle around a sacred object, place or person, or walking in a circle while carrying a sacred object. The performance of this ritual created a boundary: what was in the circle was set apart from what was outside it.⁴⁸² Another example of such a ritual is the

475 Wolters, 'Faden und Knoten'; Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets*, 3 – although he argues that in the combination of an object and a cord, the encircling cord is less important. Tying of ribbons also in: Faraone, *Transformation*, 35-40.

476 F. Graf, 'Knots', *Brill's New Pauly Online*, last accessed September 2025.

477 It is unclear if the object was used as an amulet. For knotting in ancient Egypt see: W. Wendrich, 'Entangled, Connected or Protected? The Power of Knots and Knotting in Ancient Egypt' in: K. Szpakowska (ed.), *Through a Glass Darkly. Magic, Dreams and Prophecy in Ancient Egypt* (Swansea 2006) 243-270.

478 Deubner, 'Charms (Greek)', 436.

479 A.V. Siebert, 'Licum', *Brill's New Pauly Online*, last accessed September 2025.

480 ACM 64. Translation by R. Smith in ACM, nr. 64.

481 F.G. Naerebout, 'Territorialität und griechische Religion - die aufgeteilte Landschaft' in: E. Olshausen, V. Sauer (eds.), *Die Landschaft und die Religion. Stuttgarter Kolloquium zur Historischen Geographie des Altertums 9, 2005* (Stuttgart 2009) 191-213.

482 D.L. Eck, 'Circumambulation' in: M. Eliade (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Religion* III (New York 1987) 509-511; P. Larson, 'Circumambulation' in: D.A. Leeming, K. Madden, S. Marlan (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Psychology and Religion* (Boston 2010) 153.

Roman *lustratio*, which could be performed around a city,⁴⁸³ around a newborn,⁴⁸⁴ or around houses.⁴⁸⁵ Space could also be marked by drawing circles. In instructions for making objects similar to amulets, circles were for example drawn around plants waiting to be picked or around a body part that was hurt.⁴⁸⁶ Drawing circles or demarcating space in general is not exclusive to Greek and Roman religion. C. Theis shows that it is an transcultural phenomenon that can be traced back to the second millennium BCE, for example in Egypt and Mesopotamia.⁴⁸⁷ H.S. Versnel attributes three functions to the various *lustratio* rituals: to purify, to protect, and to unite what was encircled.⁴⁸⁸ Scholars often connect the ritual *lustratio* with purification.⁴⁸⁹ Versnel, however, argues that ‘the circumambulation draws a magic circle that keeps out disaster’,⁴⁹⁰ and that separation of ‘the inner space’ from the ‘chaotic world outside the circle’ creates unity within.⁴⁹¹

The ritual marking of space did not always involve creating perfect or symbolic circles. Pliny, for example, describes various objects to be placed on arable land in order to protect its crops. To prevent birds damaging the harvest for example, a certain plant had to be buried on the four corners of the field.⁴⁹² Together the plants demarcated and ‘encircled’ the location. In another ritual a toad had to be carried around the field (a circumambulation), which subsequently had to be buried in the centre.⁴⁹³ In some cases, especially larger open locations, a single object was placed in the centre. Perhaps for practical reasons: a circumambulation could still take place, but only one object was needed to cover a wide

483 G. Baudy, ‘Lustratio’, *Brill’s New Pauly Online*, last accessed September 2025. For the *pomerium* as circle around the city, see S. Stevens, *City Boundaries and Urban Development in Roman Italy* (Leuven 2017) 13–60.

484 The name day is called *Dies Lustricus*. See: Macrobius, *Saturnalia* 1.16.36.

485 Going around houses to protect against a plague in IGR IV 1498, see Faraone, *Talismans and Trojan Horses*, 61–64.

486 For example: Scribonius Largus, *Compositiones* 163; Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 22.135; 34.151.

487 C. Theis, ‘Präsenz und (Un-)Sichtbarkeit magischer Grenzen’ in: W.E. Keil, *et al.* (eds.), *Zeichentragende Artefakte im sakralen Raum. Zwischen Präsenz und Unsichtbarkeit* (Berlin/Boston 2018) 55–69; for example, there are many amulets with an image of the Egyptian Ouroboros, a snake biting its own tail, thus creating a circle; see in *PGM* VII. 579–590 or Dasen, ‘Healing Images’, 181. For the relationship between the idea of encircling in the context of healing and purification in ancient Egyptian religion see: R.K. Ritner, *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice* (Chicago 2008) see 57n.266 and 57–67. The relation with circles is still present in medieval amulets, see: Skemer, *Binding Words*, 138–141 focusing on the outward, protective function of textual body amulets.

488 H.S. Versnel, ‘Sacrificium Lustrale: The Death of Mettius Fufetius (Livy I, 28). Studies in Roman Lustration-Ritual I’, *Mededelingen van het Nederlands Instituut te Rome* 37 (1975) 97–116: 101–103.

489 It has often been discussed what the original purpose was: purification or apotropaism. See for example: L. Deubner, ‘Lustrum’, *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft* 16 (1913) 127–136.

490 Versnel, ‘Sacrificium Lustrale’, 101.

491 Versnel, ‘Sacrificium Lustrale’, 103.

492 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 18.160.

493 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 18.158 (to protect against damage by sparrows or worms), 23.28 (use of plants to demarcate a location), 28.266–267 (a larger ritual, which included the sprinkling of wolfblood around the borders of the field).

area without obvious point of entry.⁴⁹⁴ As amulets were believed to radiate their power, one object would be deemed sufficient to cover the whole area.⁴⁹⁵

In yet another ritual described by Pliny, a bat had to be carried around a house or a sheepfold (circumambulation). Following this, the bat had to be fastened to the window or threshold.⁴⁹⁶ Pliny writes, ‘if carried alive three times round the house and then fastened head downwards through the window, it acts as a talisman (*amuletum*).’⁴⁹⁷ In this case, the object is placed at an opening, a liminal location where danger could enter. By closing off this specific spot, the whole space was closed off. Attaching objects to specific boundary locations was not uncommon in the ancient world. Wilburn discusses the relation between locations and the use of ritual safeguards, arguing that built structures ‘remained porous – people and animals, as well as spirits, ghosts, and demons, could enter the structure at various points’. At these points ritual safeguards were used to close the area.⁴⁹⁸ In a house, exterior walls created a boundary between inside and outside, but evil could enter through doorways and windows.⁴⁹⁹ By placing amulets at the door opening or by writing protective amuletic inscriptions on the lintel or one of the doorposts, the house was closed off and controlled.⁵⁰⁰ Ancient literary sources refer to protective images of gods (for instance Hecate, Hermes, Apollo, Hercules, Priapus, and the Lares) being placed near doors, gates, crossroads, and edges of farmland – all border locations.⁵⁰¹ Although such statues are not often found in situ at archaeological sites, niches near gates and doors, and inscribed statue bases represent these practices.⁵⁰²

494 PCM I 11, p. 4 describes doors and exits as liminal places where amulets were needed, but for the courtyard it specifically mentions that it had to be protected from the centre.

495 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 18.294 (another toad in the centre of the field), 19.180 (a crab).

496 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 29.82–83.

497 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 29.82–83. Translation by Jones, *Pliny, Books 28–32*, 236–237.

498 For archaeological examples: Wilburn, ‘Building Ritual Agency’, 557. For an earlier discussion of a case study see for example: Wilburn, ‘Archaeology of Ritual’, 108–111. Other scholars argue the same for the door, but in his 2019 paper, Wilburn includes ritual safeguards for the roof, foundation etc. For protection at openings in walls see also: K.D. Bowes, ‘At home’ in: R. Raja, J. Rüpke (eds.), *A companion to the Archaeology of Religion in the Ancient World* (Chichester 2015) 209–219: 214.

499 Wilburn, ‘Building Ritual Agency’, 572–573.

500 For rituals of protection at the house door: Ogle, ‘The House-Door’, for a possible protection of windows: A. Parker, ‘“The Bells! The Bells!” Approaching Tintinnabula in Roman Britain and Beyond’ in: A. Parker, S. McKie (eds.), *Material Approaches to Roman Magic. Occult Objects and Supernatural Substances* (Oxford 2018) 57–68; for possible protection of entrances with power objects: Wilburn, ‘Archaeology of Ritual’, esp. 110. Wilburn, ‘Building Ritual Agency’, 585–588.

501 Wilburn, ‘Building Ritual Agency’, 582. For more on the phenomenon of guardian statues see: Faraone, *Talismans and Trojan Horses*; S. Iles Johnston, ‘Gate, Deities Associated With’, *Brill’s New Pauly Online*, last accessed September 2025; T. Heinze, ‘Priapus’, *Brill’s New Pauly Online*, last accessed September 2025. See for example: Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca Historica*, 4.6.4; Ogle, ‘The House-Door’, 261–263.

502 Niche in gate: the niche in the Porta Marina in Pompeii. Statue base for protective statue of Apollo for example: IGR IV 1498. Lack of archaeological evidence; Faraone, *Talismans and Trojan Horses*, 8–9; Wilburn, ‘Building Ritual Agency’, 582. Archaeological evidence is, however, given by Stevens, *City Boundaries*, 66–68. This is again a much broader phenomenon, not just for Greek and Roman religion.

As C.A. Faraone observed in a book published in 1992: ‘Personal amulets, prophylactic rings, knotted cords, and inscribed metal tablets represent only the narrowest of a series of concentric circles of protection that they [the Greeks] erected around themselves.’⁵⁰³ In 2018 he used the phrase ‘lines of defense’ to describe the areas amulets were believed to be able to affect.⁵⁰⁴ Similar to the rituals discussed above, amulets also marked the designated area by radiating their power over it. Using amulets did not always mean creating actual circles; amulets were supposed to act within the concept of setting an area apart with ritual processes.

2.4.3 Amulets marking the boundary between inside and outside

The use of amulets to demarcate an inside and an outside area reflects ancient ideas about disease and danger. Korsvoll describes how ancient individuals, in his words, ‘externalised’ disease: ‘To cope with, avoid, or overcome sickness or adversity, ancient sources typically identify the disease or its symptoms as some form of agent to be opposed and fought.’⁵⁰⁵ Ghosts, demons, personified disease or disease in general were understood as external powers that could enter a body and influence its well-being, even its behaviour.⁵⁰⁶ These external powers had to be expelled or warded off.⁵⁰⁷ High-risk locations, such as openings in houses, were closed off with amulets to make sure that ‘sinister forces’ could not enter.⁵⁰⁸ A very late Coptic text mentions locations where an amulet might be needed. Most of these are boundary locations: ‘hidden in its foundations, or in its extended places, or in its entrance or in its exit, or in the door, or in the window.’⁵⁰⁹

In the ancient world, the body was understood as permeable and it was believed that external evil could enter especially through the facial orifices.⁵¹⁰ Faraone stresses that the throat, where both food and air enter, is the main entrance to the body.⁵¹¹ This explains why the neck was the most popular location for placing amulets.⁵¹² Disease and danger were not only seen as coming from ‘outside’ (‘externalised’), but also often believed to be caused by

503 Faraone, *Talismans and Trojan Horses*, 3.

504 Faraone, *Transformation*, 244.

505 Korsvoll, ‘Using Placebo Research’, 9.

506 Korsvoll, ‘Using Placebo Research’, 9; Rask, *Personal Experience*, 96-104.

507 Korsvoll, ‘Using Placebo Research’, 9.

508 Wilburn, ‘Building Ritual Agency’, in general, but see 556 and 593.

509 PCM I 11, p. 4. Translation by Dosoo, Love and Preininger, *PCM*, 117.

510 For medical theories on the permeability of the body: H. King, J. Toner, ‘Medicine and the Senses: Humors, Potions, and Spells’ in: J. Toner (ed.), *A Cultural History of the Senses in Antiquity* (London 2014) 139-161: 140. See also: Dasen, ‘Healing Images’, 178; Wilburn, ‘Building Ritual Agency’, 556.

511 Faraone, *Transformation*, 249; Faraone, ‘Confronting Evil at the Boundaries’, 9.

512 For example, see the many Roman and Etruscan statues of boys wearing *bullae* and PGM VII. 206-207. Faraone, however, proposes a development in the believed functioning of body amulets, from apotropaic shield before the imperial period, towards the amulet as a guardian of the permeable body after. As the latter is the focus of this book, this difference is not further analysed. Faraone, ‘Confronting Evil at the Boundaries’, 9.

supernatural forces, such as demons or the evil eye, and to be present in the air. The amulet in *PGM* P3, for example, had to protect a house from ‘bewitchment of spirits of the air and human (evil) eye’.⁵¹³ With a simple jealous glance an individual could cause damage, as the glance was believed to ‘shoot’ evil into the air.⁵¹⁴ Heliodorus (third to fourth century) describes how one might get sick when evil carried through the air entered the body through the facial openings.⁵¹⁵ Some textual amulets list the lingering dangers. An amulet with Christian elements from Egypt, *PGM* P13, contains the following catalogue of external threats: ‘The principalities and powers and cosmic rulers of darkness, or an unclean spirit, or fall of a demon at noontide, or chill, or fever, or ague, or harm from people or powers of the adversary.’⁵¹⁶ Mihálykó argues, that such lists of dangers were created ‘as a means of gaining control over them.’⁵¹⁷ Knowing that the amulet would take care of all these dangers might create a sense of control.⁵¹⁸

In all these cases, amulets were used to close off and control locations. With the help of amulets, a boundary was created to demarcate a safe space within the dangerous, chaotic world, whether the amulet was worn around the neck, placed near a door, or installed at another liminal location.⁵¹⁹ More can be said about how different kinds of amulets were believed to act at this boundary. As has been discussed above, from a functional point of view, amulets can be grouped into three categories: healing, protection, and attracting benefits. These three categories each functioned in their own way in relation to space.

Protective amulets were placed on significant locations to mark the space where they were supposed to have an effect. A sixth-century papyrus amulet concerns the door of a house: ‘The might of our God prevailed, and the Lord lighted upon the entrance and didn’t permit to the malicious one to come into.’⁵²⁰ Many house amulets were placed at doors or windows, places where danger lingered, waiting to enter.⁵²¹ The amulets at the openings closed off the built structure, in this way providing protection for the house and everyone

513 Translation by Marvin Meyer in ACM, nr. 26.

514 See for example Wilburn, ‘Archaeology of Ritual’, 109.

515 Heliodorus, *Æthiopica* 3.7.

516 As Mihálykó argues this practice was based on earlier Egyptian traditions *PGM* P13. Translation by A.T. Mihálykó, ‘Christ and Charon: *PGM* P13 Reconsidered’, *Symbolae Osloenses* 89.1 (2015) 183-209: 187-188.

517 Mihálykó, ‘Christ and Charon’, 199.

518 See also *GMA* 52 for example. On lists and control see also: D. Frankfurter, ‘Master-Demons, Local Spirits, and Demonology in the Roman Mediterranean World: An Afterword to Rita Lucarelli’, *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions* 11 (2011) 126-131: 129.

519 For doors and windows as liminal places see for example: Wilburn, ‘Building Ritual Agency’, 572-573; Parker, ‘Approaching Tintinnabula’, 65.

520 *PGM* P2a, many thanks to dr. Efstathia Dionysopoulou for help with the English translation.

521 Wilburn, ‘Building Ritual Agency’; E.M. van Opstall, ‘General Introduction’ in: E.M. van Opstall (ed.), *Sacred Thresholds: The Door to the Sanctuary in Late Antiquity* (Leiden 2018) 1-27; D.A. Frese, *The City Gate in Ancient Israël and her Neighbours* (Leiden 2019); S. Iles Johnston, ‘Crossroads’, *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 88 (1991) 217-224.

living in it. Pliny the Elder writes: ‘They say that noxious charms cannot enter, or at least cannot harm, homes where a star-fish, smeared with the blood of a fox, has been fastened to the upper lintel or to the door.’⁵²² The same is the case for amulets tied around human bodies. Body amulets were often worn on the neck, in this way preventing danger from entering through the facial orifices to affect other parts of the body.⁵²³ Apotropaic imagery plays a large role in the efficacy of protective amulets. Phalli, medusa/gorgon frontal faces or imagery involving the evil eye all worked to ward off evil.⁵²⁴ The protective amulet was thus expected to act as a shield or fence.

A second group of amulets were used for healing. Amulets were believed to heal in various ways. They might put an end to the effects of a disease, make the disease disappear, or force the disease out and put it to flight.⁵²⁵ In the textual amulets, for example, we read about the removal of fever,⁵²⁶ the turning away of headache⁵²⁷ or the expelling of epilepsy.⁵²⁸ The illness was believed to leave the inside area marked by the amulet, because the amulet precluded its presence in this area. In relation to healing, the object often had to be tied around the affected area, for example a scorpion sting.⁵²⁹ Amulets could also act preventively in relation to healing, which makes it difficult to draw a clear line between ‘healing’ and ‘protective’ amulets. Marcellus of Bordeaux describes an amulet that could both heal an ailment and prevent its occurrence.⁵³⁰ Since, the body was seen as permeable, the amulet functioned as a ‘gatekeeper’ for the area it marked, forcing evil out and preventing it from entering.⁵³¹

While the expelling powers of amulets were generally called upon in relation to the human body, they could also be harnessed for larger structures. One example is the use of amulets to drive snakes from a house.⁵³² Scholars often combine ideas about the healing function of amulets with the notion of exorcism. This relationship will be further discussed in chapter four, because the connection between amulets and exorcism became more prominent in Late Antiquity.⁵³³

522 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 32.44. Translation by Jones, *Pliny, Books 28-32*, 490-491. Other protective rituals focusing on the door in Pliny are for example: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 20.101, 28.86, 28.135, 28.142, 29.30, 29.67, 30.52, 30.82, 32.44.

523 On the dangers of opening the mouth see for example: Toner, ‘Sensing the Ancient Past’, 10.

524 Faraone, *Transformation*, 54-78.

525 See Faraone, *Transformation*, 187-190, 208-217. On forcing: Kotansky, ‘Greek Exorcistic Amulets’.

526 P.Oxy. LXXXII 5308; *PGM* P10.

527 R.D. Kotansky, ‘An Early Christian Gold Lamella for Headache’ in: P. Mirecki, M.W. Meyer (eds.), *Magic and Ritual in the Ancient World* (2002) 37-46.

528 Kotansky, *GMA* 57, 327.

529 For example, *PGM* VII. 193-196. Placing the amulet on the area infected by a scorpion sting. The importance of physical contact is stressed by some scholars, see for example, Dasen, ‘Personal Agency’, 128. For the locations of amulets in relation to healing see also, Faraone, *Transformation*, 247-251.

530 Marcellus, *De Medicamentis*, 15.67.

531 On the permeability of the face: Toner, ‘Sensing the Ancient Past’, 10.

532 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 25.101-102.

533 See part 4.3C.

A third group of amulets were those providing benefits. Amulets belonging to this group would direct supernatural powers to the area they marked to attract good luck, victory, or personal charm. Such amulets, creating a portable area of attraction, were often used for human bodies. However, larger areas, such as businesses, might also be in need of benefits. GEMF 15.145-155 presents an object to be buried near the threshold of a business to attract profit.⁵³⁴ Again, the object marks the area of its agency, in this case the inside of the business. The amulet would attract benefits towards this area and keep negative influences out; it would only provide good luck for the demarcated space.

All in all, amulets were believed to demarcate an area by encircling it or blocking entry points. What the amulets of these three types had in common, was that they all affected specific spaces, with the interplay of outside, boundary, and inside defining the sphere of influence. In other words: there was an indissoluble link between object, location, and perceived functioning.

2.5 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have analysed the use of amulets as a process involving different stages, first discussing users and their motives, and subsequently examining the acquisition of amulets, their installation, and the beliefs surrounding these steps. This was the ideal route from problem to solution as understood by the ancient amulet users. Within this process, a few elements stand out that help to explain why amulets were attractive options.

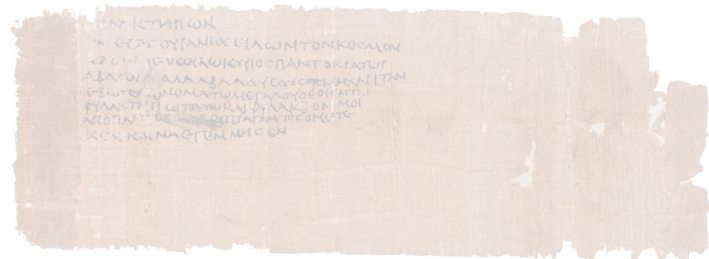
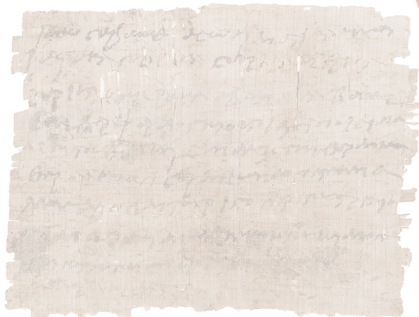
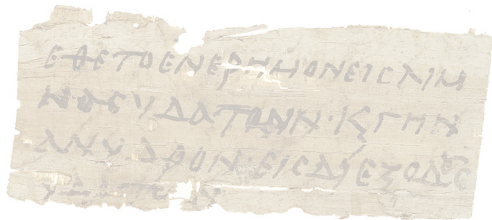
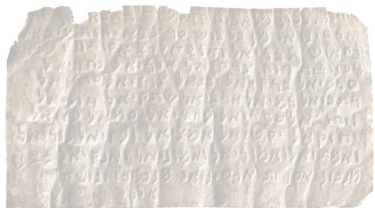
Amulets were worn by children, women, and men and were also, in various manners, ‘attached’ to larger spaces such as houses and vineyards. As amulets were used by all sorts of people and a wide variety of types was available, they were accessible to most. Amulets could be made of very expensive materials, such as gold and gemstones, or from perishable materials that could be easily found in nature. Amulets could be home-made, given by family members, or provided by specialists. The level of accessibility depended on budget and on the availability of materials, specialists, and relevant institutions. However, it would seem that amulet practice was flexible and offered a wide variety of options. If a specialist was involved, there may not have been much room for personalisation, but (faith in) the specialist’s expertise would have enhanced the power and agency of the object. Specialists probably used marketing language to stress their authority and the efficacy of their spells, enhancing their customers’ faith and adding to their experiences.

Amulets were used to establish control over various aspects of life. Three spheres of influence can be identified: healing, protecting, and providing benefits. These three functions of amulets correspond to the motives for reaching out to amulets. Using amulets

⁵³⁴ GEMF 15.145-155. See also: Faraone, ‘Protective Statues’.

made it possible to deal with specific illnesses, various other aspects of life that were seen as vulnerable (such as health, the prosperity of the family, or a good harvest), and social situations (such as lawsuits, conflicts, war, and financial issues).

Amulets demarcated a location and were believed to actively intervene in the designated area. They took care of the 'inside' and offered protection against the 'outside'. Healing amulets were often used to expel diseases or disorders from the body or a certain body part. Protective amulets were installed to shield an area, to make sure that no evil could enter the protective circle. This evil was often perceived to be the result of supernatural intervention; this would include evil 'sent' by other human beings. Amulets for benefits were used to enhance the position of the inside area and attract supernatural powers to it. Users of amulets believed that the objects provided control: the amulet would actively deal with their issue and/or safeguard the affected or threatened location. As will be further discussed in the next chapter, this belief in the controlling powers of amulets had a large psychological impact. Ideas about the efficacy of encircling and knotting created expectations, which impacted the experience of users. This psychological impact may be identified as one of the reasons why all sorts of inhabitants of the Roman empire continued to use amulets to deal with their fears and hopes.



CHAPTER



3

**EXPERIENCING THE IMPACT
OF AMULETS**

EXPERIENCING THE IMPACT OF AMULETS

In this chapter I will analyse the impact of using amulets. How did the process of amulet use affect its users? Why did people continue to rely on amulets? I will present an analysis of the full-circle experience of amulets to clarify how the use of the object could impact users' mental and physical well-being.

First, I will discuss the potential impact of material religious practices, involving insights from research into the placebo effect, religious coping, materiality, and the sensory experience of objects. As a next step, I will look into the power of expectations. Current research into the impact of religious (healing) practices often stresses that the entire context of the practice should be taken into account – not just the tangible aspects, but also (cultural) knowledge and the expectations that are created during the process.⁵³⁵ Adopting this approach makes it possible to shed new light on the experiences of users of amulets. A third line of inquiry concerns the embodied sensory experience of amulet use, which I will approach with the question how amulets as material substances were experienced through the five Aristotelian senses.⁵³⁶ Since sensory experiences take place in space and time, I will also discuss these two elements.⁵³⁷ Experiences occur within every step of the process of amulet use, so these will all be included to obtain a full picture.

3.1 THE IMPACT OF RELIGIOUS PRACTICES ON MENTAL HEALTH AND PHYSICAL WELL-BEING

In a passage dealing with amulets against fever Pliny argued that an abundance of hope could bring delight.⁵³⁸ Similarly, Soranus wrote that amulets would 'make the patient more cheerful' because they provided hope.⁵³⁹ People used amulets to deal with something that made them uncomfortable. Users of amulets hoped the amulet would have an effect and

535 See for example Korsvoll, 'Using Placebo Research'.

536 King, Toner, 'Medicine and the Senses', 155-158. These are the five senses of the five different sensing organs that are being distinguished. For more information: P. Gregoric, J. Leth Fink, 'Sense Perception in Aristotle and the Aristotelian Tradition' in: J. Toivanen (ed.), *Forms of Representation in the Aristotelian Tradition* (Leiden 2022) 15-39. The five senses are also part of the parameters set by A. Grand-Clément to study the sensory experiences of ancient bodies. I will discuss the other parameters below: the space and time in which a ritual was performed, and the movements of the worshippers. A. Grand-Clément, 'Sensorium, Senses, Synaesthesia, Multisensoriality: A New Way of Approaching Religious Experience in Antiquity?' in: A. Alvar Nuño, J. Alvar Ezquerro, G. Woolf (eds.), *Sensorium. The Senses in Roman Polytheism* (Leiden 2021) 141-159: 148.

537 Including time and space in the study of sensory experience: Grand-Clément, 'Sensorium, Senses, Synaesthesia, Multisensoriality', 148.

538 Paraphrase of Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 30.104.

539 Soranus, *Gynaecia* 3.42. Translation by Temkin, *Soranus' Gynecology*, 165. For amulets to deal with fears see Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.25 and 28.115. See also: Sarischouli, 'Hope for Cure'.

produce the desired result. In her work on childbirth in the Roman world, A. Bonnell Freidin describes amulets as ‘technologies of hope, inspiring people to hope for better outcomes and helping to bring them to pass.’⁵⁴⁰ Our present-day idea of hope concerns the expectation of or desire for something positive in an uncertain situation.⁵⁴¹ Amulets helped to cope with uncertainty and can thus be seen as a religious coping strategy.⁵⁴² From the late twentieth century onwards, the research field of psychology has studied the relationship between religiosity (and spirituality) and mental health.⁵⁴³ In modern-day society, religious coping strategies, such as prayer, have been proven to have a positive influence on emotional well-being.⁵⁴⁴ Pliny and Soranus also noted that religious objects, such as amulets, could help people cope with their issues.

A passage from one of Menander’s plays (fourth century BCE) refers to the power of faith in the effectiveness of medicine: ‘Find an empty medicine for your empty illness and believe it’s helping.’⁵⁴⁵ In a way, Menander is describing what centuries later would be called a placebo. In modern medical research, a placebo is an ‘empty medicine’ – a substance without therapeutic value, that is given to a group of people to test how receiving this substance (and everything that comes with it) influences their experience of their illness.⁵⁴⁶ As E. Goodwyn explains, the placebo effect is ‘a long-known effect in medical science, where the patient responds to treatment that does not have a specifically identified

540 Bonnell Freidin, *Birthing Romans*, 168, see chapter four on using ‘Technologies of Hope’.

541 I will not pursue the question whether hope should be considered an emotion or not, nor address the question if the ancient emic and modern etic understanding of hope are similar or not. These questions are extensively discussed in G. Kazantzidis, D. Spatharas, ‘Introductory: “Hope”, Elpis, Spes: Affective and Non-Affective Expectancy’ in: G. Kazantzidis, D. Spatharas (eds.), *Hope in Ancient Literature, History and Art* (Berlin 2018) 1-31. See also: J. Cook, *Imagined Futures. Hope, Risk and Uncertainty* (London 2018) 105-115.

542 For the idea of coping strategies and using ancient ‘magical’ objects see D. Frankfurter, ‘Desperation and the Magic of Appeal. Representation of Women’s Emotions in Magical Spells and Ritual Figurines’ in: A. Chaniotis (ed.), *Unveiling Emotions III: Arousal, Display and Performance of Emotions in the Greek world* (Heidelberg 2021) 517-536: 518.

543 For an overview of early research and the situations in which mental health can be influenced by religious acts see: M.O. Harrison, *et al.*, ‘The Epidemiology of Religious Coping: A Review of Recent Literature’, *International Review of Psychiatry* 13 (2001) 86-93; L. Miller, B.S. Kelley, ‘Relationships of Religiosity and Spirituality with Mental Health and Psychopathology’, *Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* (New York 2005) 460-478.

544 See for example F. Dolcos, *et al.*, ‘Religiosity and Resilience: Cognitive Reappraisal and Coping Self-efficacy Mediate the Link Between Religious Coping and Well-being’, *Journal of Religion and Health* (2021) 1-14; C. Imperatori, *et al.*, ‘Neurophysiological Correlates of Religious Coping to Stress: A Preliminary EEG Power Spectra Investigation’, *Neuroscience Letters* 728 (2020) 134956.

545 Menander, *Phasma* 2-31. Translation in: D.S. Kalleres, ‘Drunken Hags with Amulets and Prostitutes with Erotic spells: the Re-Feminization of Magic in Late-antique Christian Homilies’ in: K. Stratton, D.S. Kalleres (eds.), *Daughters of Hecate: Women and Magic in the Ancient World* (New York 2014) 219-251: 224.

546 For example, to compare its effects with the results of a control group which receives an actual working medicine.

biochemical or surgical mechanism.⁵⁴⁷ Research on this effect addresses several aspects of the ‘treatment’, ranging from the colour of a pill to the exact words used by the medical professional. The patient is not only influenced by the use of the medicine; the effect is the result of the complete embodied experience of treatment, including the interaction between doctor and patient and the location of treatment.⁵⁴⁸ Research into the placebo effect has been applied to modern religious practices and to (religious) healing practices of the past.⁵⁴⁹ Recently, N.H. Korsvoll and others have demonstrated the usefulness of research into the placebo effect for the study of the experience of healing rituals in late antique Egypt.⁵⁵⁰

The use of the term ‘placebo effect’ has also been criticised. One of the arguments here centres on the inclusion of social and cultural context and the creation of meaning.⁵⁵¹ The placebo effect is more than just believing it helps, as in Menander’s words. The belief in and experience of healing is a complicated matter. D.E. Moerman, a medical anthropologist, argues against using the term ‘placebo effect’, because what this medical effect describes is actually part of what he calls the ‘meaning response’: ‘the psychological and physiological effects of *meaning* in the treatment of illness.’⁵⁵² People interpret and give meaning to healing practices; ‘what people know and understand about medicine, what they experience about healing, what healing processes mean can also enhance (...) healing processes. Meaning can make your immune system work better, and it can make your aspirin work better, too.’⁵⁵³ In their research into religious healing practices in late antique Egypt N.H., Korsvoll and others also stress the importance of taking the knowledge and expectations

547 E. Goodwyn, ‘Rediscovering the Ritual Technology of the Placebo Effect in Analytical Psychology’, *Journal of Analytical Psychology* 62.3 (2017) 395-414: 400.

548 Moerman describes the elements which influence the outcome: the doctors, the form of the medicines, as well as knowledge and culture. Moerman, *Meaning, Medicine*; see also: D.E. Moerman, A. Harrington, ‘Making Space for the Placebo Effect in Pain Medicine’, *Seminars in Pain Medicine* 3 (2005) 2-6. Kaptchuk described the patient, the practitioner, the patient-practitioner interaction, the nature of the illness, the treatment and the setting. Kaptchuk, ‘The Placebo Effect’. For sources on the power of rituals as a placebo effect see: Goodwyn, ‘Rediscovering the Ritual’; see also: Welch, ‘Ritual in Western Medicine’.

549 Placebo and religion: A. Schienle, A. Gremsl, A. Wabnegger, ‘Placebo Effects in the Context of Religious Beliefs and Practices: A Resting-State Functional Connectivity Study’, *Frontiers in Behavioural Neuroscience* 15 (2021) 1-8. Koenig discusses all sorts of research from before 2010: H.G. Koenig, ‘Religion, Spirituality, and Health: The Research and Clinical Implications’, *ISRN Psychiatry* (2012) 1-33. However, this type of research also has been criticised, see: A. Harrington, ‘The Placebo Effect: What’s Interesting for Scholars of Religion’, *Zygon* 46 (2011) 265-280. Placebo and historical research: E. Czerniak, M. Davidson, ‘Placebo, a Historical Perspective’, *European Neuropsychopharmacology* 22 (2012) 770-774; on the ‘ancient’ placebo effect: A.K. Shapiro, E. Shapiro, *The Powerful Placebo. From Ancient Priests to Modern Physician* (Baltimore 1997) 1-27. For the possible placebo effect of amulets in a broader sense, see: M. Healy, ‘Wearing Powerful Words and Objects: Healing Prosthetics’, *Textual Practice* 30.7 (2016) 1233-1251: 1233.

550 Korsvoll, ‘Using Placebo Research’, for example, 1-4 but see the whole volume.

551 See for example Korsvoll, ‘Using Placebo Research’, 5-8; see also Harrington, ‘The Placebo Effect’ for why applying this to religion comes with its own complications.

552 Moerman, *Meaning, Medicine*, 14, *passim*.

553 Moerman, *Meaning, Medicine*, 20, see 12-21, 67-85, 152-154.

of ancient patients into account when trying to understand their healing experiences. Such knowledge would include the information obtained in contacts with religious and/or medical specialists.⁵⁵⁴ Not only the total cure, but also a (big or small) relief of symptoms would be considered a healing experience.⁵⁵⁵ Korsvoll also highlights the fact that ancient healing experiences were guided and shaped by the expectations created by the idea that evil, disease, and danger are external forces, which can be expelled and warded off.⁵⁵⁶

Regardless of whether the processes described above are understood as religious coping, placebo effect, meaning response, hope, or as something psychosomatic, all of these approaches show the impact of religion, healing, and material practices on the well-being of the user. Instead of exploring the possible placebo effects of amulets, this chapter will study if and how objects had the potential to impact their users. As Soranus' observation that amulets make patients 'more cheerful' demonstrates,⁵⁵⁷ amulets may have had psychosomatic effects, physical effects caused by mental processes.⁵⁵⁸

Because 'placebo effect' mainly evokes connotations with healing amulets, focussing on the healing aspect might imply excluding other types of amulets. Protective amulets or amulets for benefits, however, were also capable of having a positive impact on the well-being of their users. Amulets aimed at keeping danger away could give a feeling of safety. Users of amulets desiring charisma or victory expected an improvement of their situation. The amulet could give such people a feeling of confidence that could result in actual benefits. Amulets probably gave their users emotional support, thus reducing anxiety and in a way improving their quality of life. Of course scorpions or other poisonous creatures would not have been deterred by an amulet attached to the door. However, the objects could still provide relief and comfort and create a feeling of control over a situation and a location.

To understand the effects of the use of amulets, the experiences of amulets as material presences need to be explored. This is where materiality studies can be helpful, because they provide us with ways to deal with questions about the experience of objects by the sensing human body when ancient users can no longer inform us. In the words of E-J. Graham, we should approach objects with questions such as: 'what did their material presence *do*?' or 'what did they *do to* the people involved?'⁵⁵⁹ Graham then argues that

554 See: Korsvoll, 'Using Placebo Research', specifically 8-10.

555 H. von Ehrenheim, 'Placebo Factors at Healing Sanctuaries in Pagan and Early Christian Times', *Trends in Classics* 13.1 (2021) 95-121: 107-113

556 This idea influences how one deals with disease and cure. Korsvoll, 'Using Placebo Research', 8-10 and see for example: K. Dosoo, 'Healing Traditions in Coptic Magical Texts', *Trends in Classics* 13.1 (2021) 44-94: 74.

557 Soranus, *Gynaecia* 3.42.

558 I use the term 'psychosomatic' in its strictest sense: the mind influencing the body. It is, however, often used in connotation with the idea of the mind causing illness in the body, while in this study the focus is on making the body feel better. Still, both are psychosomatic effects, similar to the idea of placebo versus nocebo (treatment having a bad effect): both are meaning responses.

559 Original italics. Graham, *Reassembling Religion*, 5, see also 201.

‘certain differences were made to the world when humans and things were brought together in ritual contexts.’⁵⁶⁰ Amulets could turn fear into hope, producing psychosomatic effects that made people feel better. The capacity to bring about this change can be understood as the agency of the object.⁵⁶¹ This agency is created by the interplay of the object, the experiencing human body, space, time and other factors. All these aspects must be taken into account when trying to understand the impact of amulets.

Sensory perception plays a key role in experiencing material presence.⁵⁶² Through sight, touch, smell, sound, and taste ancient individuals would have sensed the presence of amulets and encountered their inherent supernatural qualities. Noticing the amulet also meant noticing fears, memories, knowledge, hope, and the divine.⁵⁶³ A sensory approach to the materiality of the object makes it easier to understand why amulets were used. Of course it should be noted that the experience of the material presence is highly individual and dependent on a specific time and situation.⁵⁶⁴ Furthermore, as has been argued in relation to sensory studies, the experience and interpretation of sense is culturally specific.⁵⁶⁵ It is therefore impossible to gain a full understanding of ancient individuals’ experience of the use of their own amulet in a particular place and at a specific moment. It is, however, possible to discuss the potential experiences of amulets by focusing on their material affordances and also to analyse the potential impact of these experiences.

3.2 THE IMPACT OF EXPECTATIONS BEFORE USE

In the use of amulets expectations were created before even using the object.⁵⁶⁶ Amulet users expected improvement of their situation by using the amulet and investing their time and effort. Expectations regarding their power or efficacy likely also had an impact on the use of the amulet, as will be discussed below. The users did not necessarily expect miracles. The specialists creating amulets likewise played a large role in raising expectations. I will discuss all these aspects to shed light on the impact of expectations on the experience of amulet users.

Even before actual use, people had expectations based on earlier experiences of amulets,

⁵⁶⁰ Graham, *Reassembling Religion*, 11, 29, 181.

⁵⁶¹ Graham, *Reassembling Religion*, 40.

⁵⁶² Graham, *Reassembling Religion*, 12, 29. On ‘magic’ and the senses see: Toner, ‘Sensing the Ancient Past’, 2. For sensory studies in general see: Griffiths, Starkey, ‘Sensing Through Objects’.

⁵⁶³ See also: Harvey, ‘The Senses in Religion’, 94-96.

⁵⁶⁴ Graham, *Reassembling Religion*, 201.

⁵⁶⁵ Alvar Nuño, Alvar Ezquerro, Woolf, ‘Introduction’. For an application see: Patzelt, ‘Experience of the Divine’, 106-107.

⁵⁶⁶ Since it is not possible to discuss all cultural knowledge that ancient amulet users may have had – also because my research concerns a large time period and region – this section will focus on the expectations created during the stages discussed in chapter two.

cultural knowledge, or the input of others such as specialists. These expectations were present in the mind of the user when experiencing the current object of their choice.⁵⁶⁷ Expectation and motivation can influence the outcome of a religious practice: the more you believe that something will work, the more effects you will experience. In relation to ancient divinatory ritual Y. Ustinova argued that, for instance, knowledge of the experiences of others and the price of the ritual influenced expectations.⁵⁶⁸ As discussed earlier, amulet use involved many different steps. After deciding to acquire an amulet to help them deal with their fears or misfortunes, prospective users had to make an effort to reach out to a specialist, and pay for materials. Sometimes they would look for the right formula, iconography or rituals themselves. Accordingly, the individuals in question may already have been in a heightened emotional state before actually using the amulet.⁵⁶⁹ Moreover, they probably had certain expectations based on earlier experiences or on what they had been told by others.

Doubtlessly, existing ideas about external danger and the demarcating forces of amulets were particularly impactful. By installing the object at a certain location, users expected it to act for them. The functioning was related to the object's perceived supernatural powers, to the knowledge of binding in a religious context, and also to beliefs concerning the effects of the object in relation to its specific place. As people of the twenty-first century, we may have our doubts about the workings of amulets, but several ancient authors clearly had none. Some of these believed in the efficacy of amulets because they had tested them. Galen writes about a jasper amulet: 'I myself have satisfactory proof of the efficacy of this stone.'⁵⁷⁰ This belief in the efficacy of the object could actually impact the (healing) experience.

However, where 'healing' is concerned, our modern expectations and those of ancient individuals are not quite the same. In their analysis of healing rituals in Late Antiquity, scholars such as K. Dosoo and E. Chronopoulou stress that in the ancient world fever was seen as a disease in itself rather than a symptom.⁵⁷¹ Ancient individuals using fever amulets probably felt relieved when the fever left them, but from a modern medical point of view

567 The study of cognitive religion distinguishes between expectations (top-down input) and the sensory input of experiencing the actual practice (bottom-up input). See for an explanation and an analysis of the impact of expectations on the experience of a religious practice: M. Scott, 'Walls and the Ancient Greek Ritual Experience. The Sanctuary of Demeter and Kore at Eleusis' in: E. Eidinow, A.W. Geertz, J. North (eds.), *Cognitive Approaches to Ancient Religious Experience* (Cambridge 2022) 193-217: 195, *passim*.

568 Y. Ustinova, 'To the Netherworld and Back. Cognitive Aspects of the Descent to Trophonius' in: E. Eidinow, A.W. Geertz, J. North (eds.), *Cognitive Approaches to Ancient Religious Experience* (Cambridge 2022) 44-66: see for example 46-48.

569 As is argued in relation to health by Dosoo, 'Healing Traditions', 44; Von Ehrenheim, 'Placebo Factors at Healing Sanctuaries', 108.

570 Galen, *De simplicium medicamentorum* Kühn XII.207. Translation by Gourevitch, 'Popular Medicines', 266. See also: Alexander of Tralles, *De Febris* P. 1.407.4-7.

571 Dosoo, 'Healing Traditions', 71; E. Chronopoulou, 'Placebo is Magic or Magic is Placebo? The Greco-Roman Iatromagical Texts', *Trends in Classics* 13.1 (2021) 21-43: 25.

this did not automatically mean that they had been cured. This is similar in pain treatment. Pliny the Elder, for example, describes how, thanks to an amulet for toothache, ‘the pain at once disappears’.⁵⁷² The source of the pain, a rotten tooth, would still be there, but the pain had (temporarily) disappeared: the amulet ‘did’ what it was supposed to do. So, amulets may actually have brought about symptom relief. They were able to provide physical and emotional relief, even though the user had not been restored to health.⁵⁷³

As I have argued above, many expectations were formed in contact with a doctor or a ritual specialist. In ancient religious practices these figures of authority could have a large impact on the expectations and experiences of the people involved.⁵⁷⁴ Authors of amulet instructions would add positive information on the object’s effect, such as Pliny stating that an amulet for headaches ‘is said to relieve headache immediately on being applied’.⁵⁷⁵ In other examples, authors claim that the object acts ‘automatically’,⁵⁷⁶ that it is ‘wonderful’ or ‘excellent’⁵⁷⁷ or that it is the best.⁵⁷⁸ In a study dealing with Coptic pharmacological prescriptions, A. Grons analysed which elements could have had a positive influence on the physical well-being of patients. She discusses the ‘marketing’ language in the instructions – ‘the object works’ (creating positive expectations), ‘the object was tested’ (creating trust) – and the inclusion of descriptions of divine assistance or authority (being persuasive and reassuring).⁵⁷⁹ As it remains unclear for whom these Coptic prescriptions, and other Greek and Demotic instructions, were written, their impact is unknown. Nevertheless, if these elements ‘were possibly transferred by the physician to the patient, [they] may have contributed towards a placebo effect’.⁵⁸⁰ The specialist’s explanations concerning the object’s performance (expectancy, reassurance), descriptions of how it had been tried and tested (trust), in combination with the required ritual acts (ritual contact and sensory experience) probably had a large impact on the user’s experiences. Although the intensity of the contact and the words used by the specialist will have varied, the role of specialists in the general experience of amulet use, and therefore also in the motivations for reaching out to amulets, cannot be underestimated.

All in all, the creation of different layers of expectations was an important aspect of the impact of amulets. Customers’ expectations most likely developed as they gained new

572 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 30.26. Translation by Jones, *Pliny, Books 28-32*, 294-295.

573 Moerman, *Meaning, Medicine*, 12: Moerman notes that even chronic diseases wax and wane. In the periods when one feels better, the relief may be attributed to objects such as amulets.

574 Scott, ‘Walls and the Ancient Greek Ritual Experience’, 206-207.

575 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 24.170. Translation by Jones, *Pliny, Books 24-27*, 120-121. See also: *Medicina Plinii* I 1.4.

576 Dioscorides, *Materia Medica* 3.12.2; see also: Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 8.26.

577 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.217, 30.63; Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 10.42.

578 Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 15.108.

579 A. Grons, ‘The Question of the Effectiveness of Coptic Pharmacological Prescriptions’, *Trends in Classics* 13.1 (2021) 122-153: 133-142.

580 Grons, ‘Coptic Pharmacological Prescriptions’, 136.

knowledge. The explanations of the specialist and the experience of the actual use of the object must have influenced customers' understanding of their ailments, their amulets, and the eventual results.⁵⁸¹ In short, the amulet would have had a significant impact on the user even before it was put into place. Acknowledging their situation and taking matters into their own hands, users may – even before they actually used their amulets – have felt better.⁵⁸²

3.3 EMBODIED SENSORY EXPERIENCES OF AMULET USE

Only a small number of surviving amulets show traces of use.⁵⁸³ Examples include a parchment amulet with water damage that may have occurred during use and a phallic amulet showing signs of wear at the suspension hole.⁵⁸⁴ Some amulets were found in graves, often worn around the neck of the deceased.⁵⁸⁵ A small number of amulets show signs of reuse indicating that they were utilised for a long time. Unfortunately, the physical experience and impact of amulet use is rarely referred to in the ancient sources. With the help of materiality and sensory studies it is, however, possible to analyse the various embodied experiences amulet users may have had.

Amulet use started with the attachment to the designated location. Amulets were always near their users and the proximity of their material presence facilitated experience; they could be seen, or touched, and sometimes smelled, heard or tasted. While not all senses were affected by each amulet and ancient individuals may have become so accustomed to their amulets that they no longer were aware of them, there can be no doubt that amulets were capable of creating impactful experiences. In what follows, the possible experiences of the five senses are discussed separately: first visibility, then touch, smell, and sound and lastly taste. A general analysis of these experiences is given at the end of this section.

581 On the importance of the experience of the actions and words of the ritual specialist in the creation of meaning, see also: Patzelt, 'Experience of the Divine', 107.

582 Similarly argued by Chronopoulou, 'Placebo is Magic', 37-38.

583 It can also be difficult to recognise signs of wear on the objects.

584 The amulet with water damage: ACM 9, analysed by Jones, *New Testament Texts*, 66; see Whitmore, 'Fascinating Fascina', 51, 53-54.

585 For a grave see for example GMA 12.

3.3.1 Experience of visibility

Wearing (in)visible amulets

Many textual amulets feature the text ‘protect the wearer’ – evidence that many amulets were made to be worn.⁵⁸⁶ Instructions do not always describe exactly how the object should be worn. Most instructions simply stipulate that the object should be ‘tied on’ (as *περίπτρον* or *alligatus*). Some of these amulets were worn invisibly, specifically under garments: ‘and wear it (φορέω) under your garment’.⁵⁸⁷ Early Greek vases depict naked women wearing ribbons around their arms and legs. It has been suggested that these ribbons were used as amulets. The ribbons tied around their upper arms and legs would not have been visible when these women were dressed.⁵⁸⁸ Despite its invisibility, however, the wearer would probably still have been aware of the amulet, would have felt it on their skin and would have known it was there. In an instruction from Pliny and in a parallel instruction from *Medicina Plinii* we read about amulets that had to be tied to an arm and to the loins without the patient’s knowledge. It seems unlikely, however, that the patient subsequently remained unaware of the object.⁵⁸⁹

Many amulets will have been worn visibly, attached to a garment or around a body part.⁵⁹⁰ Natural products, for instance a perforated tooth or the root of a plant, might be worn attached to a string.⁵⁹¹ People wearing amulets must have been a common sight in the streetscape. Amulets were not necessarily a secret thing. Pliny knew about former consuls wearing amulets, describes young boys wearing the *bulla* and discusses the visible application of amuletic iconography such as phallic symbols.⁵⁹² Visual sources, such as the burial portraits from Roman Egypt or statues of boys wearing their *bullae*, testify to the visible wearing of amulets.⁵⁹³ Because of their apotropaic character, some amulets, for instance the frontal Gorgo or Medusa faces, actually *had* to be seen. Amuletic iconography of this kind can be found on many objects worn on the body. Various types of jewellery, worn in the ears, around the neck or on the finger, had apotropaic imagery to ward off the harmful jealous glance, the evil eye, of others.⁵⁹⁴ The relationship between

586 See for example *PGM* XCVI. Part of the research for this section was conducted for the paper: ‘Imagining amulets: ancient instructions and the iconography of actual Graeco-Roman amulets’, presented at the colloquium *Aux sources des graveurs. Les gemmes magiques dans une histoire des transferts d’image* Fribourg, 15-17 February 2023. Many thanks to the organisers and other speakers for their helpful feedback.

587 *PGM* XXXVI. 35-68.

588 Wolters, ‘Faden und Knoten’.

589 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 24.94, 24.170, 32.114; *Medicina Plinii* III 16.4.

590 *PGM* VII. 186-190 (or invisible in the fold) and *PGM* VII. 370-373; see the amulets on statues and burial portraits from the Faiyum. Dieleman, ‘Materiality of Textual Amulets’, 30-31.

591 Dioscorides, *Materia Medica* 2.47.

592 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.29 (consuls), 33.9-10 (*bulla*), 28.39 (*fascinus*).

593 See for example the research of Faraone, *Transformation*, 46-51.

594 See for example the analysis of wearing phallic pendants in: Whitmore, ‘Fascinating Fascina’.

visibility and efficacy is also apparent from an instruction for an amulet against jaundice by Pliny the Elder: ‘jaundice is cured if this shrub is merely looked at while worn as an amulet (*alligatus*).’⁵⁹⁵

Visible amulets would have looked differently, depending on the type of material used. Amulets made of precious metals and stones came in similar shapes and sizes, but the gemstones had a wide variety of colours. Gold or bronze was most often prescribed for the creation of powerful rings. It is possible that the colour of the gems inserted into rings or pendants was supposed to support the effect of the object. An example may be the use of haematite, a dark red stone, for issues related to blood, such as menstruation.⁵⁹⁶ The gemstones might also carry powerful imagery, reminding the user of the power of the object. The imagery, however, would of course have been very small. Bonnell Freidin stresses that users probably had to squint to make out the image. The effort may have enhanced the personal relationship with the object.⁵⁹⁷

If containers were used for the amulet, only the container and the strings would have been visible when wearing it. Containers are often mentioned in instructions: ‘A plant which grows on a statue’s head, collected in a rag from any garment and tied on (*inligata*) with a red thread, immediately allays pain.’⁵⁹⁸ Even when no container is mentioned, we can sometimes be certain that one was used. The *Medicina Plinii* contains the following instruction: ‘a snail’s head is cut off with a reed while it is grazing early in the morning and is tied (*alligo*) and suspended (*suspendo*) from the neck on a linen tread.’⁵⁹⁹ How would one tie a snail’s head around one’s neck without a container? From the archaeological record we know that metal amulet cases were used⁶⁰⁰ and the sixth-century medical author Marcellus of Bordeaux mentions several amulets that had to be enclosed in metals such as gold.⁶⁰¹ In *De Medicamentis* 29.26 he writes about a gold metal tablet that had to be inscribed with *caractères* and put into a golden capsule before attaching it to the body.⁶⁰²

Every type of container used to attach amulets to the body, whether made of leather,

595 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 24.94. Translation by Jones, *Pliny, Books 24-27*, 70-71. See also Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 27.66 and 32.114.

596 Mastrocinque, ‘Colours of Magical Gems’, 62-68.

597 Bonnell Freidin, *Birth of Romans*, 193.

598 *Medicina Plinii* I 1.4. Translation by Hunt, *Medicina Plinii*, 17. Based on Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 24.170. In the IV-V CE handbook of Marcellus a similar instruction can be found; in this one the grass can be worn both with and without a (red-coloured) container. Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 1.43, almost the same instruction in 2.20. See also: *Medicina Plinii* III 15.5.

599 *Medicina Plinii* I 1.6. Translation by Hunt, *The Medicina*, 17. In Pliny, in a similar instruction, the head needs to be worn in a container: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 29.114. See also: Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 1.85.

600 For example, the Thetford treasure gold amulet case with sulphur. British Museum, London, registration number 1981.0201.30.

601 Gold: Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 8.45, 8.50, 26.43, 28.52, 29.13, 29.26, 29.51. Silver: 15.52.

602 Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 29.26, see also 29.51.

linen, wool, or metal, will have looked differently.⁶⁰³ In addition, some instructions mention a specific colour for the thread or the container itself. The example from the *Medicina Plinii* mentioned above stipulates a red thread to tie the headache amulet to the body.⁶⁰⁴ Galen mentions a purple thread.⁶⁰⁵ The colours mentioned most often for the container are red,⁶⁰⁶ purple,⁶⁰⁷ grey, and black.⁶⁰⁸ Pliny also mentions materials that are ‘natural’ and ‘undyed’.⁶⁰⁹ One handbook from Roman Egypt prescribes the use of a multicoloured linen bandage to attach a scarab amulet for protection during the performance of a ritual. The bandage had to be woven with a specific number of threads in four different colours: white, green, blue, and red.⁶¹⁰ In general, however, there does not seem to be a relation between the colours and the types of amulets.

One aspect of visibility needs special attention: the texts and images on rolled-up or folded textual amulets. Many metal textual amulets have been found in graves, folded or rolled up in amulet capsules.⁶¹¹ Some of the papyrus textual amulets which have been found had no capsules, but had been rolled up and tied with a piece of string.⁶¹² Apart from raising the question whether ancient users would have been able to read the amulets’ texts – a matter of literacy – we might ask ourselves whether ancient users ever opened the containers to read the amulets. To understand the motives for using amulets, texts and images are of great importance. What, though, did the concealment of the texts mean for the experiences of the user?

As argued by Faraone, from the imperial period onwards formerly spoken texts were added to amulets in written form.⁶¹³ This development not only included the coherent written word, but all forms and shapes of text and imagery.⁶¹⁴ It is unlikely that users of folded and rolled up amulets carrying texts unrolled or unfolded them.⁶¹⁵ This suggests that the texts were created for the supernatural force that was supposed to take care of

603 In the *Medicina Plinii* for example: leather in III 1.1, textile in I 1.4, wool in I 13.10.

604 Red threads: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 24.170 and 30.98. The first is copied in: *Medicina Plinii* I 1.4; Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 1.43 and 2.20.

605 Galen, *De simplicium medicamentorum* Kühn 11.860.

606 Too many to mention, see for example: Dioscorides, *Materia medica* 4.43; Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 21.166, 29.64, 30.99.

607 Dioscorides, *Materia Medica* 3.91; *PGM* IV. 2622-2707.

608 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 20.225, 28.114-115; ash-coloured in *Medicina Plinii* III 15.5.

609 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 20.29, 32.74.

610 GEMF 16.90-92.

611 See for example: GMA 4, 8, 17, 18, 31, 36, 37, 39, 52, 58.

612 *PGM* XVIIIb. 1-7; *PGM* P5b; P.Oxy. LXIV 4406; *PGM* P9.

613 Faraone, *Transformation*.

614 On the power of writing see: Frankfurter, ‘Magic of Writing’; Frankfurter, ‘Magic of Writing in Mediterranean Antiquity’.

615 Metal tablets would be particularly difficult to unroll and there is no indication in the source material that this happened. *PGM* P15b still included plant remains that were folded with the object, suggesting the object stayed enclosed and the plants were kept in place.

the issue at hand.⁶¹⁶ As a parallel, only the writer of amulets used by members of modern Bedouin tribes knows (the meaning of) the texts. After the object has been folded and put in a container, it would be unwise to open the container and read the text: the object will lose its power and the reader will be (supernaturally) punished.⁶¹⁷ In the ancient world the power of the amulet resided in the complete object, including the container; the object in the container did not need to be seen to be understood as powerful. It is possible that the text on the amulet was spoken aloud when the object was created and that the user knew its content.⁶¹⁸ Still, the experience of hearing the words on one particular occasion is different from recurring perception.⁶¹⁹ Some papyrus amulets show signs of having been folded while the ink was still wet, but even in these cases we cannot rule out the possibility that the user of the amulet had been able to see the texts and images before the object was folded.⁶²⁰ Despite such uncertainties it seems reasonable to conclude that the user of the amulet did not always know all the details of its text.

The same argument can be made for images. GEMF 16.1098-1104 from the late second century concerns an instruction for a ritual against the evil eye. The final part refers to the amulet that had to be made with a specific drawing. The image in question is a depiction of an eye and fits into the group of apotropaic evil eye averters. In this case the eye should be drawn on papyrus: ‘also write this on a new papyrus; and make it into a papyrus roll on his body. “You are this eye of heaven.” The writings: “eye.” [drawing of an eye].’⁶²¹ Even though visibility is a common feature of apotropaic evil eye iconography, this amulet would have been worn rolled-up, and the eye would not have been visible. Other rolled-up or folded amulets have been found with drawings of scorpions to prevent scorpion stings.⁶²² These drawings would likewise have been hidden from view.⁶²³

All of this does not necessarily mean that the text and images on these folded amulets did not play a role in the experience of the object. Users knew that the text was there. Every time the amulet came to mind – for example because it was noticed through the senses – users probably also remembered its text and/or imagery.⁶²⁴ In addition, the simple fact that the text was *there*, gave the object power. The maker’s inscription had endowed it with efficacy. Once the amulet had been created, the power of the text remained present

616 See the discussion in section 2.3. Gordon argues for example that the texts in handbooks and the products coming from these handbooks were indeed not meant to be read by the customers. Gordon, ‘Shaping the text’, 97 specifically, also 76 and 107.

617 The object also loses its powers when it gets wet. A. Abu-Rabia, ‘The Evil Eye and Cultural Beliefs among the Bedouin Tribes of the Negev, Middle East’, *Folklore* 116.3 (2005) 241-254: 249.

618 See the discussion on sound in in 3.3.4 *Experiencing sound*.

619 See for example the amulets in Faraone, *Vanishing Acts*.

620 SM 18, with thanks to dr. Joanne Stolk for inspecting the object with me.

621 GEMF 16.1098-1104. Translation by J. Dieleman, *et al.* in GEMF.

622 *PGM* CXIII.

623 Dosoo, ‘Heathen Serpents and Wingless Angels?’, 129: from the fifth century and onwards.

624 Frankfurter, ‘Magic of writing’, 190-196.

and perpetuated the rituals performed when the object was made or installed. The fact that these texts and images were not visible must mean that neither the object's efficacy nor the experience of it depended on visibility. To know that the text which invested the object with performative power was there, was enough and could bring comfort to the user.

It follows from this discussion that visibility played a role on different levels. The complete object, including the container, could be visible but also hidden underneath clothes; materials, texts, and iconography could be kept in amulet cases or be visibly worn for their apotropaic working. It is highly likely that this layered (in)visibility influenced users' experiences.

Seeing (or not seeing) amulets for larger locations

Amulets could also be placed in larger locations where they could be visible or invisible. Many instructions stipulate that the amulet should be buried and would thus not be seen. Amulets would be buried in significant places: near a threshold or under it, at the corners or in the centre of a field.⁶²⁵ When objects were not visible, they could still be present in the mind of the owner. They may have remembered the ritual act of burying when passing the locations which marked the boundaries of the influence sphere of the amulet. Knowing about the amulets' presence and proximity may have been more important than visual perception.

Other amulets had to be visible.⁶²⁶ In the case of apotropaic amuletic protection, for instance the motif of the All-Suffering Eye in mosaics, visibility generally was a precondition for efficacy – for example at the Basilica Hilariana in Rome, where an apotropaic mosaic protected the entrance of the building.⁶²⁷ Other amulets for larger locations were likewise visibly attached to the designated location. For example, GMA 11A, an amulet used to protect a vineyard against damage from hail and snow, consisted of a bronze tablet with a hole in the middle. As R.D. Kotansky argued, the object may have been placed in the centre, at a corner or at the entrance of the vineyard.⁶²⁸ In this way, it would have been perfectly visible.

625 Threshold in: GEMF 15.145-155; Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 29.67, 29.82-83, 30.82. Corners of field in: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 18.160, and middle of field: 18.158, 18.294.

626 One example of a highly visible amuletic situation was the eye-level inscription placed on the outside wall of a theatre in fourth- to fifth-century Miletos. The inscription at the bottom reads: 'Archangels! Protect (φυλάσσω) the city of the Milesians and all the inhabitants!' SEG 4.440. Cline, 'Archangels, Magical Amulets', 57-62. Another example is the letter from Jesus to Abgar in which Jesus promises protection for the places where the letter is displayed: de Bruyn, *Making amulets Christian*, 153-154. A third example are the sixth-century Christian inscriptions in Syria to protect houses: Wilburn, 'Building Ritual Agency', 587-589 and W.K. Prentice, 'Magical Formulae on Lintels in the Christian Period in Syria', *American Journal of Archaeology, second series, Journal of the Archaeological Institute of America* X.2 (1906) 137-150. Prentice describes a sixth-century lintel inscription from Syria: 'Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son, the World of God, dwells here: let no evil enter.' This text resembles the amulet PGM P2a.

627 Object in Capitoline museums, Antiquarium AC 4951. For apotropaic mosaics at entrances see also: Wilburn, 'Archaeology of Ritual'.

628 Kotansky, GMA 11, 46-53.

Visible amulets, however, were not necessarily recognised as such. Pliny describes how laurel was attached to the openings of houses: ‘there it hangs alone, adorning the mansions and keeping sentry-guard before the thresholds.’⁶²⁹ Protective powers were similarly attributed to many other plants, flowers and trees. Elsewhere Pliny writes: ‘Squills too, hung in a doorway, are said by Pythagoras to have power to keep off evil enchantments.’⁶³⁰ Several business-enhancing spells in the Greek and Demotic ‘magical’ papyri from Egypt prescribe that a statue be made. When the statues were installed a sacrifice had to be made, but the relevant request was written down and stored inside the objects.⁶³¹ They would thus look like statues of a god, but at the same time they were amulets.⁶³²

Visibility could be of importance for the experience of the user. It provided actual awareness of the object’s presence and in this way a sense of reassurance of its power. Some amulets were invisibly worn (under clothes), others had to be visible (when apotropaic strategies were at play), and frequently only the amulet container was visible – it all had a different impact. People would notice visible amulets for larger locations in passing by and the users would be aware of their presence. As A. Wilburn observes, ‘Through use, the viewer or resident continually activated architectural features. Reading an inscription above a lintel repeated the protective spell.’⁶³³ Because of the layers of (in)visibility involved, the impact will have been varied, but it seems safe to say that seeing the amulet reminded the user of its power and the impact it could have on their lives.

3.3.2 Experience of touch

In a religious context, touch could have a significant influence on people’s experiences.⁶³⁴ Wearing an amulet was a way of securing the proximity of the supernatural during daily activities.⁶³⁵ In her work on personal experience, K.A. Rask draws attention to the importance of the tactile experience and the feeling of comfort the closeness of the supernatural provided: ‘through physical contact with the wearer, they [amulets] materially articulated the relationship between the supernatural beings and people, a strategy for keeping the gods operating in one’s life.’⁶³⁶ How, then did touch affect the experiences of amulets?

629 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 15.127. Translation by H. Rackham, *Pliny. Natural History*. Books 12–16. Vol. IV (London 1968) 374–375.

630 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 20.101. Translation by Jones, *Pliny, Books 20–23*, 60–61. For another object that functions as an amulet and is placed in the field, see: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 19.180.

631 *PGM* IV. 2359–72; *PGM* IV. 2373–2440; *PGM* IV. 3125–71; *PGM* VIII. 1–63.

632 See: C.A. Faraone, ‘The Convergence of Guardian Statues in the Ancient World: Top-Down or Bottom-Up?’ in: S. Blakely, B.J. Collins (eds.), *Religious Convergence in the Ancient Mediterranean* (Atlanta 2019) 269–294 and Faraone, ‘Protective Statues’.

633 Wilburn, ‘Building Ritual Agency’, 599.

634 Rask, *Personal Experience*, 26–28.

635 Rask, *Personal Experience*, 112, see 112–114, 121, 138.

636 Rask, *Personal Experience*, 138, see also 121.

Wearing amulets on the human body

What did it feel like to wear an amulet? Instructions for making amulets often described where the amulet should be worn. In relation to bodily health, objects often had to be placed on the problem areas, or in the words of Pliny: ‘tied around the affected parts’.⁶³⁷ The objects are frequently described as being tied on with threads or ribbons.⁶³⁸ An amulet attached to the hair, ears, neck, upper or lower arm may have felt familiar because it was similar to wearing jewellery. Over time, users likely got used to the amulet’s presence and no longer noticed it. However, depending on the location and other circumstances, the experience of wearing an amulet could be active and impactful.

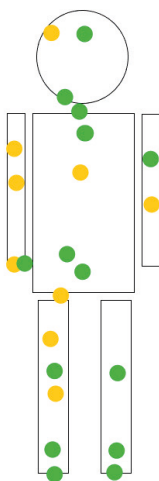


Figure 3. Impression of the locations where amulets could be worn on a human body according to the instructions found in Pliny the Elder.⁶³⁹

637 The instruction refers to gout. Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.41. Translation by Jones, *Pliny, Books 28-32*, 30-31.

638 Bélyácz, Nagy, ‘Periammata’.

639 Green = more specific: hung from the neck: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 11.97; worn around the ankles: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 23.28; applied to the left upper arm: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 24.170; to the girdle: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 27.36; tying together several toes or several fingers (of right hand): Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.42; attached above the pubes: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.42; applied to the knees, Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.138; worn under the chin (but could just mean around the neck) Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 30.98; worn on the forehead, Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 30.140; on the jaw, Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 32.81; on the navel, Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 32.133-134.

Orange = less specific: attached to the arm, for example: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 20.227; attached to the upper arm, not mentioning which one, Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 23.137-138; attached to the left arm: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.91; attached to the head: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 25.143; tied to varicose veins, Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 26.100; applied to the area affected with gout, Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.41; attached to the groin area: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.48; attached to the chest, Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.98; to the thigh, Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.217.

As may be seen in figure 3, the amulets discussed by Pliny the Elder could be worn on all sorts of places on the body.⁶⁴⁰ Wearers will have actively experienced their amulet tied to the upper arm or thigh. The weight of the object and the tightness of the cord, thread or knot would have played a role in the awareness of the object. The loosening of a string might make the object slip down, something the wearer would probably have noticed. The position of the amulet may have restricted movement or caused discomfort. Examples include amulets attached to the eye, restricting sight,⁶⁴¹ or amulets requiring the joining of fingers or toes,⁶⁴² wearing the object in one's sandal or attached to the foot.⁶⁴³ Often there was a connection between the problem or ailment and the place where the amulet had to be worn, but in the case of protective amulets or amulets for benefits a specific location was not always prescribed. N. Crummy established that the amulets discovered in the graves examined in her study were found on the left side of the body.⁶⁴⁴ It is unclear why one side of the body would be preferred over the other, but a similar tendency can be found in the instructions for making amulets. There the left side is mentioned more frequently than the right, but the difference is small and most texts do not mention any particular side.⁶⁴⁵

Whether the object would be worn directly on the body or over clothes would make a difference in the wearer's experience. Some objects would have felt warm or cold to the touch. Metals and stones might feel cold in cold weather; some objects might get hot when warmed by the sun.⁶⁴⁶ Pliny describes a warm sheep's lung to be attached to the head to cure brain fever.⁶⁴⁷ Amulets made of perishable materials may have felt moist and metal touching the skin probably got sweaty. In fact, it appears from the written sources that some amulets had to be kept dry in order to remain effective. Alexander of Tralles describes an amulet made from wolf dung that would lose its efficacy if it touched the ground or the bath.⁶⁴⁸ Users will have experienced the material properties of the amulet containers if these were worn directly on the skin: sharp or smooth edges of cold or warmed-up metal capsules; the soft or rough and itchy textures of woven cloth, leather, or wool; and rough or soft threads and ribbons tied loosely or firmly. The experience will have differed from object to object and from person to person.

640 Sometimes the location is mentioned on activated amulets, such as the arm in P. Oxy. LXXXII 5308.

641 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 21.171.

642 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.42.

643 PGM VII. 919-924; Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 29.26.

644 N. Crummy, 'Bears and Coins. The Iconography of Protection in Late Roman Infant Burials', *Britannia* 41 (2010) 37-93: 69.

645 Left (often the arm): Pliny, *Naturalis Historia* 24.170, 28.91, 29.64, 30.91, 30.100; GEMF 34.23, *Medicina Plinii* III 16.4, PGM IV. 52-85; PGM IV. 2891-2942; Alexander of Tralles, *De Febribus* P. 1.407.8-10; Alexander of Tralles, *Therapeutica* P. 2.319.17-19.
Right: *Medicina Plinii* III 15.7; PGM IV. 475-829; Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 22.41; PGM CXXIII. a; Alexander of Tralles, *Therapeutica* P. 2.375.26-30.

646 Thoughts on the experience of metal by Sanzo, *Ritual Boundaries*, 79.

647 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 30.95 and 97.

648 Alexander of Tralles, *Therapeutica*, P.2.375.20-25. See also: PGM VII. 206-207; Alexander of Tralles, *Therapeutica*, P. 2.585.5-19.

Sometimes the initial touch of amulets will have made less impact. An amulet loosely tied around the neck could be worn over one's clothes, as is often shown on paintings and in sculptures featuring amulets like the *bulla*. The fact that such objects were not in direct contact with the skin does not imply that they would not be noticed – the use of objects is dynamic. The object's weight could make the string cut the skin of the neck. The amulet could also move during daily activities, shifting and twisting the thread or getting stuck in the pleats of the wearer's clothes.⁶⁴⁹ Even if certain amulets were not felt while worn, they had to be attached to the body and this was a powerful tangible experience. Wearers might themselves tie the knots that fastened the object and thus the supernatural power ascribed to it.⁶⁵⁰ Although tying a knot would have been a familiar kind of movement, in the case of amulets it was a deeply meaningful act.⁶⁵¹

Amulets not just touched the body parts they were attached to, they could also be actively touched by their users. Body amulets worn in containers or attached to a string, will, in general, have been relatively small – small enough to fit into a hand. Once they were attached to the body, these small objects may have invited their users to touch them, move their fingers over the object, let it pass through their fingers, play with it. In relation to tiny votive objects, Jessica Hughes argues that their scale 'invited the viewer to touch the object – or to want to touch,' and this touching would have 'intensified the relationship between object and owner'.⁶⁵² In the context of amulet use touch could be mnemonic, making the user remember the object, the text on it and the rituals performed when it was installed.⁶⁵³ Some amulets will have been smooth; fingertips would glide over the surface of stone or metal objects. Others may have been a little rough or sharp, creating a different sensation in the fingers exploring the surface. All these tactile experiences enhanced the effect the amulet on its user.⁶⁵⁴

Sometimes, especially in the case of amulets used to heal, the amulet touched an area that was painful.⁶⁵⁵ Galen describes his testing a jasper amulet, making sure the thread was

649 On the experience and movement of amulet necklaces, see for example: Whitmore, 'Fascinating Fascina'.

650 A spell where a customer needs to tie the knots: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 22.61.

651 S. McKie, 'The Legs, Hands, Head and Arms Race: The Human Body as a Magical Weapon in the Roman World' in: A. Parker, S. McKie (eds.), *Material Approaches to Roman Magic. Occult Objects and Supernatural Substances* (Oxford 2018) 115-125.

652 J. Hughes, 'Tiny and Fragmented Votive Offerings from Classical Antiquity' in: S.R. Martin, S.M. Langin-Hooper (eds.), *The Tiny and the Fragmented. Miniature, Broken, or Otherwise Incomplete Objects in the Ancient World* (Oxford 2018) 48-71: 64-65. On touching small objects see also: D. Bailey, 'Touch and the Cheirotic Apprehension of Prehistoric Figurines' in: P. Dent (ed.), *Sculpture and Touch* (Farnham 1975) 27-44: especially 29 on empowerment by miniature objects.

653 Bonnell Freidin, *Birthing Romans*, 193; Dasen, 'Healing Images', 186-188.

654 Hughes, 'Tiny and Fragmented', 49, 63-64; S.R. Martin, S.M. Langin-Hooper, 'In/Complete. An Introduction to the Theories of Miniaturization and Fragmentation' in: S.R. Martin, S.M. Langin-Hooper (eds.), *The Tiny and the Fragmented. Miniature, Broken, or Otherwise Incomplete Objects in the Ancient World* (Oxford 2018) 1-23: 3-6; Graham, *Reassembling Religion*, 96.

655 Dasen, Nagy, 'Gems', 435.

long enough for it to touch the designated area (near the ‘mouth of the belly’).⁶⁵⁶ In *PGM* VII. 193-196, a scorpion sting would be healed by using an amulet made according to the following instructions: ‘On a clean piece of papyrus, write the characters and place it on the part which has the sting; wrap the papyrus around it, and the sting will lose its pain immediately.’⁶⁵⁷ In ancient healing rituals, touch, especially the touch of the divine, was of great importance.⁶⁵⁸ With limited possibilities for pain relief, pain itself was an active physical experience: having an object attached to the painful body part may have increased the awareness of pain, but also have created a feeling of being ‘treated’,⁶⁵⁹ and thus a sense of being in control of the situation; the user may have felt that the object contained and expelled the ailment.⁶⁶⁰

The tactile experience of amulets for larger locations

As numerous references to the urge to touch cult statues demonstrate, the need to touch religious objects goes beyond small objects attached to the body.⁶⁶¹ Touch could be impactful in the use of amulets for larger locations as well. Touch could renew the sense of the object’s power in the mind of the user. In relation to the amuletic iconography of a floor mosaic, A. Wilburn suggests that ‘These tactile experiences may have been understood as animating or activating the image.’⁶⁶² Touch likewise plays a large role in some instructions for making objects that functioned as amulets. Pliny the Elder 30.52 features an instruction that reappears in third- and fifth-century medical handbooks and we can therefore assume it kept its meaning over a long period: ‘Another remedy is a live green-lizard, hung up in a pot before the door of the bedroom of the patient, that he may touch it with his hand on going out and coming in.’⁶⁶³ In the fifth century, Marcellus of Bordeaux adds that the pot with the lizard had to be touched with the left hand. The ritual was intended for healing the spleen. Every time the patient entered or left the bedroom, they would have been aware of the object. Their touch would make the pot move or swing. With every touch, the supernatural power of the object was renewed and made present in the user’s mind.

Touch created awareness of the object and its supernatural power. The experience created a sense of control; users, as it were, touched the power of the supernatural world that was working for them.

656 Galen, *De simplicium medicamentorum* Kühn XII.207.

657 *PGM* VII. 193-196. Translation by J. Scarborough in GMPT.

658 In the cult of Asklepios, see Hughes in relation to touching tiny votive objects: Hughes, ‘Tiny and Fragmented’, 65-66; Rask, *Personal Experience*, 26-28.

659 On the experience of ailments: King, Toner, ‘Medicine and the Senses’.

660 Inspired by Hughes’ ideas on anatomical votives: Hughes, ‘Tiny and Fragmented’, 55-56.

661 P. Weddle, *Touching the Gods: Physical Interaction with Cult Statues in the Roman World* (PhD Thesis Durham University 2010); A. Purves (ed.), *Touch and the Ancient Senses* (Oxon/New York 2018).

662 Wilburn, ‘Archaeology of Ritual’, 111.

663 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 30.52. Translation by Jones, *Pliny, Books 28-32*, 310-311. *Medicina Plinii* II 13.7; Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 23.50.

3.3.3 Experiencing scent

In general the smellscape of the ancient world was varied and its experience very different from that of our modern world. However, smell is not a recurring element of amulets mentioned in the ancient sources – neither in the instructions for making them, nor in texts criticising their use.⁶⁶⁴ This does not mean that amulets did not produce any smells, nor that it is impossible to study this experience. Amulets, especially those made of natural materials, must have had a wide variety of smells that may have influenced the experience of the objects as well as individuals' experience of their own body.

Some of the plants used for making amulets produced strong smells. Pliny the Elder, for example, describes a fever amulet consisting of a dog tooth filled with frankincense. The object was worn on the body and would be smelled.⁶⁶⁵ Marcellus of Bordeaux describes an amulet made with resin.⁶⁶⁶ This could have produced a pine scent. G. Davis describes how amber can also produce a pine scent, especially when warmed up and rubbed between the fingers. Ancient authors also write about the smell of amber.⁶⁶⁷ As human fingers reached out amulets (as discussed above), they might release the scent, thus adding to the objects' efficacy by enhancing their experience. When touching amulets not worn in containers, the smell of the object would spread to the fingers and clothes.

Smell could be an active part of the supposed power of the object; some substances were (believed to be) inhaled. Galen, for instance, describes the efficacy of an amulet against epilepsy, consisting of the root of a peony and worn on the neck by a boy suffering from the disorder. According to Galen, 'It was therefore logical to consider either that certain particles of the root, falling off and then being breathed in, were having a therapeutic effect on the affected parts; or that the air itself was transformed and altered by the root.'⁶⁶⁸ In a medical instruction to cure insomnia, Pliny describes how plant material, in this case anise, might be attached to the pillow; its smell would induce sleep.⁶⁶⁹

Many amulets were composed of natural materials such as plants and animal parts. Because they could be worn for a longer period of time, the materials might go through various stages of decay that could produce certain smells. Many amulets contained animal dung. Some of these

664 For the role and importance of smell in other rituals, see for example: H. Bowden, 'A Cognitive Approach to Ancient Greek Animal Sacrifice' in: E. Eidinow, A.W. Geertz, J. North (eds.), *Cognitive Approaches to Ancient Religious Experience* (Cambridge 2022) 19-43: 37-39; E. Eidinow, 'Ancient Greek Smells and Divine Fragrances. Anthropomorphizing the Gods in Ancient Greek Culture' in: E. Eidinow, A.W. Geertz, J. North (eds.), *Cognitive Approaches to Ancient Religious Experience* (Cambridge 2022) 69-95.

665 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.107.

666 Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 8.26.

667 Davis, 'Rubbing and Rolling', 73-75.

668 Galen, *De simplicium medicamentorum* Kühn XI.859-861. Translation by Gourevitch, 'Popular Medicines', 268. The root of peonies actually contains active substances against spasms – when consumed: Gourevitch, 'Popular Medicines', 268-269.

669 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 20.186. Although it is debatable whether this is technically an amulet.

had to be worn in a container around the neck.⁶⁷⁰ In the introduction to book X of his treatise *On Simple Drugs* Galen writes about the use of (human) excrement for medical purposes and argues against it – it would pollute the user's body. Nevertheless, he refers to the use of dung in his instructions, for example wolf dung worn in an amulet.⁶⁷¹ C. Petit has analysed both Galen's aversion to dung and his use of it. According to Galen, the biggest problem with using dung is pollution of the mouth caused by eating it. That problem does not occur, however, when using dung to create an amulet.⁶⁷² Furthermore, dried or naturally odourless dung could be used; these would not have bothered the wearer of the amulet very much. According to a passage from Marcellus of Bordeaux, horse dung had to be dried in an oven before being attached as an amulet.⁶⁷³ Amulet makers and users were probably aware of the specific dung related smells and would have worked around this by using dried materials.

Experiencing a specific smell would have reminded people of the presence of the object, which would in this way have kept or regained a central place in their minds.

3.3.4 Experiencing sound

Sound could be an aspect of amulet use, and although it was not an essential element, it could certainly add to its experience. For example, John Chrysostom describes bells worn by children, despite the fact that there was the protection of the cross to reach out to: 'What shall we say about the amulets and the bells which are hung upon the hand'.⁶⁷⁴ Bells were used to scare away danger, for instance in the form of demons. Bronze or copper was most often used for bells; the sound of these materials was understood as apotropaic.⁶⁷⁵ In addition, children were often given rattles. Both bells and rattles could have several purposes. A. Parker explains that, upon hearing the rattle activated by the child, parents would know that the child was present and in good health. At the same time, the sound might chase off imminent danger (dangerous animals or supernatural beings) and would calm or distract a crying child.⁶⁷⁶ In general, bells could be used for all sorts of locations, for example in the form of wind charms.⁶⁷⁷ Roman *tintinnabula* may be seen as amulets: they combined the use of bells with that of phallic apotropaic imagery to avert the evil eye

670 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.259, 30.26, 30.135, 30.137, 37.145; *Medicina Plinii* I 13.10; Alexander of Tralles, *Therapeutica* P. 2.375.20-25; Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 14.53, 16.11, 28.52.

671 Galen, *De simplicium medicamentorum* Kühn XII.295.

672 Petit, 'Galen, Pharmacology and the Boundaries of Medicine', 69.

673 Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 14.53 and see 16.11 for the use of dried dung.

674 John Chrysostom, *In epistulam I ad Corinthios* 12.13 (PG 61.105-106). Translation T.W. Chambers, *The Homilies of St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, on the epistles of Paul to the Corinthians*. A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Series 1, Vol. 12 (New York 1889) homily XII on 64-73.

675 Faraone, *Transformation*, 85-87.

676 Parker, 'Approaching Tintinnabula', 60-61; see also: Dasen, 'Probaskania', 189.

677 Parker, 'Approaching Tintinnabula'; Toner, 'Sensing the Ancient Past', 10.

and prevent evil from entering the locations they were attached to.⁶⁷⁸

In the case of other amulets, sound may have been less intentional. Amulets composed of multiple materials could produce a rattling sound. GMA 20 contains a folded metal tablet that was found in a metal *bullā*, which possibly produced a sound when handled.⁶⁷⁹ Some instructions mention a living lizard to be put in a vessel and worn on the body or installed at a certain location.⁶⁸⁰ Pliny, for example, suggest that ‘A green lizard too may be tried, attached (*adalligata*) alive, in a vessel just large enough to contain it.’⁶⁸¹ Although we do not know how long the lizard would have survived its ordeal, it must have moved in its container and thereby made noises that heightened the user’s awareness.

Sound could also be made by human bodies in the rituals accompanying amulet use. Speech acts could be used to attract or avert supernatural powers.⁶⁸² Such acts were believed to have the power to create a difference in the world.⁶⁸³ The words could be spoken by the ritual specialist performing rituals accompanying amulet use.⁶⁸⁴ Speech acts might be performed at different stages of the amulet’s creation, for example when it was attached to the wearer.⁶⁸⁵ PGM IV. 475-829 concerns an amulet to protect a ritual specialist during the performance of a certain ritual. The papyrus gives the following instructions: ‘Look intently, and make a long bellowing sound, like a horn, releasing all your breath and straining your sides; and kiss the phylacteries and say, first toward the right: “Protect me, PROSYMÈRE.”’⁶⁸⁶ As previously discussed, the texts written on amulets may have been read aloud as well. For example, Marcellus of Bordeaux gives an instruction for making an inscribed silver tablet for stomach pain prescribing a text that had to be written as well as spoken.⁶⁸⁷ In this way the user of the amulet would have been made aware of its text written on the amulet.⁶⁸⁸ If the users were reading the texts aloud and making the sounds themselves, the experience of hearing the sounds was combined with that of producing them.

All in all, it may be stated that sound enhanced the experience of the amulet’s power and contributed to the user’s awareness of its presence.

678 Parker, ‘Approaching Tintinnabula’.

679 GMA 20.

680 Not always clear if the animal needed to be alive: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 29.129; *Medicina Plinii* III 16.5. See also an example with bugs: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 29.64

681 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 30.104. Translation by Jones, *Pliny, Books 28-32*, 344-345. The parallel in *Medicina Plinii* is III 17.3.

682 Toner, ‘Sensing the Ancient Past’, 10.

683 Frankfurter, ‘Spell and Speech Act’.

684 Examples of speech acts: Marcellus of Bordeaux, *De Medicamentis* 14.68-69, 22.41, 29.35, 31.33, 32.21; Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 22.61, 24.133, 24.180-181, 26.116; Alexander of Tralles, *Therapeutica* P. 2.585.5-19.

685 Marcellus of Bordeaux, *De Medicamentis* 14.26 and PGM VII. 370-373.

686 PGM IV. 475-829. Translation by M.W. Meyer in GMPT.

687 And an additional text had to be spoken as well. Marcellus of Bordeaux, *De Medicamentis* 20.66.

688 See also the discussion on the visibility of the texts and imagery on textual amulets in 3.3.1 on the experience of visibility.

3.3.5 Experiencing taste

In general, taste did not play a large role in the experience of amulet use.⁶⁸⁹ According to the definition used in this thesis, amulets were attached to their sphere of influence and therefore not consumed. This does not mean that in the ritual processes surrounding the use of amulets, the experience of taste did not play any part at all.

Using amulets could be combined with other rituals, carried out by, or in accordance with prescriptions given by, professionals such as a religious or medical specialist. In some instructions for making amulets, a drink, pill, or other substance had to be consumed in combination with the use of the amulet. In one passage, for instance, Alexander of Tralles prescribes a combination of an amulet and the swallowing of pills to cure epilepsy.⁶⁹⁰ Marcellus of Bordeaux describes the attachment of wolf dung to the patient accompanied by the drinking of a little dung mixed with warm water – without the patient knowing there was dung in the drink.⁶⁹¹ Gemstone amulets could be altered (chipped, broken, powdered), added to a drink and consumed.⁶⁹² Another ritual act, often combined with powerful writing, is licking words. *PGM XIII. 1040-1055* describes a ritual with an amulet to ‘put down fear or anger’; the words written on the amulet had to be licked off.⁶⁹³ An additional experience of amulet use relating to the sensation of taste was refraining from consuming certain products. Some instructions stipulate that the ritual specialist had to be fasting while performing the ritual. Pliny gives an instruction for curing sores and abscesses, which, apart from the creation of an amulet, required a speech act to be performed by the specialist declaring that the patient was fasting as well: ‘Fasting I give a cure to a fasting patient’.⁶⁹⁴ Fasting (similar to being ‘pure’ or ‘chaste’) while using an amulet would also make users more aware of their amulet.⁶⁹⁵

Although taste might not be part of the experience of the amulet itself, it could certainly

689 Taste is therefore not fully explored in this thesis, for more information see: Z. Kamash, ‘The Taste of Religion in the Roman World’ in: G. Harvey, J. Hughes (eds.), *Sensual Religion: Religion and the Five Senses* (Sheffield 2018) 63-83.

690 Alexander of Tralles, *Therapeutica*, P. 1.571.16-19.

691 Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 28.52, for a drink see also: 28.20.

692 Á.M. Nagy, ‘*Daktylios pharmakites*. Magical Healing Gems and Rings in the Graeco-Roman World’ in: I. Csepregi, C. Burnett (eds.), *Ritual Healing. Magic, Ritual and Medical Therapy from Antiquity Until the Early Modern Period* (Florence 2012) 71-106: 81.

693 *PGM XIII. 734-1077* (1040-1055). Another example of words being ‘consumed’ is the drinking of water that was poured over a Harpocrates stele: A.T. Wilburn, ‘Figurines, Images, and Representations Used in Ritual Practices’ in: D. Frankfurter (ed.), *Guide to the Study of Ancient Magic* (Leiden 2019) 456-506: 470-472 and 472n.43.

694 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 24.180-181. Translation by Jones, *Pliny, Books 24-27*, 126-129. See also: Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 8.58-9.

695 *PGM VII. 215-218*; *GEMF 26.8-22*; *PGM X. 24-35*; Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 8.59-60 (8.57-8 for the ritual specialist to be pure). On deviation from daily practices and experience see: L.H. Martin, ‘Identifying Symptoms of Religious Experience from Ancient Material Culture. The Example of Cults of the Roman Mithras’ in: E. Eidinow, A.W. Geertz, J. North (eds.), *Cognitive Approaches to Ancient Religious Experience* (Cambridge 2022) 218-242: 221.

be part of the ritual experience of using an amulet, particularly in relation to healing.

3.3.6 Experiencing the efficacy of amulets through the senses

The attachment of an amulet to its designated location brought about a wide variety of sensory experiences. First, the visual perception of an amulet was in all probability of great importance for its believed effect. However, we find that there was a certain tension between visibility and invisibility. Amulets could be worn visibly or hidden under clothes. Written texts were rolled up and tied with a string or worn in an amulet container. The texts themselves may have been invisible to users or third parties, but they were present. While the element of secrecy may have enhanced the experience of amulet use, the fact that someone wore an amulet was usually not a secret. Amulets were visibly attached to larger locations and people would be aware of the presence of buried amulets.

Secondly, amulets were touched by users wearing them on their bodies. Wearers would feel the contact the object made with their skin and be directly aware of its material affordances. Users might reach out to the small amulets they were wearing; amulets attached to larger locations would also have been touched in passing. In this way, users could ‘access’ the supernatural powers at play. Through touch these powers would work for them.

Thirdly, scent, sound, and taste could also contribute to the amulet users’ awareness of the objects they had surrounded themselves with and thus of the powers involved. People could smell the objects attached to their necks, hear the wind play with objects attached to doors and windows or taste substances used in the rituals that came with amulet use.

The sensory experience of amulets enhanced users’ awareness and activated the amulet in their minds. In addition, it reminded users of the power of the object that was believed to be present. Touch was probably an important element in experiencing the healing properties of an amulet. Evil-averting imagery and sound made users aware of the apotropaic powers of the objects, thus providing feelings of safety. These sensory experiences may have been more intense if they were somehow unusual, for instance when amulets were made from materials or producing sounds and smells that people would not normally encounter.⁶⁹⁶ Sensory experiences confirmed the users’ sense of ‘being treated’, of knowing that the amulet acted for them.⁶⁹⁷ Through the senses, they perceived the protection, healing and/or the benefits they wanted to receive.

By giving their users the experience of ‘being treated’ amulets may also have affected the users’ psychological state. In a discussion of the possibilities of the placebo in Coptic ‘magical’ texts, K. Dosoo uses the idea of *somatic focus*.⁶⁹⁸ Paying attention to the symptoms and their changes played an important role in experiencing disease and treatment. Through

696 J. Toner, *Popular Culture in Ancient Rome* (Cambridge 2009) 125, 142-143.

697 For ideas on experiencing treatment through object use see: Chronopoulou, ‘Placebo is Magic’, 29.

698 Dosoo, ‘Healing Traditions’, 82.

sensory awareness of an amulet, especially if it was attached to the part of the body that needed protection or treatment, and a focus on the expected outcome, the user may have felt better, or at least safe and in control.

There can be no doubt that sensory experiences were a crucial aspect of amulet use. All of these experiences were powerful because of the one thing they had in common: their impact on feelings of safety and control.

3.4 EXCURSUS: THE EXPERIENCE OF MATERIALITY IN THE CHOICE BETWEEN JUDICIAL AMULETS AND CURSES

In order to highlight the importance of materiality in amulet use and its relationship with the location of use, I would like to compare amulet use with another religious practice: cursing in the context of law.⁶⁹⁹ There is a small corpus of amulets that overlaps with specific types of curses dealing with lawsuits. Excavations have yielded a sizeable corpus of judicial binding curses (excluding prayers for justice), but only a small corpus of judicial amulets.⁷⁰⁰ These two types of objects have never been the subject of comparative study, even though they had the same goal: to win a court case. Amulets and curses represent two different strategies: a curse would harm the opponent – an amulet would empower the user.⁷⁰¹ Why would some people choose a curse and others an amulet to deal with a lawsuit?⁷⁰² By comparing these two options and the motives for using them, we can gain insight into the role materiality and its potential played in choosing amulets.

3.4.1 Using a curse

A binding curse, κατάδεσμος in Greek or *defixio* in Latin, consists of a lead tablet, inscribed with a text that expresses a wish to harm a rival, opponent or enemy. After inscribing

699 This was part of a paper I wrote for the conference *Ancient Law: Outside the Norms* in Edinburgh 7-8 July 2023. I would like to thank the organisers and participants for their feedback.

700 In 1992 a total of 67 Greek and 46 Latin judicial binding curses had been found. These numbers can only have increased. Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 117. I have excluded judicial prayers; in most examples judicial prayers do not refer to the involvement of actual legal procedures, since the matter is in the hands of the gods. See E. Eidinow, 'Binding Spells on Tablets and Papyri' in: D. Frankfurter (ed.), *Guide to the Study of Ancient Magic* (Leiden 2019) 351-387; 351-352 for a quick overview of the debate on prayers for justice; Papakonstantinou, *Cursing for Justice*, 37.

701 For more on judicial curses see for example: Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 116-150; W. Riess, *Performing Interpersonal Violence. Court, Curse, and Comedy in Fourth-Century BCE Athens* (Berlin 2012); Z. Papakonstantinou, *Cursing for Justice. Magic, Disputes, and the Lawcourts in Classical Athens* (Stuttgart 2021). One of the few papers that includes judicial amulets is F. Maltomini, 'Libanio, il camaleonte, un papiro e altri testi', *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 147 (2004) 147-153.

702 I will not discuss formal aspects of legal history, because it falls outside the scope of the present research. In the words of John Gager, I would like to 'focus instead on one particular aspect of the legal process, namely, how prospective litigants prepared to defend themselves against their accusers': Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 116.

the tablet, it was folded, pierced, and deposited in a place with a connection with the underworld, such as a grave or a spring. Curses often intended to harm a competitor in sports, love, business or law.⁷⁰³ ‘Judicial’ curses are datable between the sixth century BCE and the sixth century CE and have been found all over the Greek and Roman world.⁷⁰⁴ They were made by and for every social group.⁷⁰⁵ The considerable number of excavated ‘judicial’ curse tablets demonstrates that cursing in a legal context was common. Written sources show that ancient individuals feared losing the ability to speak because of supernatural harm caused by opponents.⁷⁰⁶ When preparing for a trial, cursing one’s opponent was one of the available religious strategies, as were amulets and votives.⁷⁰⁷ Here, I will present only one example of a judicial curse, but its length allows the discussion of several issues related to judicial curses.

Daimones under the earth and *daimones* whoever you may be; fathers of fathers and mothers (who are a) match (for men), whether male or female, *daimones* whoever you may be and who lie here (...) take over the voice(s) of my opponents, (I) Alexandros also called Makedonios, to whom Matidia gave birth, namely, Theodôros the governor (*hêgemôn*) and Timôn to whom Markia gave birth NÊTHIMAZ ... MASÔLABEÔ MAMAXÔMAXÔ ENKOPTÔDIT ... ENOUOUMAR AKNEU MELOPTHÊLAR AKN ... ruler of *daimones* beneath the earth. ... And give a muzzle to Theodôros the governor (*hêgemôn*) ... of Cyprus and to Timôn, so that they will be unable to do anything against me, Alexandros MAZO ... also called Makedonios. But just as you are ... wordless and speechless (...) so also let my opponents be speechless and voiceless. Theodôros the governor (*hêgemôn*) and Timôn . . . ⁷⁰⁸

This was written on a lead tablet found in a grave on Cyprus; the object has been dated to

703 H.S. Versnel, ‘Defixio’, *Brill’s New Pauly Online*, last accessed September 2025.

704 Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 122. Most of the Greek sources come from fourth-century BCE Athens: Riess, *Performing Interpersonal Violence*, 171.

705 Curse tablets involved materials and scribes and were therefore not free. In other words, they will not have been available to all. For a long time scholars saw them as a strategy used by the ‘lower classes’, but especially the fourth-century BCE Athenian tablets show that the social and political elite was also involved in the creation and receiving of curse tablets: Papakonstantinou, *Cursing for Justice*, 18-19; Z. Papakonstantinou, ‘Some Observations on Litigants and Their Supporters in Athenian Judiciary Defixiones’ in: Á. Martínez Fernández, *et al.* (eds.), *Ágalma: ofrenda desde la Filología Clásica a Manuel García Teijeiro* (Valladolid 2014) 1027-1035: 1029.

706 For example, Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 120; Eidinow, ‘Binding Spells’, 360. Cicero for example described how a lawyer forgot his text and attributed the effect to being poisoned and cursed: Cicero, *Brutus* 217. See also Libanius, *Oratio* 1.43.

707 Curses as part of preparations for trial: Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 117. A votive: R.D. Kotansky, ‘A Silver Votive Plaque with a Judicial Prayer Against Slander’, *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 60.1 (2020) 139-157.

708 Gager, *Curse Tablets*, nr. 46.

the second or third century CE.⁷⁰⁹ It was created by Alexandros.⁷¹⁰ He is identified by his mother's name, which is common in curses as well as in amulets.⁷¹¹ The curse was made to harm Theodôros, the Roman governor of Cyprus, and one Timôn by affecting their voice.⁷¹² Timôn may have been the governor's assistant. In this specific case, all parties are men, but other tablets also mention women.⁷¹³ The tablet provides no information on the subject of the trial.⁷¹⁴ The requests presented in judicial curses focus on performance at the trial and not on retribution. This suggests that judicial curses were made before the trial took place. They reflect the anxiety of those involved and their decision to deal with these fears and reduce the risks.⁷¹⁵

The tablet engages the supernatural to aid the user. Curse tablets often addressed the dead to act for the user and perform the curse.⁷¹⁶ In this example the addressees were the individuals buried in the grave, who were approached with *voces magicae* whose meaning remains unknown to modern scholars.⁷¹⁷ The supernatural seems to assume the role of a secret accomplice, deployed to assist in attracting victory.⁷¹⁸ Alexandros requests that Theodôros and Timôn be robbed of the capacity to speak.⁷¹⁹ This is a common request in judicial curse tablets: just as the dead can no longer speak, the opponents of the curser must be voiceless and in this way be unable to perform in court.⁷²⁰

In a legal context, curse tablets can be seen as a form of 'dispute management'.⁷²¹

709 Gager, *Curse Tablets*, nr. 46.

710 The name Alexandros also shows up on two other curse tablets found at the same location: Gager, *Curse Tablets*, nr. 46.

711 Although not that common in this specific curse hoard: Gager, *Curse Tablets*, nr. 46. See: J.B. Curbera, 'Maternal Lineage in Greek Magical Texts' in: D.R. Jordan, H. Montgomery, E. Thomassen (eds.), *The World of Ancient Magic. Papers from the first International Samson Eitrem Seminar at the Norwegian Institute at Athens, 4-8 May 1997* (Bergen 1999) 195-203.

712 Gager, *Curse tablets*, nr. 46n.66. The curse tablets show that legal actions often involved more than two people: Eidinow, 'Binding Spells', 362, 382.

713 Z. Papakonstantinou states that 'it is safe to say that in the eyes of the persons who commissioned legal curses Athenian women had, through their involvement in formal or informal aspects of litigation, as much power in influencing the outcome of a trial as men.' Citation from: Papakonstantinou, 'Some Observations on Litigants', 1033, see 1031-1033.

714 See Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 117. For an example with information on the trial see: Gager, *Curse Tablets*, nr 47 and 54.

715 Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 117-118; Papakonstantinou, *Cursing for Justice*, 33-34.

716 The dead could act as mediators between the supplicant and the gods or as performers of the wishes of the gods. For the discussion, see for example: Riess, *Performing Interpersonal Violence*, 211-212.

717 Gager, *Curse Tablets*, nr. 45.

718 On the role of the supernatural in prayers for justice, see for example: A. Chaniotis, 'Von Ehre, Schande und kleinen Verbrechen unter Nachbarn: Konfliktbewältigung und Götterjustiz in Gemeinden des antiken Anatolien' in: F.R. Pfefsch (ed.), *Konflikt* (Heidelberg 2004) 233-254: 253.

719 Gager, *Curse Tablets*, nr. 46.

720 C.A. Faraone, 'The Agonistic Context of Early Greek Binding Spells' in: C.A. Faraone, D. Ogden (eds.), *Magika Hiera. Ancient Greek Magic and Religion* (Oxford 1997) 3-32: 15.

721 Faraone, 'Agonistic Context', 3-32; Papakonstantinou, *Cursing for Justice*, 18; Riess *Performing Interpersonal Violence*, 164 (on conflict resolution).

Litigants used curse tablets to improve their position and influence the outcome of the case.⁷²² This had an effect on a psychological level; a curse could provide the party in question with a sense of power in a situation that could have a negative impact on their lives. Curses gave their users agency – or the idea of agency.⁷²³ In this way, they helped to cope with the emotions surrounding an upcoming trial.⁷²⁴ At the same time, literary sources make it clear that the fear of being cursed was also widely present. This fear, nourished by gossip and amplified rumours, could actually result in a poor performance.⁷²⁵

3.4.2 Using an amulet

Two specific aspects make using a curse different from using an amulet. According to my definition, an amulet was supposed to have an effect on the location it was attached to. An amulet tied to the upper arm of the user demarcated the user as the amulet's action space. 'Judicial' amulets belong to the category of amulets used to secure benefits. Unlike 'judicial' curses, which were deposited with the aim of harming the opponent, 'judicial' amulets were used to empower the user and help them win the lawsuit. A 'judicial' amulet worn by one of the litigants was thus actively present in court.⁷²⁶ An amulet of the first century BCE or first century CE has the following request: 'Let no more harm appear! Drive away, drive away the lawsuit (ὀπόθεσις) from Rufina! And if anyone shall injure me (ἁδικέω) henceforth, turn (him) away! And may no poison harm me.'⁷²⁷ The amulet was most probably created before the lawsuit in which Rufina was one of the parties took place.⁷²⁸ As the editor R. Kotansky stressed, the verb ἁδικέω suggests that this woman felt she needed protection against any kind of injury related to judicial proceedings.⁷²⁹ Rufina believed that the object would create a 'shield' around her that would ward off harm, injuries, and poison – perhaps even prevent the lawsuit from taking place. The harm she feared could be the result of an opponent's curse or poisoning.⁷³⁰

As I indicated above, unlike curses, amulets positively influence the user, instead of negatively influencing the opponent. *PGM IV*, a handbook from Roman Egypt written in Greek

⁷²² Papakonstantinou, *Cursing for Justice*, 28-29.

⁷²³ Papakonstantinou, *Cursing for Justice*, 28-29, 118-146.

⁷²⁴ Or the risks in the words of: Eidinow, 'Binding Spells', 382.

⁷²⁵ For a discussion of the psychosomatic effects of curse tablets see: Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 22; Tomlin, 'The Curse Tablets', 101-104. For new arguments see: McKie, *Living and Cursing in the Roman West*; E. Eidinow, 'Magic and Social Tension' in: D. Frankfurter (ed.), *Guide to the Study of Ancient Magic* (Leiden 2019) 746-774.

⁷²⁶ For another example of the use of an amulet in a judicial context, see S. Shaked, R. Elitzur-Leiman, 'An Aramaic Amulet for Winning a Case in a Court of Law', *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 26 (2019) 1-16 (this amulet in certain respects resembles GMA 58, but it is in Aramaic and dates from the sixth to seventh century.); also Kotansky, 'Silver Votive Plaque', although this concerns a votive, not an amulet.

⁷²⁷ Translation by Kotansky, GMA 36.

⁷²⁸ Kotansky, GMA 36, 182. The last sentence is probably a reference to poison as one of Pontus' kings was known to be invulnerable to poison.

⁷²⁹ Kotansky, GMA 36, 189.

⁷³⁰ Kotansky, GMA 36, 190, 198-199.

and dated to the fourth century, contains an instruction for making an amulet that would bring victory to its user.⁷³¹ Three Homeric verses had to be inscribed on an iron tablet (*lamella*); the act of inscription had to be accompanied by a speech act and a consecration ritual. The object would be efficacious in a variety of situations. The instruction claims that ‘A contestant with the tablet stays undefeated, just as also a charioteer who carries the tablet along with a lodestone; and the same is true in court (δικαστήριον); also, these are things for a gladiator to carry.’⁷³² The amulet, in brief, guaranteed all sorts of victories. Multiple examples of curse tablets for these specific areas of life have been found, but few amulets, which makes this amulet quite special.⁷³³ *PGM XXXVI. 35-68* provides instructions for creating a ‘charm to restrain anger and to secure favor and an excellent charm for attracting victory in the courts (it works even against kings; no charm is greater)’.⁷³⁴ This amulet had to be worn under the garments to provide victory for the wearer.⁷³⁵

A tablet made for Proclus in the fourth century carries a text that seems both maledictive and amuletic. It includes the following: ‘give favor, glory, victory to Proclus whom Salvina bore, before Diogenianus the dux of Bostra in Arabia (...) in order that he might be justifiably or unjustifiably victorious in any judgment before any judge, before a magister, before all who observe him and who hear him and his words.’⁷³⁶ Proclus was involved in a dispute with Salvina and her children. As Salvina was Proclus’s mother, we are dealing with a family dispute.⁷³⁷ Diogenianus the dux of Bostra apparently was the military governor of Arabia around this time.⁷³⁸ As in the case of curse tablets, a larger group of people is included: all opponents, judges and all who are watching and listening.⁷³⁹

731 On the possible Egyptian influence on these types of formulations see: Quack, ‘From Ritual to Magic’. Other instructions for the creation of objects in relation to victory in court see: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 29.67, 29.53-54, also: 24.165 a plant for ‘its use to gain the highest position at Court’ (it is unclear how this would work); 9.79, ‘a spell to hinder litigation in the courts’ (this would act more like a curse); 28.114, ‘controls the results of cases in the courts’ (in relation to other sources, this should perhaps be seen as harming others – see the argumentation of Maltomini, ‘Libanio, il camaleonte’ and also: GEMF 40.44-45. Finally, Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 37.169, ‘the ‘haematitis,’ allows it to interfere in lawsuits and trials’.

732 *PGM IV. 2160-2164*. Translation by H. Martin jr. in GMPT.

733 Gager, *Curse Tablets*, chapter one and chapter three.

734 *PGM XXXVI. 35-68*. Translation by R.F. Hock in GMPT.

735 One could wonder who in the legal process was intended to wear this object as ‘gladiator’ and ‘charioteer’ seem to point to use in a professional context. Was the intended wearer a ‘lawyer’? I would like to thank dr. Renske Janssen for this suggestion.

736 Translation by Kotansky, GMA 58, 333.

737 Kotansky, GMA 58, 341. Because of the family relation, it has been argued that the lawsuit may have concerned property. Kotansky, GMA 58, 337.

738 For an analysis of the names see Kotansky, GMA 58, 330, 336, 338.

739 Kotansky, GMA 58, 340-343. For more on people watching, see for example: A. Chaniotis, ‘Watching a Lawsuit: A New Curse Tablet from Southern Russia’, *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 33.1 (1992) 69-73. While in theory body amulets were only used by individuals, a ‘judicial’ amulet for a group of people has been found, which suggests that in a judicial context curses and amulets were used in a similar manner: GMA 7. For another possible amulet (or prayer?) for a group of people see *PGM P6c*.

Furthermore, Proclus is described as wearing the supernatural's 'holy and unconquerable power'.⁷⁴⁰ He thus carries the power of the object with him. Most of the text focusses on Proclus, urging the supernatural to make him win the lawsuit. However, the tablet also presents requests similar to those found on curse tablets, such as the request to 'Silence, subjugate, and enslave' the people involved, and the text ends by saying: 'And may no one act in opposition, or speak in opposition, or deliberate in opposition.'⁷⁴¹ As R.D. Kotansky points out, the use of this type of curse-language is unique in amulets.⁷⁴² It could thus be argued that the tablet combines two strategies to enhance the position of Proclus and weaken that of his opponents – and everyone involved. Still, the object must be considered an amulet, since Proclus wore it on his body.

3.4.3 Amulet or curse?

People involved in lawsuits might use amulets or curses because they feared a negative outcome of the trial and/or counteractions of the opposite party. To deal with these fears they could call on supernatural power to help them by arranging a positive outcome for themselves (amulet) or a negative outcome for their opponent(s) (curse). For practical reasons, people usually opted for one or the other. For example, an amulet could in theory only be worn by one individual – although at least one Latin/Greek 'judicial' amulet for a group has been identified.⁷⁴³ If several people decided to reach out to supernatural aid, a curse might be more suitable. In addition, the choice for a certain type of object may have been influenced by the specialist consulted.⁷⁴⁴ It is often assumed that amulets were made by religious specialists, but because of the considerable amount of legal knowledge and titles referred to in the case of Proclus' amulet, it has been suggested that the person who wrote this text may have had a legal background – perhaps a court-clerk with access to instructions.⁷⁴⁵ When a religious specialist was consulted, it is likely that they had some specific formularies and knowledge at hand, as many amulets were created with the help of handbooks.⁷⁴⁶ Religious strategies to provide help in a judicial context are also described in the 'magical' handbooks from Roman Egypt. They show that specialists had the knowledge

740 Carrying the power of the object: Kotansky, GMA 58, 345.

741 Translation by Kotansky, GMA 58, 330.

742 Kotansky, GMA 58, 342. I would argue that it was not common, however, after the publication of Kotansky's arguments a sixth-to-seventh-century Aramaic amulet has been published that requests the binding of the tongues of the opponents: Shaked, Elitzur-Leiman, 'Amulet for Winning a Case'.

743 See GMA 7.

744 See chapter two of this book for amulets, for curses see: Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 118-119.

745 As suggested by Kotansky, GMA 58, 331.

746 See chapter two on amulets, on curses see: Riess, *Performing Interpersonal Violence*, 174.

to perform and create a wide variety of rituals and objects in relation to ancient law.⁷⁴⁷ Some fall within the categories of amulets or curses, others fall in between.

Concerning the functioning of curses and amulets, the main difference lies in proximity. Amulets were worn to enhance their users' positions, while curse tablets were installed at a location associated with the underworld to harm an opponent. While in many examples these two practices were separated, the amulet for Proclus shows that the boundaries between amulets and curses could be crossed.⁷⁴⁸ Even when the aim was to harm others, there could be a preference for the proximity of an amulet. Two handbooks from Roman Egypt refer to the creation of spells intended to silence opponents, similar to those in deposited curses, but the objects on which these spells were written, had to be kept close: according to GEMF 40.44-45 the object had to be worn and touched and *PGM* VII. 925-39 prescribes a lead tablet to be worn under the client's foot. Having an object close to the body or touching an object was an important aspect of its efficacy and the transferability of its powers.

In the emotional and psychological impact the proximity of the material object must have played a crucial role. With a curse ancient individuals could direct their anger or frustration at their opponents. Depositing a curse tablet may therefore have created a sense of relief.⁷⁴⁹ The proximity of the amulet would have produced a different psychological effect. The mere presence of the object would have given the users hope and probably removed some of their anxiety, which may have given them the courage to perform better at the trial. As the medical author Soranus pointed out, amulets could give their wearers hope.⁷⁵⁰ On this basis, I argue that the proximity of amulets, their material presence and their potential for sensory experiences were important factors in the decision to use an amulet instead of a deposited curse.

⁷⁴⁷ For example, collected in *PGM* and *GEMF*: *GEMF* 15.353; *GEMF* 21.28-30; *GEMF* 35.26-32; *GEMF* 40.44-45; *PGM* XIII. 805-804; *PGM* VII. 925-39; *PGM* IV. 2160-2164; *PGM* XXXVI. 35-68. See also: *PGM* LI. 1-27; this is not an instruction, but an activated object with a necromantic request from Neilammon concerning his legal opponents, including his son.

⁷⁴⁸ See Faraone, *Transformation*, 192 and 378n.123.

⁷⁴⁹ Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 22-23, based on Tomlin, 'The Curse Tablets', 101.

⁷⁵⁰ Soranus, *Gynaecia* 3.42.

3.5 THE EXPERIENCE OF CONTROLLED AMULET SPACE

As discussed in chapter two, space or location was a crucial factor in the presumed functioning of amulets.⁷⁵¹ Amulets demarcated the space they were supposed to act in. They were placed on the openings between an inside space and the outside world, such as architectural foundations, walls, roofs and especially doors, windows and gates.⁷⁵² *PGM* P10, a sixth-century amulet, provides us with an idea of where the supernatural could hide: ‘Do not hide down here in the ground; do not lurk under a bed, nor under a window, nor under a door, nor under beams, nor under utensils, nor below a pit.’⁷⁵³ As we have seen, there were three locations at play: the outside, the permeable boundary on which the amulet was located, and the inside area demarcated by the amulet. By placing an amulet on significant boundary locations or surrounding a certain area with amulets one could create a closed-off zone of protection. Danger would have to pass the amulet(s) when trying to move from outside into inside – and would be stopped. Conversely, an amulet could force evil out of the inside area and prevent it from re-entering.

As objects that were used to demarcate, amulets fit into the ancient understanding of religious space. Location was an important aspect of ancient religious practices and ritual could be performed wherever it was needed.⁷⁵⁴ Many religious strategies focused on boundary locations to set an inside area apart and attract a supernatural presence. In a paper on ancient religious territoriality F.G. Naerebout argued that in ancient religion, religious space was always marked.⁷⁵⁵ The space set apart for a temple complex, the *temenos*, is an obvious example. This space marked for religious activities would always be demarcated by a border. Both visible and invisible borders served to set the inside area apart, and restricted

751 Part of this research was presented at the Penn-Leiden Colloquium on the Sacred. In the conference paper I compared the use of space in amulets with the use of sacred space. I am convinced that comparing sacred space and the amuletic use of space is a very fruitful way to acquire insight into the different modes of operation of religiously marked space and to deepen our understanding of how both uses of space are situated in a bigger framework. My presentation resulted in interesting discussions for which I am very grateful, and I want to thank the organisers and participants. However, comparing sacred space and amulet space did, in the end, not lead to a better understanding of amulet space itself, so for the purpose of this book I do not include the discussion on the sacred space.

752 Willburn, ‘Building Ritual Agency’; Van Opstall, ‘General Introduction’; D.A. Frese, *The City Gate in Ancient Israel and her Neighbours* (Leiden 2019) 237-255; Johnston, ‘Crossroads’.

753 *PGM* P10. Translation by M.W. Meyer in ACM, nr. 20.

754 Such as ‘portable religion’ for ships or military camps: S. Muir, ‘Religion on the Road in Ancient Greece and Rome’ in: P.A. Harland (ed.), *Travel and Religion in Antiquity* (Canada 2011) 29-47. For using space for ‘magical’ rituals see: Edmonds, *Drawing Down the Moon*, 167-168; Wilburn, ‘Building Ritual Agency’, 600. One distinction that could be made is the idea of religion for here (domestic), there (civic) and anywhere (such as ‘magic’). Amulets fall in all three categories, because they could be installed in locations of every kind and be used in private. Amuletic strategies were also applied to larger constructions such as city walls. J.Z. Smith, ‘Here, There, and Anywhere’ in: J.Z. Smith (ed.), *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago/London 2004) 323-338.

755 Naerebout, ‘Territorialität und griechische Religion’.

and controlled entrance to the space.⁷⁵⁶ This does not mean that all rituals demarcating religious space were similar. Body amulets created a portable religious space, whereas the demarcation of a temple complex was set in the environment. Still, expectations regarding the efficacy of amulets were rooted in, and should be contextualised in, general expectations about the functioning and experience of religious space.⁷⁵⁷

Amulets were experienced with the senses within the space they were used in and both elements impacted the overall experience of amulet users.⁷⁵⁸ Users of amulets on boundary locations not only experienced the demarcated space, but also the transition from unmarked to marked space. Entrance into a space marked for religious activity could be an impactful experience.⁷⁵⁹ Passing boundary locations, such as doors and gates, reminded ancient individuals of the danger that could enter through these openings, but also made them feel protected by the sensory experience of the amulets and the demarcated space as well as by memories of earlier sensory experiences. The experience of demarcated spaces not only occurred when moving through the space, but also when feeling the presence of an amulet on the body. Some instructions state that the user of the amulet should be pure or should fast while being in the marked space.⁷⁶⁰ So, apart from noticing and experiencing amulets on boundary locations, being within the demarcated space may have been associated with specific behaviour which also enhanced the religious experience. In the case of amulets attached to human bodies, the demarcated space was portable, which was of influence for

756 See the work of Naerebout above and of Guettel Cole on the understanding of space in a temple complex: S. Guettel Cole, *Landscapes, Gender, and Ritual Space: The Ancient Greek Experience* (Berkeley 2004) 39-52. On the experience of space in relation to temple complexes see also: Miles, 'Birds Around the Temple'; Von Ehrenheim, 'Placebo Factors at Healing Sanctuaries'.

757 Research into the relationships between space, religion and psychology demonstrates that geographical location can be an important agent in the processes of meaning making. In these processes embodied experiences, combined with other factors such as culturally conditioned knowledge, play an important role. V. Counted, F. Watts, 'An Introduction to the Psychology of Religion and Place' in: V. Counted, F. Watts (eds.), *The Psychology of Religion and Place* (Cham 2019) 1-12; K. Knott, 'Spatial Theory and the Study of Religion', *Religion Compass* 2.6 (2008) 1102-1116; K. Knott, 'Religion, Space, and Place. The Spatial Turn in Research on Religion', *Religion and Society* 1.1 (2010) 29-43. For the application of this type or research, see for example: A. Maddrell, 'Mapping the Visible and Invisible Topographies of Place and Landscape Through Sacred Mobilities' in: V. Counted, F. Watts (eds.), *The Psychology of Religion and Place* (Cham 2019) 131-144.

758 Graham, *Reassembling Religion*, 47-49, 95. See also: M.M. Miles, 'Birds Around the Temple: Constructing a Sacred Environment' in: J. McInerney, I. Sluiter (eds.), *Valuing Landscape in Classical Antiquity: Natural Environment and Cultural Imagination* (Leiden 2016) 151-195.

759 See for example the discussion on the experiences surrounding doors to sanctuaries in: Van Opstall, 'General Introduction', 1-10.

760 Purity: *PGM* VII. 215-218; *GEMF* 26; *PGM* X. 24-35; Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 8.59-60. Fasting: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 24.180-181; Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 8.58-59. On how being pure and fasting can add to the experience of religious space, see for example: Edmons, *Drawing Down the Moon*, 167-168; I. Csepregi, 'Bonus Intra, Melior Exi! "Inside" and "Outside" at Greek Incubation Sanctuaries' in: E.M. van Opstall (ed.), *Sacred Thresholds: The Door to the Sanctuary in Late Antiquity* (Leiden 2018) 110-135: 116-117; Guettel Cole, *Landscapes, Gender, and Ritual Space*, 40.

the experience of that space.⁷⁶¹ The experience of portability is especially evident in the textual amulets of Late Antiquity and will be further discussed in chapter four.

The area in need of help was controlled by the amulet and thus by the supernatural. The supernatural was expected to be present in the demarcated space through the agency of the amulet. A sixth-century amulet for door protection presents several different 'responsible' entities: 'The might of our God prevailed, and the Lord lighted upon the entrance and didn't permit to the malicious one to come into. Abraham dwells here; Christ's blood, cease the evil!'⁷⁶² The supernatural would prevent malevolent influence from entering. The supernatural was believed to be super active in the demarcated space, more active than elsewhere in everyday life.⁷⁶³ The experience of the presence of amulets as well as that of being in a marked, encircled, closed-off and controlled space, users were aware of protective watchfulness of the supernatural. The space in question would have been experienced as a safe space and those using it would have felt more confident. The experience of space the amulet(s) facilitated, had a genuine impact on their users.⁷⁶⁴

3.6 THE EXPERIENCE OF TIME

The use of amulets is dynamic. Amulets were used within different timeframes and some of them may have had an effect for specific amounts of time. They could be used for longer periods, acquire new meanings over time, and even be reused. An amulet could also be discarded when it was no longer necessary. All of this must have influenced the experience of the user and should therefore be considered if our aim is to understand why individuals continued to reach out to amulets. In what follows, I will discuss various layers in the experience of time, starting with the installation of the amulet. I will also address practices of reuse.

3.6.1 A moment in time

The exact moment of first use, with or without accompanying rituals, could influence the experience of amulets. This experience will have been different depending on the time

761 Rask, *Personal Experience*, 112; see also Bonnell Freidin, *Birthing Romans*, 190-191. On the similar perception of body amulets and house amulets see: Faraone, 'Confronting Evil at the Boundaries', 9.

762 PGM P2a, many thanks to dr. Efstathia Dionysopoulou for the English translation.

763 Comparable to the experience of the supernatural in temple complexes: Miles, 'Birds Around the Temple', 188.

764 In line with the argumentation of J. Gruneau Brulin, 'God and Place as Attachment "Figures": A Critical Examination' in: V. Counted, F. Watts (eds.), *The Psychology of Religion and Place* (Cham 2019) 183-200: 193-195. See also: V. Counted, 'Religious and Place Attachment: A Cascade of Parallel Processes' in: V. Counted, F. Watts (eds.), *The Psychology of Religion and Place* (Cham 2019) 167-182; Maddrell, 'Mapping the Visible and Invisible', 136.

of day and also on the season – especially in relation to availability of natural resources to create amulets. Some instructions for the creation of amulets, specify a time period for the installation of the object. In many instances, the amulet had to be attached before sunrise.⁷⁶⁵ This implies that the amulet was installed or attached at night under the power of the moon.⁷⁶⁶ Visiting a ritual specialist and performing the ritual by moonlight and/or the light of a lamp must have added to the sensory experience of receiving an amulet. In other instructions, the installation of the amulet had to take place at a specific astronomical moment. *PGM XXXVI. 320-32*, an instruction for making an anticonception amulet, states ‘attach it as an amulet (περίαψον) during the waning of the moon [which is] in a female sign of the zodiac on a day of Kronos or Hermes.’⁷⁶⁷ Other instructions mention the seventh day after a new moon,⁷⁶⁸ the day of Jupiter,⁷⁶⁹ when the moon is in Aquarius,⁷⁷⁰ or when the moon is in Leo.⁷⁷¹ Choosing the right time to perform specific rituals was probably the task of the ritual specialist. Still, performing a ritual at a specific time could enhance the feeling of power created by the amulet and underline all aspects belonging to its use. Events of this kind fitted into larger astrological, astrobotanical and astrolithical traditions.⁷⁷² Time thus already played a role in the experiences of amulet users at the moment of attachment and these would have been remembered while the amulets were used.

3.6.2 Duration of use

The duration of amulet use will have varied. Some medical and ‘magical’ handbooks mention specific timeslots. In general, however, it was believed that an amulet functioned for as long as it was attached to the designated location. A body amulet would stop having an effect as soon as it was taken off.⁷⁷³ It could therefore be argued that amulets not only demarcated a space but also a time period, during which they were experienced and expected to function.

Amulets could be worn for specific amounts of time, varying from one hour, to nine

⁷⁶⁵ Scribonius Largus, *Compositiones* 163; Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 29.85, 32.115-116, 23.130; *Medicina Plinii* III 6.1; Alexander of Tralles, *De Febris* P. 1.407.4-7; Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 8.27-28.

⁷⁶⁶ Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 14.53 specifically mentions that the amulet had to be attached during the night.

⁷⁶⁷ *PGM XXXVI. 320-32*. Translation by J. Scarborough in GMPT.

⁷⁶⁸ Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 14.30.

⁷⁶⁹ Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 14.68-69.

⁷⁷⁰ Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 34.82.

⁷⁷¹ GEMF 16.1003-1014. Other examples are: Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 29.26, 31.33; Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 32.74.

⁷⁷² Gordon, ‘Substances to Texts’, 150.

⁷⁷³ Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 10.81.

days, thirty days, a year or forever.⁷⁷⁴ Many of the amulets described in the Greek and Demotic ‘magical’ papyri were made to be used during a specific ritual only.⁷⁷⁵ There could be particular reasons for removing an amulet. In Pliny 30.60 we read that an amulet made in relation to digestive problems was believed to be harmful when worn for a longer period of time. According to Pliny, ‘it must not be so used continuously, for it makes the body thin.’⁷⁷⁶ An amulet may no longer have been effective after a set period of time, but it was assumed that, by then, the problem had been solved or disappeared. When perishable materials were used, an amulet could decay before the end of the intended period of use; in one case referred to by Pliny a new amulet could be made to replace the old one.⁷⁷⁷ Instructions regarding a specific amount of time may have heightened the user’s awareness of the amulet and the problem it had to deal with. Pliny, for example, describes a fever amulet made of a dog tooth. To ensure its efficacy, the patient had to avoid the person who had attached the amulet (the specialist for example) for five days. Aware of the situation, the patient might have felt better after this specific amount of time.⁷⁷⁸ In general, the duration of the problem will have determined the duration of use.

Some instructions prescribe wearing the amulet when needed, but not a second longer. Amulets worn during childbirth, to make things easier, were believed to be so powerful, that they had to be removed immediately after the birth of the child.⁷⁷⁹ Pliny describes an amulet of this kind, that had to be tied to the loins. After delivery, the object not only had to be loosened, but also ‘hastily carried out of the house’.⁷⁸⁰ Its power was considered so strong as to extend to the whole house. Similarly, amulets to prevent miscarriage had to be removed at the right time. Otherwise, they would prevent birth.⁷⁸¹ In other situations there was no pressing need to remove the amulet; it was taken off when no longer needed. Pliny describes a specific amulet that had to be untied when the wearer was no longer suffering from fever.⁷⁸² Alexander of Tralles mentions that an amulet can be taken off when the user was cured, of gout in this case, but may be re-attached when the pain reoccurs.⁷⁸³ An

774 One hour: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 25.134; nine days: Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 14.25; thirty days: Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 8.130 and Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 30.36; 45 days: Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 8.152-153; 360 days Alexander of Tralles, *Therapeutica*, P. 2.585.5-19; a year: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 29.85 and Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 8.27-28; forever: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 30.91-92.

775 PGM IV. 154-285; PGM IV. 930-1114; PGM IV. 2441-2621; GEMF 31.263-276; PGM VII. 478-90; PGM VII. 800-828; PGM VII. 846-61; PGM III. 1-164; PGM IV. 475-829; PGM IV. 1331-1389; PGM IV. 2622-2707; PGM IV. 2891-2942; PGM IV. 3007-86.

776 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 30.60. Translation by Jones, *Pliny, Books 28-32*, 16-17.

777 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 30.36. The LOEB translation does not recognise the use of Latin to indicate a time period.

778 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.107.

779 Dioscorides, *Materia Medica* 3.150.2; Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 27.30, 30.129.

780 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 20.6. Translation by Jones, *Pliny, Books 20-23*, 6-7.

781 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 30.125, 36.151.

782 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 22.61.

783 Alexander of Tralles, *Therapeutica*, P. 2.579.20-31.

instruction for a fever amulet referred to by Pliny stipulates that the amulet must be hidden by the ritual specialist after taking it off.⁷⁸⁴ We may conclude that in many cases amulets were only worn when they were needed. In this sense, the object demarcated a specific time period. All in all, some experiences of the object could be short, but intense; a period during which the user would have been highly aware of it. In other situations, the amulet could be used for a very long time, even an entire lifetime, and the experience would have been very different.

Some amulets were used permanently. Healing amulets, for instance, could in theory be worn after the cure to prevent a relapse.⁷⁸⁵ Pliny 26.24 describes an amulet for healing skin-related problems and gives a different reason for not discarding the amulet: ‘the healed patients must guard it, lest herbalists wickedly plant it again, as I have said in certain places, and bring about a relapse.’⁷⁸⁶ Especially in the case of recurring diseases, such as migraines or malaria fever, one might continue to use one’s amulet to prevent another episode.⁷⁸⁷ Marcellus of Bordeaux describes an amulet against tonsillitis that could be worn permanently to prevent relapses.⁷⁸⁸ As I explained in chapter two, these amulets were believed to act as gatekeepers, expelling disease from the body and preventing new disease from entering.⁷⁸⁹

During its use, the ‘meaning’ of an amulet might change in the sense that it became part of the user’s identity. When using an object for an extended period of time, the initial experience of being healed, protected or endowed with benefits might fade, but the object could still feel special. As many amulets were worn into the grave, they must have been special for the deceased. There are some examples of amulets acquiring a new function in relation to their owners’ death. GMA 28, a victory amulet found on the Vigna Codini in Rome, was found in the mouth of a skull in a cinerary urn. In relation to the rituals surrounding death and burial, the object could be explained as a *Totenpass*. Like a coin in the mouth or an Orphic tablet on the chest, it may have been believed to help the owner on their journey to the netherworld.⁷⁹⁰ Over time, the owner of an amulet, whether wearing it on the body or perceiving it in their environment, may have come to view the object in a different manner. We modern scholars can therefore not always understand the specific

784 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 30.100-101.

785 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.228-229.

786 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 26.24. Translation by Jones, *Pliny, Books 24-27*, 282-283.

787 It is of course possible that the object was buried as a grave good and not have been worn by the deceased during their life.

788 Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 15.67; see also 32.19 for an object that can be worn both to heal and prevent. An earlier version of this instruction can be found in *Medicina Plinii* I 7.5, but the preventative function of the object is not mentioned here. For the continued use of an object to prevent disease from returning see also: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 26.24, 28.228-229.

789 See the discussion on the believed efficacy of amulets in chapter two.

790 Kotansky, GMA 28, 114; D.R. Jordan, ‘The Inscribed Gold Tablet from the Vigna Codini’, *American Journal of Archaeology* 89 (1985) 162-167: 166.

motives of amulet owners.⁷⁹¹ We know something about the motives for making amulets from the texts they carry, but the motives for holding on to an amulet may not have been the same as those for making or acquiring it – new layers of meaning may have been added to the object.

Apart from the impact of using amulets at specific astrological times or for specific time periods, time also had psychosomatic influence, because users made an effort and took time to deal with their problems. Speaking of grief, we often use the saying ‘time heals all wounds’. In relation to ancient healing sanctuaries, H. von Ehrenheim argued that a sojourn at a sanctuary may have resulted in actual health improvement. By going to a healing sanctuary, the patient acknowledged the situation, expected that the visit would help, decided to take the necessary time and take rest to deal with the ailment. This combination of expectations, attention, and rest may have resulted in healing or in a relief of symptoms.⁷⁹² Although it is not known whether amulet users would generally also have taken time to rest, they did decide to spend time to deal with their problem and reach out to an amulet. So, although the experience of a healing sanctuary would have been different from the experience of using an amulet, taking time to use the object could also have had an impact on the amulet user.

All in all, the experience of amulet use was not limited to the single moment of the amulet’s installation, but continued during its use. Use could be short, intense and impactful, or long and habitual. During use, especially longer use, the beliefs attached to the object could change and the object might acquire a different meaning. For all these reasons, amulet use was dynamic.

3.6.3 De-installation and assessment

In general, there probably was no formal moment of assessment at which the amulet would be de-installed. We do not know how amulet users assessed the efficacy of their personal amulets.⁷⁹³ As the foregoing discussion shows, amulets could be used for a variety of time periods and their meaning could change over time. Some amulets had to be removed after a certain period. They could then be stored, for example, for future use.⁷⁹⁴ Amulet(s) could be buried along with the deceased user as (a) personal object(s) or for a new function in the afterlife. We cannot rule out the possibility that amulets were discarded, thrown away, melted, or simply got lost.⁷⁹⁵ As will be discussed below, amulets could also be reused as

791 J.F. Quack, *Altägyptische Amulette und ihre Handhabung* (Tübingen 2022) 40–41.

792 Von Ehrenheim, ‘Placebo Factors at Healing Sanctuaries’, 108, 113.

793 See for example how Galen discusses and rationalises the effects of amulets and other practices, as discussed by Petit, ‘Galen, Pharmacology and the Boundaries of Medicine’.

794 *Bulla* found in House of the Menander (I, 10,4); J. Ward-Perkins, A. Claridge, *Pompeii AD 79, Exhibition Catalogue, Boston, Museum of Fine Arts* (Boston 1978) I 31, colour plate, no. 40; II 132, no. 40.

795 GMA 7 is an example of an amulet that was probably lost as it was found in a bathhouse. See also: de Bruyn and Dijkstra, ‘A Checklist’, 47; and see P.Mich. 18.768.

votives. In that case they were purposely discarded and their functions changed.⁷⁹⁶

3.7 EXPERIENCING CIRCULARITY: THE IMPACT OF REUSING AMULETS

The process of amulet use shows aspects of circularity. Some amulets may have been stored to be used again by the same individual or by someone else. In this section, I will discuss several forms of reuse: the use of second-hand material to make amulets, the reuse of amulets as amulets, and the reuse of amulets as something else. I will subsequently explore the motives for and impact of reuse in order to understand why reuse took place and how it influenced the experience of using amulets.

So far, circularity has not been an element of the study of amulets, because it is often impossible to tell if they were reused, especially when the archaeological context is unknown or when the object does not carry a text.⁷⁹⁷ However, new approaches in research enable us to study a small corpus of amulet circularity.

3.7.1 Circular processes in amulet use

Under the influence of research into ‘the cultural biography of things’, we have come to recognise that objects can go through different life stages – which can be studied.⁷⁹⁸ An object can have multiple meanings during its life cycle, from being a practical tool to being a social commodity. Reuse was often studied as something associated with Late Antiquity, reflecting a period of crisis, and as a phenomenon belonging to art and architecture (*spolia*).⁷⁹⁹ Recently, the reuse of ancient objects in a wider sense has attracted new scholarly attention

796 For amulets found in the context of a temple/religious complex see for example: GMA 3, 44, 35, 64. Mastrocinque, ‘Phylacteries’, 141.

797 On the text bias in amulets see: Faraone, *Transformation*: texts make objects recognisable as amulets for modern scholars, but that does not mean that objects without texts were not used as amulets or reused in later times.

798 Kopytoff, ‘The Cultural Biography of Things’, 64–68. Kopytoff stresses that the meaning of objects can not only change over time, but can also be viewed differently by different people at the same time. See also the discussion in section 1.2.1 on object agency.

799 C.N. Duckworth, A. Wilson, ‘Introduction: Recycling and Reuse in the Roman economy’ in: C.N. Duckworth, A. Wilson (eds.), *Recycling and Reuse in the Roman Economy* (Oxford 2020) 1–8: 2, 6; D.Y. Ng, M. Swetnam-Burland, ‘Introduction: Reuse, Renovation, Reiteration’ in: D.Y. Ng, M. Swetnam-Burland (eds.), *Reuse and Renovation in Roman Material Culture. Functions, Aesthetics, Interpretations* (Cambridge 2018) 1–23: 2–4.

and research shows that reuse and recycling were common practice.⁸⁰⁰ Bavuso et al. have shown that the notion of circular dynamics can be applied to the research of many types of ancient objects.⁸⁰¹ In a linear process an object would be discarded after its initial use, but objects could also be reclaimed: ‘the object is removed from its original context and used again with or without a change in use.’⁸⁰² The publication in question utilises ‘reuse’ as an umbrella term for all the possible processes an object might go through, including: curation, maintenance, remanufacturing, lateral cycling, secondary use, and recycling.⁸⁰³ Several of these processes can also be applied to the biographies of amulets. ‘Reuse’ may refer to the use of second-hand materials to create amulets, to amulets being used again as amulets, and to amulets being given a new function, for example as a votive. Examples of these three categories will be analysed below.

Using second-hand materials to create an amulet

Amulets could be made of or with materials that had in some way formed part of objects with a different function (both religious and non-religious). This is a form of recycling: from one (religious) object into the next.

In some cases, the recycled material added power to the amulet.⁸⁰⁴ In an instruction from Roman Egypt, we read that a piece of linen cloth should be used as an amulet during the performance of a specific ritual; not just any piece of linen, but a piece of the clothing of a cult statue of Harpokrates.⁸⁰⁵ A very special second-hand material concerns an Orphic tablet found in an amulet case.⁸⁰⁶ The handwriting on this golden tablet has been dated to the third or second century BCE. At a certain point in the object’s life, the tablet was cropped,

800 This is one of the aims of Ng, Swetnam-Burland, ‘Introduction’, 4, 6-8. However, apart from votives, ancient religious objects are not often studied with a focus on reuse. See for example: J. Hughes, ‘“Souvenirs of the Self” Personal Belongings as Votive Offerings in Ancient Religion’, *Religion in the Roman Empire* 3.2 (2017) 181-201. Votives are used as an example to describe the possibilities of reuse in: Ng, Swetnam-Burland, ‘Introduction’, 5. For the role of personal objects gifted as votives in the sanctuary see: A. Hartmann, ‘Beyond the Bones: Relics in Greek Temples’ in: H.P. Hahn, A. Klöckner, D. Wicke (eds.), *Values and Revaluations. The Transformation and Genesis of ‘Values in Things’ from Archaeological and Anthropological Perspectives* (Oxford 2022) 175-192.

801 I. Bavuso, et al., ‘Circular Economy in the Roman Period and the Early Middle Ages – Methods of Analysis for a Future Agenda’, *Open Archaeology* 9 (2023) 1-18.

802 Bavuso et al., ‘Circular Economy’, 2.

803 All from Bavuso et al., ‘Circular Economy’, 3-4. On recycling in the ancient world see: J.T. Peña, ‘Recycling in the Roman World. Concepts, Questions, Materials, and Organization’ in: C.N. Duckworth, A. Wilson (eds.), *Recycling and Reuse in the Roman Economy* (Oxford 2020) 9-58.

804 Pliny the Elder gives several instructions for amulet-like objects that include the use of ‘a piece of a nail taken from a cross’ and ‘a cord taken from a crucifixion’ to heal fever, ‘the rope used by a suicide’ for headaches, ‘nails that have been extracted from a tomb’ to create a fence against nightmares. Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.46 (included in *Medicina Plinii* III 15.1), 28.49 and 34.151.

805 PGM IV. 930-1114 (lines 1055-1085). P.Oxy. LXXXII 5308 requires the use of ‘a holy thread’ from a garment, presumably some ritual garment.

806 On the question whether Orphic tablets are actually amulets see McClay, *The Bacchic Gold Tablets*, 107-135. (The short answer is no, see 113).

possibly to make it fit into the container it was found in, a golden tubular capsule, attached to a necklace. The capsule is dated to the second or third century CE. This means that the tablet could have been in use for a very long period before it was put into the capsule. As this is a typical amulet capsule, the Orphic tablet is believed to have been used as an amulet from that point.⁸⁰⁷

In other cases, using second-hand materials, for instance a potsherd to write on⁸⁰⁸ or a piece of cloth from an old garment to wrap something, was probably just practical.⁸⁰⁹ Excavations have yielded a variety of amulets made of papyrus that had already been inscribed with other (documentary) texts. The uninscribed reverse of papyrus sheets could be recut or older texts could be erased and over-written.⁸¹⁰ Reusing papyrus was common in the ancient world, obviously for practical reasons. It would have been cheaper than new papyrus and was readily available.⁸¹¹ For amulets, too, this seems to have been just practical use of resources; using second-hand materials was necessarily enhancing the efficacy of the object.

On the other hand, one might raise the question if reuse of materials was seen as detrimental to the efficacy of the amulet. Some Greek-Egyptian handbook instructions specify that ‘new’ papyrus be used – which, supports the notion that it was quite common to use second-hand papyrus.⁸¹² Emphasis on the use of new and clean papyrus may imply that an amulet made of this material was considered more powerful than one made of second-hand papyrus – unlike amulets made of religious textiles, where the second-hand material added power.

Reusing an amulet as an amulet

A small group of amulets shows signs of having been reused as amulets. For many centuries, gems in general were often reused, recycled, and upcycled. They were expensive and therefore kept, stored or set in new mounts.⁸¹³ Gemstones were of course used for personal adornment, but added inscriptions and imagery make it clear that some of the gems which have been found, were used as amulets. Most examples of reuse of gemstone amulets date

807 British Museum, London, registration number 1843,0724.3.

808 PGM CXXIII. a.; Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 16.40 describes the use of a piece of a sieve found alongside the road; see also: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 24.171.

809 Similar recipes in *Medicina Plinii* I 1.4; Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 24.106, 170; Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 1.43.

810 Reused papyrus can, for instance, be found in: SM 34 (on the back), PGM P15a (erased), PGM P6c (on the back).

811 E. Salmenkivi, ‘Reuse and Recycling of Papyrus’ in: C.N. Duckworth, A. Wilson (eds.), *Recycling and Reuse in the Roman Economy* (Oxford 2020) 89–103.

812 GEMF 16.1098–1104 and PGM XXIIa. 11–14.

813 Dasen, Nagy, ‘Gems’, 423; J. Spier, *Late Antique and Early Christian Gems* (Wiesbaden 2007) 82. It is difficult to draw a clear line between traditional and Christian practices where these objects are concerned.

to Late Antiquity and will be discussed in the next chapter. One extraordinary example, however, dates from the second or third century. This gem carries an Abrasax figure with inscriptions on the front and a request on the back. The text inscribed on the back requests favour for Ptolemaios before all people. The name Ptolemaios was inscribed after an earlier line had been cut away. Although we may be dealing here with a scribal error that was immediately corrected, it seems more likely that the name of an earlier user was removed and replaced with Ptolemaios's.⁸¹⁴ In general, there is little evidence for the adaption of names on gemstone amulets, because most of these do not carry names. M.S. Nutzman argued that amulets without names were reused more easily and that the practice was more common than is evident from the sources. Her research, focussing on Roman Palestine, notes that more amulet tablets than gemstone amulets were found in graves. Textual amulets, whether metal tablets or papyrus, contain much more personal information than gemstone amulets as the latter have very little space for text. As a result, people would have been more inclined to reuse gemstone amulets; amuletic tablets and papyri were deposited with the deceased.⁸¹⁵

An example of a reused metal tablet comes from ancient Carnuntum, in modern Austria. The find concerns an individual buried with four small, rolled-up thin metal tablets.⁸¹⁶ Three tablets were made of silver and one of gold. They were inscribed with Greek texts and/or *charaktêres* – an untranslated (or untranslatable) script. One of the silver tablets carries an intelligible text and is considered an amulet to heal migraines.⁸¹⁷ The context of the grave has been dated to the third century CE, but on the basis of the handwriting, the editor, R.D. Kotansky, dated the silver migraine amulet to the first or second century.⁸¹⁸ The amulet is thus older than the grave context; it was probably not created for the deceased, but had been in use for a long time, something that would have remained unnoticed if the context of the grave was not known.

Because of the reuse and because migraine is a hereditary disease, Kotansky argued that the object may have passed from generation to generation as an heirloom.⁸¹⁹ It is indeed possible that amulets were passed on to family members; the creation and use of amulets was frequently a family matter, as we have seen in chapter two. Both amulet instructions and amulets were, for example, found in a house context in Kellis, Egypt.

814 C.A. Faraone, 'Notes on Some Greek Magical Gems in New England', *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 53 (2013) 326-349: 332-334.

815 M.S. Nutzman, *Contested Cures. Identity and Ritual Healing in Roman and Late Antique Palestine* (Edinburgh 2022) 23-24.

816 See: GMA 13-16 and A.A. Barb, 'Griechische Zaubertexte vom Gräberfelde westlich des Lagers', *Der Römische Limes in Österreich* 16 (1926) 52-67. More recent information is not available.

817 See GMA 13.

818 See GMA 13.

819 GMA 13, page 59.

One of the amulets carries the name of a member of the family.⁸²⁰ GEMF 26, a small amulet handbook, contains the following restriction: ‘and you shall not share it except with legitimate offspring’.⁸²¹ Childhood amulets, such as the *bullae*, were possibly also passed on within families. It is often argued that they were sacrificed to the household gods when their wearer reached adulthood.⁸²² A. Olivier, however, argues that pieces of jewellery, including *lunulae*, could become heirlooms and were reused.⁸²³ Childhood amulets have been found, stored in jewellery boxes in Pompeii, which suggests they were keepsakes or objects waiting for a new owner.⁸²⁴

In the early fifth century, a woman living in ancient Vindonissa, in modern day Switzerland, was buried with two amulet tablets, namely a golden tablet rolled up within a silver one.⁸²⁵ The tablets were inserted together in an amulet case. The texts on the tablets request protection and benefits. They need more research and the current edition is being debated. However, the editor argued that the tablets could be dated to the late second century.⁸²⁶ The objects may have been used by multiple generations before it was taken into the grave in the fifth century.⁸²⁷

Although in specific cases uncertainties remain and sources are scarce, there can be no doubt that some amulets remained in use for long periods of time and knew several owners, retaining their function as amulets. It is probable that some amulets were reused in a family context. It should be kept in mind that the perceived functioning of the objects may have changed over time. Layers of meaning and layers of memories probably added to their character and value.

Reusing an amulet as something else

Amulets may at some point have lost their meaning or been used for another amuletic purpose; they could in theory also have been used as something else. As I have shown above, after their owner’s demise, amulets sometimes assumed a new function in the

820 Brand, *Religion and Everyday Life of Manichaeans*, 104. Handbook: P.Kellis I Gr. 85ab, amulet: P.Kellis I Gr. 87.

821 GEMF 26.8-22. Translation by M. Zellmann-Rohrer in GEMF.

822 For a collection of primary sources see: Szilágyi, ‘Late Roman Bullae’, 20n.55.

823 A. Oliver, ‘Jewelry for the Unmarried’ in: D.E. Kleiner, S.B. Matheson (eds.), *I Claudia II. Women in Roman Art and Society* (Austin 2000) 115-124; C. Ward, ‘Ornamenta Muliebria: Jewellery and Identity in the Roman Period’ in: A.J. Batten, K. Olson (eds.), *Dress in Mediterranean Antiquity. Greeks, Romans, Jews, Christians* (London 2021) 95-108: 106. For examples see: A. Bedini (ed.), *Mistero di una fanciulla. Ori e gioielli della Roma di Marco Aurelio da una nuova scoperta archeologica* (Rome 1995).

824 *Bulla* found in House of the Menander (I, 10,4): Ward-Perkins, Claridge, *Pompeii AD 79*, I 31, colour plate, no. 40; II 132, no. 40. Necklace: Faraone, *Transformation*, 59-60.

825 W. Kosack, ‘Zwei altkoptische Talismane aus dem römischen Gräberfeld von Windisch-Oberburg’, *Pro Vindonissa* (2003) 11-15.

826 For criticism, for example concerning the assessment of the language, see: K. Dosoo, E.O.D. Love, M. Preininger (eds.), ‘KYP M937’ in *Kyprianos Database of Ancient Ritual Texts and Objects*, last accessed September 2025.

827 The scribe who created the object perhaps also copied the exact handwriting when copying the text for the amulet from an older handbook. See Kosack, ‘Zwei altkoptische Talismane’, 13.

deceased's afterlife.⁸²⁸ Amulets were also reused as votives.⁸²⁹ In ancient Pannonia a typical golden amulet capsule was found with a votive inscription on it. It was given as a votive to Silvanus Viator, a local god, perhaps because it had done its job: its user had been cured, had felt protected in a specific situation or had been given some extra luck. The amulet was reused to thank the god.⁸³⁰ As I mentioned above, ancient sources refer to childhood amulets being sacrificed to the household gods when their wearers entered adulthood.⁸³¹ They were no longer necessary and acquired a new function.

3.7.2 Motives for the reuse of amulets

As noted above, some amulets show signs of continued use over quite extensive periods of time. As amulets were also made of old or reused materials, it can be argued that the element of time played a role in the value ascribed to amulets. In a paper on the reuse of Roman bracelets, Swift argues that we should consider the perceived value of the object when discussing motivations for reuse.⁸³² In this context, she mentions use value, economic value, and historical value.⁸³³ In the eyes of the users, the original object had a certain value, for example use value: it was practical. Over time the same object might acquire a different value. A heirloom, for example, had sentimental and/or historical value. The value an individual ascribes to an object is thus personal and can change over time.⁸³⁴ We can also apply the notion of these three types of value to the reuse of amulets.

Economic value often played a role in reuse and should therefore also be considered for reuse in the context of amulets.⁸³⁵ Reusing material saves money; reusing papyrus instead of buying new sheets is a case in point. Gemstones had a high monetary value and were therefore less likely to be discarded. In her study on the reuse of votives, Hughes analyses the differences between the experience of offering a ready-made votive and that of bringing a reused votive.⁸³⁶ Some of her observations can be applied to amulets as well. For example, when reusing an existing object as a votive – reusing an amulet, for instance – it was

828 See GMA 28.

829 For amulets found in relation to a temple/religious complex see for example: GMA 3, 44, 35, 64.

830 E. Tóth, 'Silvanus Viator', *Alba Regia* 13 (1980) 91-103: 93.

831 For a collection of primary sources see: Szilágyi, 'Late Roman Bullae', 20n.55. On amulets found on children who died before reaching adulthood see: C. Ward, 'Ornamenta Muliebria', 106.

832 E. Swift, 'Reuse of Roman Artefacts in Late Antiquity and the Early Medieval West. A Case Study from Britain of Bracelets and Belt Fittings' in: C.N. Duckworth, A. Wilson (eds.), *Recycling and Reuse in the Roman Economy* (Oxford 2020) 425-446.

833 Swift, 'Reuse of Roman Artefacts', 426.

834 Swift, 'Reuse of Roman Artefacts', 426. On the value of objects see also: H.P. Hahn, A. Klöckner, D. Wicke (eds.), *Values and Revaluations. The Transformation and Genesis of 'Values in Things' from Archaeological and Anthropological Perspectives* (Oxford 2022).

835 It plays the most important role in Swift's 'Reuse of Roman Artefacts', 440; C. Moser, C. Smith, 'Transformations of Value: Lived Religion and the Economy', *Religion in the Roman Empire* 5 (2019) 3-22.

836 Hughes, 'Souvenirs of the Self'. On the functioning of non-purpose made votives in temples see also: Hartmann, 'Beyond the Bones', 175-192.

unnecessary to engage a craftsman or ritual specialist.⁸³⁷ When an amulet was reused as an amulet without changing the object, it would have cost less or nothing. The object would have been available and could perhaps be applied immediately, which would have been important in acute health situations.⁸³⁸

Secondly, the believed efficacy of the object or the material – the religious use value – could play a role in reuse. An existing migraine amulet could be reused simply because it was still believed to be powerful. Furthermore, as I have mentioned above, the use of certain second-hand materials was believed to enhance an amulet's agency. Examples are the reuse of fabrics produced for and/or used in a religious context and the reuse of an Orphic tablet.

Thirdly, there is the aspect of time. Memories, experiences and emotions attached to objects made them special in the eyes of the users. The 'biographies' of the objects and those of their previous owners played an important role in reuse. Hughes makes a similar point for reused votives: a reused votive would be joined by layers of memories or associations that added value and meaning to the object. This contributed to the personal experience of using it.⁸³⁹ Using an amulet that had been handed down within the family would add another layer of meaning and emotion to its believed power. These elements would have influenced the emotional impact of using and wearing it.

The impact of reuse

Unfortunately, scholars can only study amulets in the state they were found in. Without information on the archaeological context or the presence of visible alterations, such as the change of a name or the addition of a votive inscription, it remains unclear how many people used the object. Despite the limitations imposed by the surviving evidence, there can be no doubt that some amulets were reused, for economic, historical or emotional reasons. Reusing amulets must have changed the user's experiences in at least some cases, for instance because there was no ritual specialist involved. In addition, the reuse of religious objects could add meaning and in this way may have provided an increased sense of power and agency. In the case of amulets that had been in use as heirlooms, emotions, experiences and memories influenced this sense of agency. Examples of reuse indicate that in the eyes of ancient individuals, amulets could retain their efficacy over long periods of time. Reuse likely had more impact on the experiences of amulet users than would perhaps initially appear.

837 Hughes, 'Souvenirs of the Self', 181.

838 Hughes, 'Souvenirs of the Self', 194-195.

839 Hughes, 'Souvenirs of the Self', 187, 194-195.

3.8 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have explored the experiences of amulet use. I have argued that religious strategies involving objects could have a large impact on the emotional and physical well-being of their users. Amulets impacted their users through expectations and experiences; psychosomatic processes could make users feel better. Expectations formed throughout the process of creation and use and the sensory aspects of the use itself shaped the experiences of the object in place and time.

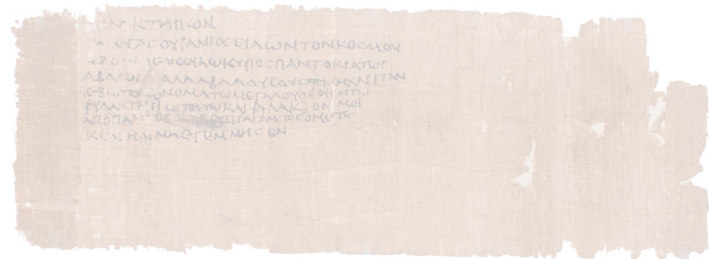
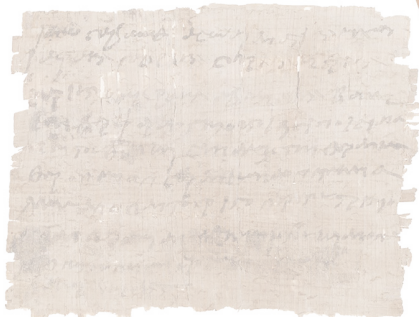
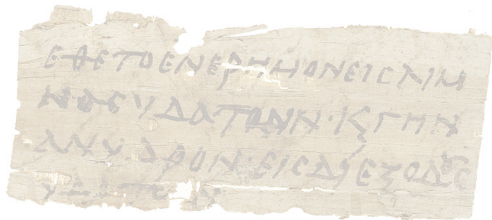
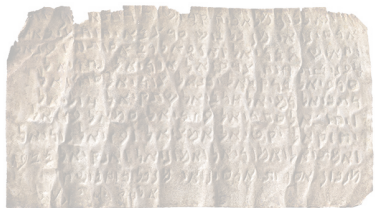
Even before the installation or actual use of the amulet, several factors probably already influenced experiences and outcomes. Expectations as to what the amulet would do and how it would do it at least partly shaped the actual experience of its use. Ideas about the believed effect of the object and the contact with the specialist also had an impact. While they were worn, amulets were seen, felt, smelt, and even heard, and in accompanying rituals materials were sometimes tasted. By sensing the amulet, amulet users would have been aware of the object 'at work' and feel its healing or protective power. Sensory awareness reminded the user of the object's power, of the accompanying rituals and of the expectations they had. Noticing the amulet would reactivate the relationship between user and object. Sensory experience made the user perceive the power of the supernatural, which enhanced their feeling of safety, control and/or healing. These sensory experiences were not necessary to make the object effective. Its material presence and proximity to the designated location, however, definitely was.

Expectations embedded in general ideas regarding religious space shaped the experience of the amulet and of the area it demarcated. Amulets as boundary markers created an 'inside area' separate from the outside world. Amulet users experienced these boundaries and the shift from protected to un-protected space. Within this demarcated space, the amulet user could feel safe, secure, and in control of the situation. This may have been a reason why amulets were often preferred to alternative religious strategies.

By choosing to use amulets, ancient individuals decided to spend time and resources to deal with their issues. This probably already contributed to the experience of well-being. Some amulets were used for a short time, with the object demarcating a specific time period. Other amulets were used for longer periods of time, with the experience of the object changing over time. For instance, an amulet used for healing could acquire a protective function, preventing the return of the ailment. This does not mean that the object became less valuable. As the aspect of reuse shows, certain amulets were believed to retain their power, agency and dynamism for long periods of time.

Most textual sources relating to amulets concern the creation of the object, or the moment of installation, but not the (experience of) actual use. Therefore, studying the impact of amulets involves a certain amount of speculation. However, using a materiality approach to the process of amulet use reveals a wide variety of plausible amulet experiences.

Amulets must have had an effect on their users, something that made people come back to them. Expectations and the experiences which developed during the process of amulet use had an impact on the users. The proximity of the object, the sensory experience of its efficacy, and the experience of being in a demarcated safe space may have made the user feel better. From an etic point of view amulets are incapable of healing or bringing victory in court. However they could bring about a sense of emotional and/or physical well-being, relieving symptoms and enhancing feelings of safety and control. In this way, amulet use certainly had an effect, which may be why, for centuries, people were strongly motivated to come back to amulets.



CHAPTER



CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN LATE ANTIQUITY

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN LATE ANTIQUITY

Amulets were used for a very long period of time during which they remained omnipresent as a means to help people deal with daily issues. However, although amulets stayed in use, they did not stay the same. In this chapter, I will address the developments amulets underwent (or not) in Late Antiquity. In this period the rapid dissemination of Christianity had its influence on amulets. Over time, the perception of the supernatural power believed to direct the agency of amulets changed from traditional Graeco-Roman to Christian. This chapter explores the impact of both change and continuity in order to elucidate why amulets continued to be used.

This chapter is divided into three parts. First, I will discuss contexts of change. Second, I will provide a critical analysis of a new group of sources on amulets – the sermons of bishops. These sources, written by a small elite of early Christian authoritative figures, give insight into several relevant religious developments in Late Antiquity. Finally, I will discuss changes and continuities in the actual processes of amulet use to shed light on how the introduction of new elements and the continued use of old practices impacted amulet users.

4.1 CHANGE AND AMULETS

Despite the stability of certain aspects, amulet use was never static and changes were already visible before the influence of Christianity. C.A. Faraone convincingly argues that in the first century, in the context of the wider ‘epigraphic turn’ and against the background of the introduction of new writing techniques, important textual changes took place in amulets. Oral expressions, such as ritual speech acts, now often took a written form on amulets such as *lamellae* and gems.⁸⁴⁰ In the second and third centuries, the number of amulets with text increased even further and the texts became more elaborate. New textual forms, like the ‘vanishing acts’ or *charaktères*, were introduced.⁸⁴¹ Similarly, the iconography of amulets became more elaborate over time.⁸⁴² In addition, it was in

840 Faraone, *Transformation*; see also: Kotansky, *Greek Magical Amulets*, xviii; Kotansky, ‘Textual Amulets’, 547; Dasen, Nagy, ‘Gems’, 433-434. Similarly, curse tablets also go through a variety of textual developments in the Roman period: Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 5-12.

841 Faraone, *Transformation*, 240-242; Faraone, *Vanishing Act*, 6-7; Kotansky, *Greek Magical Amulets*, xviii. See also: Kotansky, ‘Textual Amulets’, 544; Dasen, Nagy, ‘Gems’, 433. On *charaktères*: R. Gordon, ‘Charaktères Between Antiquity and Renaissance: Transmission and Re-invention’ in: V. Dasen, J.M. Spieser (eds.), *Les savoirs magiques et leur transmission de l’Antiquité à la Renaissance* (Florence 2014) 253-300: 299; Gordon, ‘Performative Images’, 107-108.

842 Where at first one single image was enough to avert evil – for instance a single eye to avert the evil eye – more elements were now deemed necessary. The main image would be surrounded by attacking animals, weapons etc. to control the dangerous image of the eye. Faraone, *Transformation*, 1-4, 240-242; Faraone, *Talismans and Trojan Horses*, 74; Dasen, ‘Probaskania’, 182.

the third to fourth century that the large ritual handbooks combining local Demotic and Greek traditions, such as PGM IV and VII, were compiled in Egypt. These handbooks contain many instructions for making amulets.⁸⁴³ In Late Antiquity the use of amuletic inscriptions on everyday objects increased even further.⁸⁴⁴ Due to these developments in text and iconography, late antique amulets are more recognisable as such for scholars than those of earlier times, and the texts provide us with more information on the perceived functioning of these objects.

Christian elements are found on amulets from the third century onwards, and during the fourth century the number of amulets with such elements increased.⁸⁴⁵ T.S. de Bruyn and J.H.F. Dijkstra describe the Christianisation of amulets as ‘the endpoint of a gradual process which becomes most visible in the papyri from the second half of the fifth century onwards’.⁸⁴⁶ K. Dosoo shows how, in the fourth and fifth centuries, references to Greek and Egyptian deities on amulets from Egypt are gradually replaced by references to Jesus and archangels.⁸⁴⁷ In this period Christianity became the main religion in Egypt: the ‘number of individuals for whom a Christian identity may be imputed climbs substantially in the fourth century before reaching a peak in the fifth.’⁸⁴⁸ It is especially from the fifth century onwards that non-Christian elements in texts written on amulets are supplanted by biblical or liturgical passages.⁸⁴⁹ Christian amulets would often solely consist of passages from the Bible, which means they are sometimes less recognisable for researchers. The fifth century saw the gradual decline of the ‘traditional’ metal tablet and gemstone amulets.⁸⁵⁰ This does not mean that amulets in general disappeared; gemstones amulets continued to be (re)used and the number of papyrus and parchment amulets found in Egypt shows a distinct peak in the fifth century.⁸⁵¹

843 Dieleman, ‘Greco-Egyptian Magical Papyri’, 316-320; Kotansky, *Greek Magical Amulets*, xix; Kotansky, ‘Textual Amulets’, 547.

844 Faraone, *Transformation*, 1-4, 177-179; Faraone, *Vanishing Acts*, 78; Kotansky, ‘Incantations and Prayers’, 107-108; A. van den Hoek, E. Feissel, J.J. Herrmann jr., ‘More Lucky Wearers: The Magic of Portable Inscriptions’ in: D. Boschung, J.N. Bremmer (eds.), *The Materiality of Magic* (Paderborn 2015) 309-356.

845 De Bruyn, Dijkstra, ‘A checklist’, 174.

846 De Bruyn, Dijkstra, ‘A checklist’, 174.

847 Note that Jewish and ‘magical’ elements continue to exist: Dosoo, ‘Magical Names’, 128-130.

848 Dosoo, ‘Magical Names’, *passim*, but specifically 111-113. Dosoo explains why we should be very critical of his approach, but his research with a focus on ‘magical’ texts confirms research into documentary texts.

849 Focussing on the names of the supernatural in question: Dosoo, ‘Magical Names’, 128-132.

850 For a ‘chronology’ see for example: Kotansky, *Greek Magical Amulets*, xviii; Dasen, Nagy, ‘Gems’, 433-434. For a decline in the sixth century see also: Kotansky, ‘Textual Amulets’, 544. Faraone described the decline of gemstone amulets, but simultaneously noticed a rise in the application of imagery associated with round gemstones to flat papyrus strips or metal tablets, in other words a shift in the material that was used. Faraone, ‘Circular Gem-Designs’.

851 Gems will be discussed in section 4.3G of this chapter. Papyrus amulets peaked again in the tenth century: Dosoo, ‘Magical Names’, 90.

4.1.1 Material expressions of late antique religions

The developments in relation to amulets did not take place in a vacuum. Some traditional Graeco-Roman religious practices discontinued in Late Antiquity – lead curse tablets are a case in point. They gradually fell into disuse. J.G. Gager argues that these lead tablets are not found after the eighth century and K. Dosoo sees a decline in applied aggressive religious practices, such as curses, in Egypt from the fourth to the twelfth century.⁸⁵² J. van der Vliet noticed a decline in the references to divination and dream visitations in the large handbooks from Roman Egypt.⁸⁵³ Traditional types of sacrifice likewise fell into disuse. While there is discussion on traces of traditional sacrifice in early Christian religious practices, there can be no doubt that the practice of plant and animal sacrifice slowly disappeared.⁸⁵⁴

On the other hand, Christian material practices gained ground, especially from the fourth century onwards. As R. Wiśniewski argues ‘The fact of having seen, touched, and heard is essential for the credibility of the Christian message. However, Christian culture of the second and third centuries was more a culture of reading, or listening, than seeing or touching.’⁸⁵⁵ Especially from the fourth century onwards more practices that were material in character came into use.⁸⁵⁶ Actual written copies of the Scriptures, relics, holy oils, pilgrimage mementos and the experience of sacred places were now valued for their materiality.⁸⁵⁷ These material presences were understood as powerful, for example in relation to healing and exorcism.⁸⁵⁸ Something that may be defined as early Christian art emerged during the third century. It took time for Christianity to develop a recognisable visual vocabulary with clear Christian elements.⁸⁵⁹ Non-Christian motifs were used in Christian settings and interpreted as Christian. Only at later stages these would be perceived as Christian.⁸⁶⁰ From the fourth century onwards, early Christian material

852 Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 27-30. The practice of cursing others is prescribed in later formularies, but not with textual objects. This explains the decline in textual applied objects. Dosoo, ‘Magical Names’, 90-92.

853 Van der Vliet, ‘Christian Spells’, 329.

854 D.C. Ullucci, ‘Sacrifice’ in: *Brill Encyclopedia of Early Christianity Online*, last accessed September 2025. For a more in-depth analysis see: D.C. Ullucci, *The Christian Rejection of Animal Sacrifice* (Oxford 2011).

855 Wiśniewski, *Cult of Relics*, 144.

856 R. Wiśniewski, ‘Relics’ in: *Brill Encyclopedia of Early Christianity Online*, last accessed September 2025.

857 See for example: G. Vikan, ‘Art, Medicine, and Magic in the Early Byzantium’, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 38 (1984) 65-86 and the discussion on ‘Christian alternatives’ in section 4.3H of this chapter.

858 For the Scriptures as powerful: J.N. Bremmer, ‘From Books with Magic to Magical Books in Ancient Greece and Rome’ in: D. Boschung, J.N. Bremmer (eds.), *The Materiality of Magic* (Paderborn 2015) 241-270: 265-266. For relics see: Wiśniewski, *Cult of Relics*, 1.

859 R.M. Jensen, ‘Art’ in: P. Esler (ed.), *The Early Christian World* (London 2017) 717-744: 717-718.

860 R.M. Jensen, ‘Towards a Christian Material Culture’ in: M.M. Mitchell, F.M. Young (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Christianity. Volume 1: Origins to Constantine* (Cambridge 2006) 568-585: 572-574. See also: Bowes, ‘Early Christian Archaeology’.

expression increased significantly. P. Cox Miller describes this as the ‘material turn’ of the fourth century, in which the Christian religion began to include the material world.⁸⁶¹ Scholars relate this development to the conversion of Constantine and the legitimisation of Christianity, which allowed Christian expression to move into the public sphere.⁸⁶²

While material expressions of Christianity became more prominent for practical reasons, people also became susceptible to the material in religious settings.⁸⁶³ As the political context grew less hostile towards Christianity, its material world became more accepted.⁸⁶⁴ The human body was an important element of early Christian materiality. As S. Ashbrook Harvey observes: ‘Christian teachings on the incarnation and physical resurrection of Christ set the body into high relief. Physicality itself became significant.’⁸⁶⁵ Relics consisting of human remains and contact relics played a crucial role in saint and martyr cults. In addition, the bodily experience of the material through the senses became more important. Through the senses, people could encounter the holy.⁸⁶⁶ The impact of the sensory experience of Christian material practices will be further studied below.

All of these observations make it clear that changes in amulet use and the increasing popularity of amulets in the fifth century must be examined and analysed within the general context of changes in early Christian material practices.

4.1.2 Studying change

This chapter will study both change and continuity in the different stages of the process of amulet use. As I have shown in chapter one, amulet use embraces humans, objects, and places. The relationships between these elements are never static – when one element changes (for instance, ideas regarding the objects’ supernatural power), the relations change as well. This means that amulets continuously change and evolve.⁸⁶⁷ Building on findings from the previous chapter, this chapter examines how the introduction of new elements impacted the relationships and stages of the process of amulet use, with special attention to experiences of the material presence of amulets through the senses and the spatial and temporal aspects of these experiences. Studying amulet use as a process enables us to pursue a more in-depth analysis of both continuity and change.

Amulet use was dynamic and changed and developed in a world that changed as well. Many scholars have studied the Graeco-Roman world’s transition towards Christianity and recognised that certain religious elements remained the same as new ones were introduced.

861 P. Cox Miller, *The Corporeal Imagination. Signifying the Holy in Late Ancient Christianity* (Philadelphia 2009) 3-4.

862 Jensen, ‘Art’, 720.

863 For the discussion regarding these developments, see Jensen, ‘Art’, 717-718.

864 Cox Miller, *Corporeal Imagination*, 3-4.

865 Harvey, ‘The Senses in Religion’, 97-98.

866 Harvey, ‘The Senses in Religion’, 97-98; Toner, ‘Sensing the Ancient Past’, 19-20.

867 On the work of Crellin as a basis for my approach, see chapter one section 1.4.

In relation to ‘magical’ religious practices in Late Antiquity, A.A. Barb asserts that ‘There are few human activities in the history of which an unbroken chain of tradition from the remotest antiquity to our days can be traced more clearly and conclusively than in the Magic Arts.’⁸⁶⁸ Writing about early Christian Roman Egypt, J. Dieleman observes that ‘from a more pragmatic perspective, there was little that truly changed’; temple structures were replaced by churches and monasteries, local deities by local saints and objects like amulets were still produced.⁸⁶⁹ Similarly, in an article on Byzantine amuletic bracelets G. Vikan concludes that, over time, there was very little change in the general perception of how these objects functioned.⁸⁷⁰ Continuity and change cannot be understood separately. We are not dealing with a clear dichotomy between Christian elements and ‘pagan survivals’.⁸⁷¹ Certain features, functions and beliefs certainly endured, but within a world that was slowly becoming increasingly Christian. This also holds true for the stable elements in amulet use.

Religious developments in Late Antiquity were dynamic and took place on various levels. Sometimes continuity and change were simultaneous and interacted. The key question, therefore, is what this interaction looked like. In relation to the study of amulet use, the idea of an interaction between tradition and innovation has proven fruitful.⁸⁷² In a publication dealing with objects like amulets, K. Dosoo writes about ‘the interaction between the tradition to which they belong, and the moment in time in which they are written.’⁸⁷³ Traditions continue, but they are not rigid and innovations are often anchored in traditions.⁸⁷⁴

In what follows, I will look at the impact of both change and continuity on the experience of amulet users, building on findings from previous chapters. I will examine changes in the external features or material affordances of amulets as well as continuities and discontinuities in beliefs and expectations relating to their functioning. New elements were added, but they sometimes only changed the objects’ external features, while beliefs regarding their functioning remained the same. At the same time, traditional elements may have been experienced in a different way, because they were now experienced within a Christian frame of reference.⁸⁷⁵

868 Barb, ‘Survival of Magic Arts’, 125.

869 Dieleman, ‘Coping with a Difficult Life’, 342.

870 Vikan, ‘Art, Medicine, and Magic’, 76-77.

871 For further discussion, see for example: P. Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, AD 200-1000*, Second Edition (Oxford 2003) 153; Frankfurter, *Christianizing Egypt*, 2, 7-15. For a similar idea see: Van der Vliet, ‘Christian Spells’, 348; D. Frankfurter, ‘Syncretism and the Holy Man in Late Antique Egypt’, *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 11 (2003) 339-385: 339-344.

872 Dasen, Nagy, ‘Gems’, 424.

873 Dosoo, ‘Magical Names’, 133.

874 See also: Strathern, *Unearthly Powers*, 81-87; Sluiter, ‘Anchoring Innovation’.

875 Van der Vliet, ‘Christian Spells’, 329-330.

4.2 A NEW SOURCE: EARLY CHRISTIAN BISHOPS DISCUSSING AMULETS

The sermons criticising the use of amulets and other Christian texts dealing with practices related to amulets are a good starting point for an examination of the dynamic between change and continuity. These sources present a variety of aspects of both the traditional Graeco-Roman and the new early Christian religious strategies.

The fierce condemnation of amulets by several Christian bishops had a considerable impact on modern research into ancient amulet use.⁸⁷⁶ The large number of sources criticising the use of amulets may give the impression that the entire early Christian church condemned the creation and use of amulets. The critical bishops, however, only formed the small top-layer of the early Christian church – many Christian amulets were actually made by priests and monks who, like the bishops, were members of Christian institutions.⁸⁷⁷ Although the sermons must be read as normative texts, they provide many insights into Christian day-to-day practice. They also make it possible to place changes and continuities in the use of amulets against the background of late antique society.

4.2.1 Critique on the use of amulets

Some non-Christian authors who discussed the process of creating traditional amulets were sceptical about their use. Pliny described the amulet-making Magi as ‘a lying crowd’.⁸⁷⁸ On the other hand, he also made the following statement: ‘In quartans [fever] ordinary medicines are useless; for which reason I shall include several of the magicians’ remedies, and in the first place the amulets (*adalligari*) they recommend.’⁸⁷⁹ Pliny was very sceptical about some amulet instructions, but praised the effects of others.⁸⁸⁰ While there had been criticism before, the advent of Christianity brought not only scepticism, but also outright condemnation of using and producing amulets.⁸⁸¹ Early Christian authors rejected such practices, even to the point of advocating exclusion from baptism or excommunication.

876 See for example the discussion on the normative discourse at the beginning of chapter one of this book and Sanzo, ‘Early Christianity’. For the focus on healing see below under ‘Focus on healing amulets’.

877 For example: de Bruyn had to deal with the normative discourse before embarking on his analysis of amulets with early Christian elements. De Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, chapter one on the normative discourse.

878 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.86, see also: 28.100. Criticism of Galen, for example on Egyptian quackery: Galen, *De simplicium medicamentorum* Kühn XI.792-793.

879 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 30.98. Translation by Faraone, *Transformation*, 301n.131.

880 This is a broader theme in Pliny’s reaction to the religious practices he describes: Cordovana, ‘Pliny the Elder between Magic and Medicine’, 75, see also 71.

881 Apart from amulets, other religious practices, such as speaking charms or performing divination rituals, were regarded as ‘magic’ and unacceptable. Augustine of Hippo, *De catechizandis rudibus* 7.11 (CCSL 46.7.18); Caesarius of Arles, *Sermones* 54.5. On the condemnation of ‘magical’ practices see: Sanzo, ‘Early Christianity’; Van der Vliet, ‘Christian Spells’; de Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, chapter on the normative discourse.

Sanzo describes a passage from the Apostolic tradition – a collection of community rules – in which ‘*magoi*’, fortune tellers, interpreters of dreams and makers of amulets were excluded from baptism.⁸⁸² Most of the criticism of amulet use was expressed by bishops in their sermons.⁸⁸³

Some bishops prepared their sermons, others improvised. The oral performances were written down by members of the clergy as they were listening or afterwards by the bishops themselves. The sermons could be altered, copied, and used by others as a source of inspiration.⁸⁸⁴ When studying a surviving sermon, one must take into account that its text may be different from the words that were actually spoken. Details may have been lost or altered when making notes or copies.⁸⁸⁵ The sermons unfortunately provide little information on how they were received.⁸⁸⁶ It goes without saying, however, that the bishops used their sermons to convey a message to their audiences. In the words of Rebillard: ‘The explicit goal of the preachers is to change habits and practices, to teach different, new values.’⁸⁸⁷ Scholars have argued that, in between the lines, these sources give us a glimpse of the preachers’ world, because the bishops must have reacted to the lived experiences of their audiences. They could not deviate too far from the truth as they saw it.⁸⁸⁸

The sermons addressed those who came to mass – people who were already involved or interested in Christianity. The early bishops thus criticised the actions of people who may have identified with Christianity.⁸⁸⁹ For example, a sermon of Caesarius of Arles that will be discussed below warns amulet users that ‘who does this evil loses the sacrament of baptism’.⁸⁹⁰ Caesarius’s criticism is thus directed at people who had already received this sacrament. Interestingly, sermons and canonical laws refer to priests, monks and clerics who themselves created, provided and/or used amulets.⁸⁹¹ Caesarius mentions people receiving amulets from priests (*clerici*), who tell their customers that they ‘contain holy facts and divine lessons’.⁸⁹² The latter is probably a reference to the scriptural and liturgical

882 *Traditio Apostolorum* 16.14, Sanzo, ‘Early Christianity’, 220-221.

883 See Sermon 13.5 from Caesarius of Arles discussed below for the consequences of losing the sacrament of baptism, discussed under ‘Caesarius of Arles’.

884 See for example, Mayer, ‘Preaching and Listening’. Sometimes bishops also wrote ‘model’ sermons for other bishops, which were thus not necessarily pronounced.

885 Cook, *Preaching and Popular Christianity*, 5, 8-9.

886 Mayer, ‘Preaching and Listening’, 19-20. See also: É. Rebillard, ‘Sermons, Audience, Preacher’ in: A. Dupont, et al. (eds.), *Preaching in the Patristic Era. Sermons, Preachers, and Audiences in the Latin West* (Leiden 2018) 87-102.

887 Rebillard, ‘Sermons, Audience, Preacher’, 95.

888 Rebillard, *Christians and Their Many Identities*, 6; Rebillard, ‘Sermons, Audience, Preacher’, 95-97.

889 On people participating in both Christian church rituals and local traditional practices see: W.E. Klingshirn, *Caesarius of Arles. The Making of a Christian Community in Late Antique Gaul* (Cambridge 1994) 211-214; Barb, ‘Survival of Magic Arts’, 106-107.

890 Caesarius of Arles, *Sermones* 13.5.

891 Shenoute of Atripe, *Acephalous work A14* par. 255-262 (Orlandi 18-20); Caesarius of Arles, *Sermones* 50.1.

892 Caesarius of Arles, *Sermones* 50.1. Translation by Mueller, *Volume I*, 253-254.

elements that form part of textual amulets with early Christian elements.⁸⁹³ Consequently, when Christian preachers criticised the use of amulets, they criticised people identifying with Christianity, including their own colleagues.⁸⁹⁴

One of the Christian authors' main arguments was the relation with the Devil amulet use implied. In the eyes of the bishops, amulets were able to heal because their power came from the Devil. The amulet would heal the user's body, but kill their soul.⁸⁹⁵ Caesarius, for example, writes as follows:

If some people have recovered their health by these charms (*ligaturae*), it was the Devil's cunning that did it. (...) For this reason the phylacteries (*filacteria*) sometimes seem to have power and beneficial effects; when the Devil has affected the soul with its consent, then he ceases to trouble the body. Anyone who makes these phylacteries (*filacteria*) or asks to have them made, as well as all those who consent to it have become pagans, and unless they perform sufficient penance they cannot escape punishment.⁸⁹⁶

Christian authors worried about the Devil tampering with the souls of those who, in times of need, reached out to amulets.⁸⁹⁷ Using amulets would make the users 'pagan' in the words of Caesarius; it would undo baptism.⁸⁹⁸

In the following sections, I will examine the work of three bishops to see which practices were criticised and on what grounds. The analysis will also shed light on the early Christian context of amulet use, because the bishops present a variety of motives for their criticism and between the lines provide insights into their own time's ideas about amulet use.

John Chrysostom

John Chrysostom became a priest in 386 and preached in Antioch. In 397 he became bishop of Constantinople. A large corpus of his sermons has survived. In many of these, John Chrysostom criticised the (religious) practices of his congregation such as using amulets.⁸⁹⁹ In his sermon 'Against Judaising Christians' he argues that using Jewish amulets leads to

893 See the discussion on the role of text on amulets below in 4.3D.

894 Compare Luijendijk: 'To what extent are these church leaders acting against colleagues in the clergy whose theology, economics, and practices they resisted?' Luijendijk, 'Gospel Amulet for Joannia', 429.

895 Some ancient authors thus believed that amulets were able to act, but only because of the Devil's aid. Graf, 'Augustine and Magic', 96-98, 102; Van der Vliet, 'Roman and Byzantine Egypt', 262. For the shift towards 'magic' as the work of the Devil see: M.W. Dickie, 'Magic in Merovingian Gaul: Continuity or Discontinuity' in: M. Piranomonte, F.M., Símon (eds.), *Contesti magici-Contextos magicos. Atti del Convegno internazionale* (Rome 2013) 313-325: 313.

896 Caesarius of Arles, *Sermones* 50.1. Translation by Mueller, *Volume I*, 253-254.

897 De Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 41.

898 Dosoo, 'Healing Traditions', 55.

899 For a general introduction see: C. de Wet, 'John Chrysostom' in: *Brill Encyclopedia of Early Christianity Online*, last accessed September 2025.

the loss of the soul and thus of the perspective of everlasting life:

Suppose he uses the cures which the Jews effect as his excuse; suppose he says: ‘They promise to make me well, and so I go to them.’ Then you must reveal the tricks they use, their incantations, their amulets (περιάμματα), their charms and spells. This is the only way in which they have a reputation for healing; they do not effect genuine cures. Heaven forbid they should! Let me go so far as to say that even if they really do cure you, it is better to die than to run to God’s enemies and be cured that way. What use is it to have your body cured if you lose your soul? What profit is there that you find some relief from your pain in this world if you are going to be consigned to eternal fire?⁹⁰⁰

Amulets were also linked to Judaism because of the Jewish use of *tefillin* and *mezuzot*, capsules with passages from the Pentateuch worn around the forehead and arm or at the door to which people may have attributed apotropaic powers.⁹⁰¹

John Chrysostom had an active audience. While he was preaching, scribes wrote down what he said, sometimes including reactions of, or interaction with, the audience – unfortunately not in the case of passages that discuss amulets.⁹⁰² Although it has previously been argued that Chrysostom’s audience must have consisted of members of the elite, the prevailing view is now that it included people from various layers of society.⁹⁰³ In any case, the sermons contain much information on the daily lives of the ordinary members of Chrysostom’s flock. Therefore, his works are often used by modern scholars to study the social reality of ‘popular Christianity’ in Chrysostom’s time.⁹⁰⁴ Two passages on amulets run as follows:

Do you not see how women and little children suspend Gospels from their necks as powerful amulets (φυλακαί), and carry them about in all places wherever they go?⁹⁰⁵

900 John Chrysostom, *Adversus Judaeos* 8.5 (PG 48.935) (This work is quite antisemitic). Translation by P.W. Harkins, *Saint John Chrysostom. Discourses against Judaizing Christians* (Fathers of the Church 68) (Washington 1979) 222-223. For other passages on amulets, see for example: John Chrysostom, *In epistulam I ad Corinthios* 12.7 (PG 61.104-6); *In epistulam ad Colossenses* 8.5 (PG 62.357-59); *Adversus Judaeos* 8.6-7 (PG 48.936-8); *Ad illuminandos catacheses* 2 (PG 49.240); *Catachesis ultima ad baptizandos* 3.6 (SC 366, 232-235).

901 Skemer, *Binding words*, 33-35; Sanzo, ‘Early Christianity’, 235.

902 J.D. Cook, *Preaching and Popular Christianity: Reading the Sermons of John Chrysostom* (Oxford 2018) 5.

903 Cook, *Preaching and Popular Christianity*, 8-9.

904 See: De Wet, ‘John Chrysostom’ or the introduction in Cook, *Preaching and Popular Christianity*, which summarises many earlier publications. For even newer perspectives see: C.L. de Wet, W. Mayer, ‘Approaching and Appreciating John Chrysostom in New Ways’ in: W. Mayer, C.L. de Wet (eds.), *Revisioning John Chrysostom. New Approaches, New Perspectives* (Leiden 2019) 1-31: 5, but also see the whole volume.

905 John Chrysostom, *Homiliae de statu ad populum Antiochenum* 19.14 (PG 49.196). Translation by Luijendijk, ‘Gospel Amulet for Joannia’, 431-432.

And what are these amulets (φυλακτήρια) and borders (κράσπεδα)? Since they were continually forgetting God's benefits, he commanded that his wonders be inscribed on little books and that these should be suspended from their hands....which they call phylacteries (φυλακτήρια), as now many of our women have Gospels hanging from their necks.⁹⁰⁶

It has been argued that the Gospel amulets described by Chrysostom are the activated textual amulets that have been excavated: Gospel passages, or only the incipits representing the whole text, inscribed on papyrus or metal, rolled up and worn in a capsule around the neck.⁹⁰⁷ The connection between amulets and women is also found in other sermons, where women are described as using amulets, tying amulets on their sick children, or providing others with amulets.⁹⁰⁸ Chrysostom does not approve of amulets, but he does endorse the use of the cross – not in its material form, but as the sign representing the crucifixion of Christ. He even attributes exorcistic and protective powers similar to those of amulets to this non-material practice: 'But the cross has the strength of a wonderful amulet (περίπτρον) and a mighty incantation; blessed is the soul which speaks in the name of Jesus Christ crucified. Call upon that name and every disease will flee, every attack of Satan will yield.'⁹⁰⁹

Recently there has been discussion on whether the sermons of Chrysostom tell us anything about how they were received. They seem to suggest that Chrysostom's words did not have much effect; he continued to condemn amulets, while his audience continued to use them. Scholars have tried to explain this. J.D. Cook has, for example, asked himself how Chrysostom could be so critical and harsh and yet remain so popular. He argues that Chrysostom may have been unusually critical, but did not necessarily react to the lived reality of his audience. Chrysostom used the harsh language of a teacher and a medical healer, because he wanted his followers to live a life without sin and attain eternal salvation: 'He wanted to arouse in his congregation a fear of judgement and of hell, that such fear might spark a deeper obedience to their God.'⁹¹⁰ I. Sandwell argues that the sermons tell us nothing about how they were received. In her view, 'ordinary Christians' probably

906 John Chrysostom, *In Matthaëum (homiliae 1-90)* 72.2 (PG 58.669). Translation by Luijendijk, 'Gospel Amulet for Joannia', 418.

907 Luijendijk, 'Gospel Amulet for Joannia', 423-425; see also de Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 141-153 on these types of amulets.

908 John Chrysostom, *In epistulam ad Colossenses* 8.5 (PG 62.357-359).

909 John Chrysostom, *Catechesis ultima ad baptizandos* 3.6 (SC 366, 232-235). Translation by P.W. Harkins, *John Chrysostom: Baptismal Instructions* (London 1963) 11.25 on page 168. On the (sign of the) cross see also: *In epistulam I ad Corinthios* 12.13 (PG 61.105-106); John Chrysostom, *In epistulam ad Colossenses* 8.5 (PG 62.357-359).

910 Cook, *Preaching and Popular Christianity*, quote on 199, but see 11-22 and the rest of the book.

formed some kind of interpretation on the basis of their personal knowledge.⁹¹¹ Although we certainly should be critical about the degree to which these sermons reflect lived reality, we must accept that they were created with an audience in mind. In another publication, Sandwell discusses the way in which Chrysostom used his sermons to construct a Christian identity, attempting to set the boundaries of what he believed to be correct and wrong Christian behaviour. Good Christian behaviour did not include the use of amulets. Sandwell argues that his audiences did not necessarily see the use of amulets as an un-Christian practice and continued to reach out to them. This matter will be further discussed below.⁹¹²

Augustine of Hippo

Augustine became a priest around 390-391 and was given the right to preach. In 396 he became bishop of Hippo. Most of his comments on amulet use can be found in his sermons.⁹¹³ More than 800 of Augustine's sermons are known to us, but this is probably only a small proportion of the total number of sermons he delivered during his life.⁹¹⁴ Augustine did not write out his sermons and delivered them without the support of written notes. Others would write them down as he was speaking and in some cases Augustine is known to have edited the texts afterwards. Already during his lifetime, Augustine's sermons were available for copying and used as examples by other bishops and priests. In the early sixth century, for instance, Caesarius of Arles used Augustine's sermons.⁹¹⁵ In his preaching, Augustine often referred to everyday life. Although we only see his vision, in order to resonate with his audience his sermons must have related to their lived experience.⁹¹⁶

Augustine particularly discussed amulets in his sermons of the 'sickbed genre', which evoke a situation of a very devout Christian suffering from a potentially lethal illness, pressured by family and friends to use an amulet. The patient refuses, however, then dies

911 I. Sandwell, 'Preaching and Christianisation: Communication, Cognition, and Audience Reception' in: W. Mayer, C.L. de Wet (eds.), *Revisiting John Chrysostom. New Approaches, New Perspectives* (Leiden 2019) 137-174.

912 Sandwell, *Religious Identity*, 3-9.

913 See the examples below as well as Augustine of Hippo, *Sermones (ad populum)* 4.36 (CSSL 41.20-48), 318.3 (PL 38.1437-1440), 328 (PLS 2.800), 335D.3 and 335D.5 (PLS 2.778-780). See also: *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 93.20 (CSSL 39.1322). There are more examples of Augustine discussing amulets, but they are often less elaborate. For Augustine's views about 'magic' in general see: F. Graf, 'Augustine and Magic' in: J.N. Bremmer, J.R. Veenstra (eds.), *The Metamorphosis of Magic from Late Antiquity to the Early Modern Period* (Leuven 2002) 87-103.

914 Augustine not only preached on Sundays, but also on feast days and during specific liturgical periods even daily. Apart from the *Sermones*, the preachings of Augustine can also be found in the *Tractatus* and *Enarrationes*. However, the sermons in these treatises were not all actually performed, but written as examples for other priests. S. Boodts, A. Dupont, 'Augustine of Hippo' in: A. Dupont, *et al.* (eds.), *Preaching in the Patristic Era. Sermons, Preachers, and Audiences in the Latin West* (Leiden 2018) 177-197: 177-178.

915 Boodts, Dupont, 'Augustine of Hippo', 177-186.

916 See also: Rebillard, *Christians and Their Many Identities*, 75.

and becomes a martyr.⁹¹⁷ These scenes reflect a discussion on martyrdom. As Christians were no longer persecuted in Augustine's time, there were fewer chances of becoming a martyr.⁹¹⁸ Augustine apparently sought to broaden the concept of martyrdom. In sermon 4.36, for example, he maintains that martyrdom is not limited to those who are killed by wild beasts in the amphitheatre, but also includes those who die of an illness after having rejected the use of healing amulets or other non-Christian healing practices.⁹¹⁹ The sickbed scenes provide us with a glimpse into the social situations surrounding amulet use. In sermon 286.7, Augustine paints the following picture:

So while he's being wracked with pain, along comes trial and temptation by tongue; either some female, or a man, if man he can be called, approaches the sickbed, and says to the sick man: "Tie on that spell (*ligatura*), and you will get better; let them apply that charm (*praecantatio*), and you will get better. So-and-so, and So-and-so and So-and-so; ask, they all got better by using it." He doesn't yield, he doesn't agree, he doesn't give his consent; he has to struggle, all the same. He has no strength, and he conquers the devil. He becomes a martyr on his sickbed, and he is crowned by the one who hung for him on the tree.⁹²⁰

In this scene people of both genders try to persuade the patient to use an amulet. They talk about people they know, who believed they had been cured because they used an amulet. However, the patient conquers the Devil (who is supposed to give amulets their power), rejects the use of an amulet, dies, and becomes a martyr. Augustine seeks to put an end to amulet use and makes the 'reward' of martyrdom part of his criticism. Similar scenes often appear in sermons. One of the reasons why they were so popular may have been the fact that life-threatening illnesses were so common at the time.⁹²¹ Listeners would recognise the scene or elements of it. The social aspects of these scenes will be further discussed below.

In the passage quoted above, Augustine's alternative for amulet use is death and martyrdom. Other passages give the impression that Augustine was still searching for the boundaries of 'good' and 'bad' religious (healing) strategies.⁹²² His *Tractates on the Gospel of John* contain the following passage:

917 This format was not solely used for amulets. For example, sermon 376A.3 criticises turning to a local healer or astrologer: Rebillard, *Christians and Their Many Identities*, 74.

918 Rebillard, *Christians and Their Many Identities*, 74-75.

919 Augustine of Hippo, *Sermones (ad populum)* 4.36 (CCSL 41.20-48).

920 Augustine of Hippo, *Sermones (ad populum)* 286.7 (PL 38.1297-1301). Translation: Rebillard, *Christians and Their Many Identities*, 74.

921 De Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 26-27.

922 See also the discussion below in section 4.2.2 on the motivations for criticising amulets.

When you have a headache, we commend you if you put the gospel by your head and do not hurry to an amulet (*ligatura*). For human frailty has come to this, and men who hurry to amulets (*ligaturae*) must be so lamented that we rejoice when we see that a man, confined to his bed, is tossed by fever and pain and yet has placed no hope anywhere else except that he put the gospel by his head, not because the gospel was made for this but because it has been preferred to amulets (*ligaturae*). Therefore, if it is put by the head so that a headache may be eased, is it not put by the heart that the heart may be healed of its sins?⁹²³

While it is clear that using an amulet was unacceptable in Augustine's eyes – this would even include textual amulets with passages from the Gospel, rolled up and worn in a capsule around the neck – holding the book itself to the head to ease a headache was allowed. As J.E. Sanzo points out, 'a gospel artifact represented a "pure" artifact that supported ecclesiastical ritual idiom and, moreover, did not require ailing Christians to visit practitioners who might influence them in theologically unsavoury ways.'⁹²⁴ This suggests, in other words, that the main reason for rejecting the use of amulets was that their creation was not controlled by bishops.

Caesarius of Arles

Caesarius became bishop of Arles in 502. The people in his diocese, both from the city and from the more rural areas around Arles, were still involved in traditional religious practices, such as pre-Roman tree worship and the use of Graeco-Roman amulets inscribed with *charaktères*.⁹²⁵ One of his sermons contains the following passage:

Moreover, if you still see men fulfilling vows to fountains or trees, and, as was already⁹²⁶ said, consulting sorcerers, seers, or charmers, hanging devilish phylacteries (*fylacteria*), magic signs (*caracteres*), herbs, or charms⁹²⁷ on themselves or their family, rebuke them harshly, telling them that one who does this evil loses the sacrament of baptism.⁹²⁸

Apart from faith in fountains and trees, this passage mentions all sorts of textual and natural amulets. Caesarius saw these rituals and practices as un-Christian. The people who

923 *In Iohannis euangelium tractatus* 7.12 (CCSL 36.73). Translation by J.W. Rettig, *St. Augustine: Tractates on the Gospel of John 1-10* (Washington 1988) 165.

924 Sanzo, *Ritual Boundaries*, 27.

925 Klingshirn, *Caesarius of Arles*, for example: 208-209.

926 See Caesarius of Arles, *Sermones* 13.3.

927 Caesarius writes *sucinos*, from *sucinus* 'made of amber'. For the use of amber in 'magical' practices see for example Davis, 'Rubbing and Rolling'.

928 'A sermon necessary in parishes', part of Sermon 13.5. Caesarius of Arles, *Sermones* 13.5. Translation by Mueller, *Volume 1*, 78.

performed them, however, had been baptised and therefore must have identified themselves as Christians. Nevertheless, they apparently did not see the traditional practices referred to by Caesarius as problematic. This ties into notions proposed by, for example, W.E. Klingshirn, who described the Christian communities of sixth-century Gaul as follows: 'It was a form of Christianity that was defined as much by local custom as by outside authority; it was a form of Christianity that permitted the continuation of many traditional observances; and above all it was a form of Christianity that the rural population actually practiced.'⁹²⁹ With his sermons, Caesarius sought to reach people from all layers of society in order to teach them Christian doctrine and morals. He made sure to adapt the language and line of argument of his sermons to his audience. In addition, he wrote examples of sermons for priests, so that they could do the same.⁹³⁰

Caesarius discussed amulets in several of his sermons, especially in those in which he focussed on morals and a good Christian life.⁹³¹ He not only sought to improve the morals of laypeople, but also those of the clergy.⁹³² As becomes clear from sermon 50.1, some clergymen were in the habit of providing amulets:

What is deplorable is that there are some who seek soothsayers in every kind of infirmity. They consult seers and divines, summon enchanters, and hang diabolical phylacteries and magic letters (*caracteres*) on themselves. Often enough they receive charms (*ligaturae*) even from priests and religious, who, however, are not really religious or clerics but the Devil's helpers. See, brethren, how I plead with you not to consent to accept these wicked objects, even if they are offered by clerics. There is no remedy of Christ in them, but the poison of the Devil which will not cure your body but will kill your poor soul with the sword of infidelity. Even if you are told that the phylacteries contain holy facts and divine lessons, let no one believe it or expect health to come to him from them.

If some people have recovered their health by these charms (*ligaturae*), it was the Devil's cunning that did it. (...) However, brethren, ask health from Christ who is the true Light. Hurry to church, be anointed with holy oil, and receive the Eucharistic Christ. If you do this, you will receive health of soul as well as of body.⁹³³

929 Klingshirn, *Caesarius of Arles*, 224-225.

930 In the context of his giving the right to preach to priests – initially, it only belonged to bishops. N. De Maeyer, G. Partoens, 'Preaching in Sixth-Century Arles. The Sermons of Bishop Caesarius' in: A. Dupont, *et al.* (eds.), *Preaching in the Patristic Era. Sermons, Preachers, and Audiences in the Latin West* (Leiden 2018) 198-231: 199-205. On using older priests as examples see page 214-215. Similarities with Augustine's ideas about martyrdom: Caesarius of Arles, *Sermones* 184.4. Similarities with John Chrysostom on blaming the mothers of sick children: sermon 52.1 and 52.5-6.

931 Some more elaborate than others, see Caesarius of Arles, *Sermones* 1.12; 13.3 and 13.5, 14.4, 19.4, 50.1 and 50.2, 52.1 and 52.2-6, 54.5, 184.4, 204.3.

932 De Maeyer, Partoens, 'Preaching in Sixth-Century Arles', 202-203.

933 Caesarius of Arles, *Sermones* 50.1. Translation by Mueller, *Volume I*, 253-254.

Caesarius speaks of amulets containing ‘holy facts and divine lessons’ and here seems to refer to the many textual amulets with liturgical and scriptural passages that have been found, which were likely made by the priests he criticised. In his time, the amount of Christian elements in these types of amulets had significantly increased as compared with the times of Augustine and Chrysostom.⁹³⁴ Nevertheless, Caesarius did not consider them acceptable.

Caesarius’s approach to amulets is similar to that of his predecessors, but there is one important difference. Whereas other bishops had tried to convince people that it was better to die than to use amulets, Caesarius identified acceptable Christian healing practices. In his view, the sick should have recourse to the church and receive holy oils and the bread of the Eucharist. He saw these practices as legitimate Christian alternatives.⁹³⁵

4.2.2 Motivations for criticising amulets

Over time the vocabulary of textual amulets became more Christian. At the same time, amulets presented fewer references to non-Christian supernatural beings.⁹³⁶ However, the bishops of the fourth to sixth centuries not only criticised the use of traditional amulets. As we have seen, Caesarius also condemned amulets containing ‘holy facts’ made by Christian priests.⁹³⁷ Augustine condemned the use of amulets with texts from the Gospels, although he allowed using the actual book for healing purposes.⁹³⁸ Chrysostom stated that the cross as a sign and a speech act had the power of an amulet, but at the same time rejected the use of (cross-shaped) amulets.⁹³⁹ The practice itself, even if the amulets were Christian, was condemned. The bishops seem to have been looking for the boundary between acceptable and unacceptable religious practice.⁹⁴⁰ Exactly why, then, did they condemn amulets?

Controlling the congregation: centralisation

One possible explanation for the criticism is the idea that the bishops sought to institutionalise Christian religious practices and control individual religious acts – personal religious strategies for control over everyday life were identified as illegitimate. In relation to the work of Chrysostom, I. Sandwell argues: ‘It was no longer acceptable for individuals

934 See for example the work of Dosoo, ‘Magical Names’.

935 Klingshirn, *Caesarius of Arles*, 233. For an analysis of the prescription of alternatives see 233–234.

936 Dosoo, ‘Magical Names’, 128–132.

937 Caesarius of Arles, *Sermones* 50.1.

938 Augustine of Hippo, *In Iohannis euangelium tractatus* 7.12 (CCSL 36.73).

939 Stander, ‘Amulets and the Church Fathers’, 65–66.

940 In some passages the bishops give the impression that they allowed certain practices that were very similar to amulets. Stander, ‘Amulets and the Church Fathers’, 62–63. Gospel at bed or box with alms in John Chrysostom, *In epistulam I ad Corinthios* 43.7 (PG 61.372–3); sign of the cross in John Chrysostom, *In epistulam ad Colossenses* 8.5 (PG 62.357–359); recourse to the church, anoint with holy oil, and receive the Eucharistic bread in Caesarius of Arles, *Sermones* 50.1.

to have control and contact with the divine for their own ends (rather than the prescribed ends of the Church), even if they were calling on Christian divinities.⁹⁴¹ This, of course, did not prevent people from using these religious strategies when trying to cope with everyday misfortune.⁹⁴²

Early church authors seem to have felt threatened by the domestic, personal sphere, an environment where the bishops did not have much influence.⁹⁴³ K. Bowes has argued that in the Christian debates of the fourth and fifth centuries, the domestic sphere played a large role.⁹⁴⁴ Although the bishops grew more powerful and the liturgy became more centralised, the power of the institutions remained limited.⁹⁴⁵ Based on archaeological material, she argues that ‘institutions, particularly episcopally-defined institutions, did not matter as much as we thought they had, and that what we casually termed “Christianization” was marked by the unorchestrated, often eccentric projects of pious individuals that frequently clashed with still-nascent ideas of episcopal authority.’⁹⁴⁶ Such concerns explain why many bishops objected to individuals building, or funding the building of, churches in their houses or on their estates and performing Christian rituals at home.⁹⁴⁷ Keeping relics at home was likewise criticised, because bishops wanted relics to be kept in church buildings.⁹⁴⁸ Similar ideas seem to have been at the background of a small elite of bishops’ condemnation of amulets.

D. Kalleres demonstrated that the debate regarding control over individual religion changed over time. This can, for instance, be seen in the use of the female as a trope. In line with an already existing Roman literary *topos*, women were criticised as the ones who brought ‘magical’ practices, such as amulets, into the home.⁹⁴⁹ As the primary caretakers for sick family members, they would have recourse to ‘inappropriate’ healing practices and should therefore be ‘feared’.⁹⁵⁰ Early Christian authors re-introduced this trope with the purpose of establishing the boundaries between good and bad behaviour and ‘crafting the

941 Sandwell, *Religious Identity*, 270-271.

942 For observations on Chrysostom’s audiences and the works of Libanus: Sandwell, *Religious Identity*, 271-273. For ancient Christian spells as a corpus of ‘crisis management’ see: Van der Vliet, ‘Christian Spells’, 331.

943 D.S. Kalleres, *City of Demons. Violence, Ritual, and Christian Power in Late Antiquity* (Oakland 2015) 70. See also Sanzo’s comments on why Augustine allowed the actual book but not the Gospel amulet (because it had to be made by someone): Sanzo, *Religious Boundaries*, 27.

944 K.D. Bowes, *Private Worship, Public Values, and Religious Change in Late Antiquity* (New York 2008) 189-216.

945 K.D. Bowes, ‘“Christianization” and the Rural Home’, *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 15.2 (2007) 143-170: 162-164.

946 Summary by Bowes of her book. Quote in: K.D. Bowes, ‘Sixth-Century Individual Rituals. Private Chapels and the Reserved Eucharist’ in: É. Rebillard, J. Rüpke (eds.), *Group Identity and Religious Individuality in Late Antiquity* (Washington 2015) 54-88: 56. About: Bowes, *Private Worship*.

947 See also: K.D. Bowes, ‘The Rural Home’.

948 Wiśniewski, *Cult of Relics*, 138-140.

949 Kalleres, ‘Drunken Hags’, 220-231 in general.

950 Kalleres, *City of Demons*, 70-71.

ecclesiastical family.⁹⁵¹ Chrysostom, for example, argues that amulets are the work of silly, drunken, old women.⁹⁵² In the works of Christian authors of the sixth century, however, the trope of the (old) woman is much less dominant. As a distinctly Christian kind of materiality gained ground, bishops were able to offer alternative religious practices, which were, moreover, institutionalised. The availability of these alternatives meant that it was no longer necessary to blame women for unacceptable behaviour.⁹⁵³ Instead, Caesarius is now critical of clergymen making amulets and investing them with Christian power. All in all, while amulets became increasingly institutionalised and monks, priests, and other members of the clergy gave people access to amulets, bishops still sought to bring every religious practice under the control of the central, institutionalised church.

Identity formation: the ideal Christian

Although emphasising the role of the church, early Christian authors also strove to present an image of the ideal Christian. They wanted to show people how they should live, to construct an idea of what a ‘good’ Christian does.⁹⁵⁴ Chrysostom, for example, argues that using omens and amulets is ‘foreign to Christianity.’⁹⁵⁵ As traditional religious practices and Christianity started to mix, for example in amulets with Christian elements, church leaders had to make decisions about what was acceptable and what was not.⁹⁵⁶ It was in this context that authors attempted to construct a Christian identity. Identities are, however, relational; in order to determine what is good, it is necessary to define what is bad.⁹⁵⁷ By making lists of unacceptable religious practices, early Christian authors sought to establish which forms of religion were legitimate.⁹⁵⁸ In his sermons, Augustine expresses his ideas about the good Christian: the person who rather dies than damage his soul by using an amulet.⁹⁵⁹ The strong contrast – between earthly life and eternal life – helps to demarcate an ideal Christian identity.⁹⁶⁰

The bishops felt the need to define the boundaries of Christian identity because different people had different ideas about them – the people who were criticised in the sermons, for

951 Kalleres, ‘Drunken Hags’, 224.

952 John Chrysostom, *Ad illuminandos catacheses* 2 (PG 49.240); John Chrysostom, *In epistulam ad Colossenses* 8.5 (PG 62.357-359).

953 Kalleres, ‘Drunken Hags’, 234-235.

954 Sanzo, ‘Early Christianity’; Van der Vliet, ‘Roman and Byzantine Egypt’, 254.

955 M. Kahlos, ‘“A Christian cannot employ Magic”: Rhetorical Self-Fashioning of the Magicless Christianity of Late Antiquity’ in: R. Flower, M. Ludlow (eds.), *Rhetoric and Religious Identity in Late Antiquity* (Oxford 2020) 130-133. John Chrysostom, *Ad illuminandos catacheses* 2 (PG 49.240).

956 Sanzo, ‘Early Christianity’, 236-237. Stander argues similarly: ‘The problem of Christians wearing amulets became most complex and acute when believers began to mingle the essence of Christian and pagan practices’: Stander, ‘Amulets and the Church Fathers’, 62.

957 Sandwell, *Religious Identity*, for example 5.

958 For example: Kahlos, ‘A Christian Cannot Employ Magic’, 140-141.

959 Augustine of Hippo, *Sermones (ad populum)* 4.36 (CSSL 41.20-48).

960 Sandwell, *Religious Identity*, 80-81.

instance, such as mothers with sick children or priests making amulets. As J.E. Sanzo has shown, most people had their own ideas about right and wrong.⁹⁶¹ Many amulets were made and used to protect those wearing them from being poisoned or cursed. While calling on the supernatural to hurt others was widely regarded as unacceptable, amulets for one's own benefit were generally seen as unproblematic.⁹⁶² The people criticised by Augustine and Chrysostom in their sermons probably saw amulets as a true Christian practice. Chrysostom, for example, describes how the people who 'make money' with amulets, justified their trade. They would say: "we call upon God, and do nothing extraordinary", "the old woman is a Christian", "and one of the faithful."⁹⁶³ Using amulets made by priests and inscribed with passages from the Bible was widely accepted as good Christian behaviour, especially if such amulets were provided from within Christian institutions.⁹⁶⁴ As these examples show, conflicting ideas about a Christian identity coexisted in Late Antiquity.⁹⁶⁵

Focus on healing amulets

Early Christian sources of the fourth to sixth centuries mostly speak about healing amulets. If one would only study these particular sources, one might get the impression that amulets were almost exclusively used to cure the sick.⁹⁶⁶ Alternatively, these texts might be read as evidence that the demand for healing amulets was so high that the church simply had to deal with the issue.⁹⁶⁷ Although amulets for other purposes are largely absent from early Christian sermons, reality was different. As will be discussed below, there is evidence that other types of amulets continued to be used.⁹⁶⁸

Perhaps the quasi-exclusive focus on healing should be understood as reflecting a deliberate choice. One aspect of Christian authors' attempts to define the boundaries of

961 Sanzo, *Ritual Boundaries*, 38, for the work of demons and spiritual attacks see 34.

962 *Codex Theodosianus* 9.16.3. For protection against others including sorcery and cursing see: GMA 52; SM 31; PGM P13; PGM P3.

963 John Chrysostom, *In epistulam ad Colossenses* 8.5 (PG 62.357-359). Translation: J.A. Broadus, *Homilies on the epistles of St. Paul the Apostle to the Philippians, Colossians, and the Thessalonians*. A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, series 1, Vol. 13 (New York 1889) 173-368.

964 Kahlos, 'A Christian Cannot Employ Magic', 134-140; Sanzo, *Ritual Boundaries*, 1-2.

965 Sanzo, *Ritual Boundaries*, 20-23, 38-42.

966 For example, in the works of John Chrysostom (*In epistulam ad Colossenses* 8.5 (PG 62.357-359); Augustine of Hippo (for example *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 93.20 (CCSL 39.1322); Caesarius of Arles (for example *Sermones* 13.3-5). Sometimes specific diseases or ailments are mentioned, such as fever (Augustine of Hippo, *Sermones (ad populum)* 335D.5 (PLS 2.778-780)) or headaches (Augustine of Hippo, *Sermones (ad populum)* 260D (PLS 2.586)). De Bruyn also mentions the focus on healing: *Making Amulets Christian*, 29. Although he also speaks of amulets for protection, I would like to stress that these are mentioned significantly less.

967 See for example: MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire*, 77, where it is argued that the church did not offer enough alternatives for non-Christian healing practices. I do not agree, see below in 4.3H. For the unignorable high demand, see also de Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 29.

968 For example, sixth-century house amulets: PGM P2; PGM P2a; PGM P6a.

proper Christian ritual practice was competition – with (older) local practices and with new Christian ritual practices they considered doubtful.⁹⁶⁹ Their aim was to carve out practices that would be ‘right’ as well as successful. In the fields of bodily healing and protection Christianity had something to offer.⁹⁷⁰ As for healing, (non-material) Christian *remedia* included church rituals and sacraments, the miracles of Christ and the cults of martyrs and saints.⁹⁷¹ Caesarius of Arles urges his congregation to make use of the prayers of the priest, of consecrated oil, to run to the church to ask Christ for health, to attend church often and take part in the Eucharist.⁹⁷² It was thus for health-related fears and problems that the early Christian authors could provide the best alternatives.

The quasi-exclusive focus on health may therefore reflect concerns of a different kind. Certain types of amulets are probably mentioned more often, because, in the eyes of the bishops, they formed the greatest threat. The sick were more easily tempted to reach out to amulets.⁹⁷³ And since the power of amulets was understood to come from the Devil, these Christians were in greater danger of harming their soul.⁹⁷⁴ M.W. Dickie argues in favour of a complementary relationship between Christian reprimands and imperial law: ‘It is precisely the areas of magic ignored by secular law as harmless and of no importance that engage the concern of the Church.’⁹⁷⁵ An edict issued by Constantine in 318 CE allows the use of religious strategies to heal individual human bodies or protect built structures, ‘since by such devices no person’s safety or reputation is injured.’⁹⁷⁶ This contrasts with early Christian authors, who did see harm in these devices.⁹⁷⁷

Anxieties about what people would do in times of crisis and the fact that Christianity had a variety of healing alternatives to offer, provide a conceivable explanation for Christian criticism’s focus on healing amulets. While bishops are unlikely to have approved of house amulets or amulets for obtaining charisma or victory, they clearly felt they had most authority in the area of healing.⁹⁷⁸

Using criticism to understand amulet users

Although the words of the bishops can give us a glimpse of the social reality of amulet use,

969 See for example: Sanzo, ‘Early Christianity’, 230-233; similar arguments in Van der Vliet, ‘Roman and Byzantine Egypt’, 521-522.

970 G.B. Ferngren, ‘Early Christianity as a Religion of Healing’, *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 66 (1992) 1-15; Sanzo, ‘Early Christianity’, 233-234; Van der Vliet, ‘Roman and Byzantine Egypt’, 248.

971 See also: Kalleres, ‘Drunken Hags’, 230.

972 For example, Caesarius of Arles, *Sermones* 19.4, 50.1, 52.5, 54.5, 204.3.

973 De Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 40.

974 See also: Kalleres, ‘Drunken Hags’, 230.

975 Dickie, *Magic and Magicians*, 257.

976 *Codex Theodosianus* 9.16.3. Translation by C. Pharr, *The Theodosian Code and Novels, and the Sirmundian Constitutions* (Princeton 1952) 237. Dickie, *Magic and Magicians*, 255-257.

977 Dickie, *Magic and Magicians*, 257-261.

978 This conclusion deserves more research, but will not be further explored in this book as the main focus is on the actual practice of amulet use.

they mostly show the bishops' narrative – a narrative that concerned the use of amulets with Christian elements by baptised Christians. Sermons provided the bishops with a means to control Christian religious practices and thus centralise the Christian religion. They presented examples of right and wrong religious behaviour, mostly referring to the area of healing where Christianity had something to offer. Nevertheless, as I have suggested before, in between the lines they refer to the social reality of their audiences, giving insights into specific situations, motivations and practices of amulet use – such as the social processes of talking about and promoting amulets. The sermons also reveal continuities and changes in amulet use. Examples include the continued use of amulets with herbs, amber, and *caractères* and the inclusion of Christian elements in amulets created by members of the clergy. This interaction between change and continuity will be further analysed in the remaining sections of this chapter.

4.3 THE LATE ANTIQUE PROCESS OF AMULET USE

An Egyptian papyrus amulet of the fourth or fifth century contains the following text:

CH M G. (Maria gives birth to Christ!) Hor Hor Phor Phor, Yao Sabaoth Adonai, Eloë, Salaman, Tarchei, I bind you, artemisian scorpion, 315 times. Preserve this house with its occupants from all evil, from all bewitchment of spirits of the air and human (evil) eye and terrible pain [and] sting of scorpion and snake, through the name of the highest god, Naias Meli, 7 (times) (?), XUROURO AAAAAA BAINCHOOCH MARIIIIIL ENAG KORE.
Be on guard, O lord, son of David according to the flesh, the one born of the holy virgin Mary, O holy one, highest god, from the holy spirit. Glory to you, O heavenly king, Amen.

A † O (ChiRho) A † O
IXΘΥΣ⁹⁷⁹

This amulet shows the continued use of amulets made to protect houses. The text itself clearly includes Christian elements, but they are combined with Egyptian (Hor = Horus) and Judeo-Christian elements typical of amuletic texts (Yao, Sabaoth).⁹⁸⁰ This combination of novel and traditional features is found in many amulets made and used in Late Antiquity. They show an enormous variety in religious elements and many ways to creatively use materials, texts, and imagery.

⁹⁷⁹ PGM P3. Translation by Marvin Meyer in ACM, nr 26.

⁹⁸⁰ De Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 90-98: for similar amulets as well as developments and meanings of Christian elements.

To gain a deeper understanding of developments in the use of amulets in the early Christian world, we have to study the actual objects. In what follows, I will analyse amulets containing Christian elements in order to elucidate the impact of these elements on the use and meaning of the object. However, the objects themselves cannot inform us on every aspect of their use. I will, therefore, also examine other sources, such as sermons and instructions for making amulets in late antique handbooks. Investigating the successive steps of amulet use set out in chapters two and three enables me to study continuity as well as change in amulet use in Late Antiquity on different levels.

A. Human individuals with problems and motives

The sermons discussed above give the impression that amulets were primarily used by women. As noted above, D. Kalleres has shown that this was a literary trope. Nevertheless, the information is valuable. John Chrysostom mentions that ‘many of our women have Gospels hanging from their necks’⁹⁸¹ and that ‘women and little children suspend Gospels from their necks as powerful amulets (φυλακαί), and carry them about in all places wherever they go.’⁹⁸² It has been argued that Chrysostom is referring to textual papyrus amulets containing incipits, i.e. the opening words of biblical passages, rather than the complete Gospels, although miniature Gospels may also have been worn as amulets.⁹⁸³ In any case, John Chrysostom’s remarks suggest that many women and children were still wearing amulets.

The arrival of Christianity does not seem to have brought about a change in the social background of people using amulets. Amulet users still included men and women, people of all ages, and from all layers of society.⁹⁸⁴ It is possible that slightly more women and children used amulets in relation to health, because pregnancy, childbirth, and childhood made them more vulnerable than adult men.⁹⁸⁵ However, the ancient medical handbooks do not confirm this hypothetical state of affairs. Compared to Pliny the Elder, for example, Marcellus of Bordeaux and Alexander of Tralles provide fewer instructions for female (in) fertility, childbirth, and childcare.⁹⁸⁶ One reason for this may be that the *Medicina Plinii*

981 John Chrysostom, *In Matthaeum (homiliae 1-90)* 72.2 (PG 58.669). Translation by Luijendijk, ‘Gospel Amulet for Joannia’, 418.

982 John Chrysostom, *Homiliae de statutis ad populum Antiochenum* 19.14 (PG 49.196). Translation by Luijendijk, ‘Gospel Amulet for Joannia’, 431-432.

983 Luijendijk, ‘Gospel Amulet for Joannia’, 423-425. For an amulet with a biblical passage see also: Jones, *New Testament Texts*, 94-100 (nr. 7).

984 For a male amulet user: John Chrysostom, *In epistulam I ad Timotheum* 13 (PG 62.564). For the use of amulets in early Christianity: Stander, ‘Amulets and the Church Fathers’, 59-60.

985 Stander, ‘Amulets and the Church Fathers’, 60.

986 Dioscorides also includes pregnancy-related amulets, but there is significantly less mention of these in the works of later authors discussed in this book. See Pliny the Elder: *Naturalis Historia* 20.6, 24.171, 26.161, 27.30, 28.99, 28.246-247, 30.125, 30.129, 32.6, 36.151, 36.153; Dioscorides, *Materia Medica* 2.164.1, 3.150.2, 5.142, 5.154; example of activated amulet: British Museum, London, registration number 2009,8042.1.

had become a more popular source than Pliny the Elder's original work – Marcellus of Bordeaux is known to have copied the *Medicina*.⁹⁸⁷ The *Medicina Plinii* was based on Pliny's *Naturalis Historia*, but it was a selection created for travellers, which would explain the absence of recipes for the female reproductive system, although it does include a few recipes for children.⁹⁸⁸ The amulets found in the archaeological record, however, provide ample evidence of the continued use of amulets by women and children. A. van den Hoek, E. Feissel and J.J. Herrmann jr., for example, have studied amuletic inscriptions on everyday objects and found slightly more references to female users in the health category.⁹⁸⁹

Apart from human bodies, amulets and amuletic texts or imagery continued to protect buildings such as houses; see for instance the amulet quoted above.⁹⁹⁰ As we have seen, it is usually impossible to establish the religious identity of amulet users. We do not know whether the user of an amulet with Christian elements would have identified as Christian or not. Religious identities were defined in different ways by different people.⁹⁹¹

Motives

Augustine describes how the Devil persuades people to use amulets: 'Just because there is no obvious enemy attacking your body, does that mean no hidden persecutor is assailing you with the allurements of materialism? How many wicked things he suggests, how many things through greed, how many things through fear!'⁹⁹² He felt that fear made people reach out to material ritual practices – not just amulets. This fits the motives described earlier. Both fear and hope were still important incentives for using amulets. People reached out to amulets because they hoped or expected that these would protect them, heal them or provide them with something. Christianity this does not seem to have brought any change in this respect.⁹⁹³

Changes in relation to healing

As the Christian bishops knew, many people reached out to amulets for healing purposes, just as they had done in earlier centuries. A comparison between Pliny and the medical works of the fifth and sixth centuries does not reveal much development. Later authors

987 Brodersen, 'Introduction', 5-6.

988 Brodersen, 'Introduction', 6.

989 Van den Hoek, Feissel, Herrmann jr., 'Magic of Portable Inscriptions', 317, 329, and 336; see also: Stander, 'Amulets and the Church Fathers', 60.

990 Sanzo, *Ritual Boundaries*, 32. See PGM P6a en PGM P2 for house-door protective amulets with Christian elements.

991 For example: Klingshirn, *Caesarius of Arles*, 224; see also Sanzo, *Ritual Boundaries*.

992 Augustine of Hippo, *Sermones (ad populum)* 4.36 (CSSL 41.20-48). Translation by E. Hill, *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century, Vol. III 1. Sermons 1-19. On the Old Testament* (New York 1990) 205-205.

993 For example: PGM P2, a sixth-century amulet for house protection; SM 35, a sixth-century amulet for fever; P.Oxy. LXXXII 5312, a sixth-century amulet for favour and success.

mainly copied earlier instructions, although there were some shifts such as the prominence of the *Medicina Plinii*. One example of the practice of copying is an arthritis amulet made of the feet of a hare. Pliny in the first century, Aelius Promotus in the second, Marcellus of Bordeaux in the fifth, and Alexander of Tralles in the sixth all describe a similar recipe: a foot (or several feet) had to be cut off a living hare to be worn on the body by the patient.⁹⁹⁴ All authors include the same recipe, but Marcellus of Bordeaux is the only one to specify where the amulet should be worn (on the patient's painful feet).⁹⁹⁵ The prevalence of copying suggests that earlier amulet instructions were still valid.⁹⁹⁶

P. Brown has put the work of Marcellus of Bordeaux in its contemporary context and analysed the differences between Marcellus's work and local healing practices in relation to saints.⁹⁹⁷ Even though Marcellus probably lived and worked with Christians (it is not clear if he was a Christian himself), he does not refer to the various Christian healing practices available in his lifetime, such as exorcism at the tombs of saints.⁹⁹⁸ Brown stresses that in the work of Marcellus healing power is not derived from a Christian or institutional source. Instead, Marcellus's writings emphasise reliance on powers present in nature, which people could access themselves. No middleman (priest, specialist, dead saint) was needed to create objects such as amulets. In Marcellus' time, people would not have seen the simultaneous use of different healing practices as problematic.⁹⁹⁹

994 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.220; Aelius Promotus, Wellmann 775.17; Marcellus, *De Medicamentis*, 36.26; Alexander of Tralles, *Therapeutica* P. 2.581.20-21.

995 Marcellus, *De Medicamentis*, 36.26.

996 Examples of similarities: headaches: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 24.170; *Medicina Plinii* I 1.4; Marcellus of Bordeaux, *De Medicamentis* 1.43 and 2.20; swelling in the groin area: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.48; *Medicina Plinii*, II 22.2; Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 32.19; 32.21; tying fingers against a cold: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 30.46; *Medicina Plinii*, I 11.2; Marcellus, *De Medicamentis*, 10.71 and 10.73.

997 P. Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago 1981) 114-119.

998 Some Judeo-Christian elements can be discerned in the textual amulets he described: Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 8.58-9 and 21.2-3 (in the name of Jacob and Zebaoth (Sabaoth)).

999 P. Brown, *The Cult of the Saints*, 114-119. Or as Zellmann-Rohrer and Love argue for the work of Marcellus, his recipes will probably have been 'at least unoffensive to Christian practitioners.' Zellmann-Rohrer, Love, *Traditions in Transmission*. 68.

Although medical handbooks show continuity over a long period of time, this does not mean that there were no developments at all. Some copied versions of specific recipes show small changes, for instance a different purpose for the same or a similar amulet. An amulet made of stones found in (or near) a swallow is described by Dioscorides, Pliny, *Medicina Plinii*, and Alexander of Tralles as a remedy for epilepsy; Marcellus of Bordeaux, however, presents it as a remedy for eye problems and fever.¹⁰⁰⁰ According to Pliny, a nail used in a crucifixion worn around the neck would act against fever, but according to Alexander such a nail should be worn around the arm against epilepsy.¹⁰⁰¹ Similarly, an eagle stone prevents miscarriage in Pliny and fever in Alexander.¹⁰⁰² It is not clear if these examples show new ideas or should be interpreted as copying mistakes.

There is one notable change that needs to be discussed: compared to earlier sources, the handbooks of the fifth and sixth centuries more frequently refer to amulets in the category of stomach pains, or gastrointestinal problems.¹⁰⁰³ Marcellus of Bordeaux and Alexander of Tralles, for instance, copying instructions from sources such as Pliny the Elder, incorporate additional directions.¹⁰⁰⁴ Alexander of Tralles, for example, gives a recipe using wolf faeces very similar to a much earlier one in the works of Pliny, Galen, and Marcellus of Bordeaux: ‘An amulet (Περίσπτον) of which we have had experience and which nearly all the of the best doctors hold in good opinion: Take the feces of a wolf, (...) and enclose it in a leather case and give it to the patient to wear.’¹⁰⁰⁵ In the work of Marcellus of Bordeaux, many instructions to create amulets for digestive issues refer to textual amulets.¹⁰⁰⁶ In one case he prescribes a Greek inscription: ‘These are the symbols that must be inscribed on a gold lamella: “Lpsmthkia Lpsmthkia Lpsmthkia.”’¹⁰⁰⁷ The textual amulets found in the archaeological record do not show a rise in gastrointestinal requests. It was, however, a very popular category in gemstones, both during the early Imperial period and in Late Antiquity.¹⁰⁰⁸

In addition, there are differences among the ancient medical authors in the types of amulets they describe. This could be due to the nature of the sources or the interests of

1000 Dioscorides *Materia Medica* 2.56; Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 30.91-92; *Medicina Plinii* III 21.2 and 21.3; Alexander of Tralles, *Therapeutica* P. 1.561.3-9; Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 8.45.

1001 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.46; Alexander of Tralles, *Therapeutica*, P. 1.567.10-13.

1002 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 36.151; Alexander of Tralles, *De Febribus* P. 1.407.1-3.

1003 As Faraone had also noticed: Faraone, *Transformation*, 261.

1004 An example of an instruction that was copied: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.211; Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 28.52, 29.35; Alexander of Tralles, *Therapeutica* 2.375.20-25

1005 Based on Alexander of Tralles, *Therapeutica* P.2.375.20-25. Taken from Faraone, *Transformation*, 280-281. Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.211 (for colitis); Galen, *De simplicium medicamentorum* Kühn, XII.295; Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 28.52, 29.35.

1006 Marcellus, *De Medicamentis*: belly pains: 20.66, 21.2-3, 29.26 and not a textual amulet but a gemstone: 20.98.

1007 The ‘symbols’ are Greek letters. Paraphrase by Faraone, *Transformation*, 279 of Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 29.26 (as 29.38 in Faraone).

1008 In general, gemstone amulets were often made for belly related problems: Dasen, ‘Healing Images’, 179-184.

the author. Marcellus of Bordeaux seems to have been particularly interested in amulets for throat problems, for instance with the uvula and tonsils, and less in fever amulets.¹⁰⁰⁹ Alexander of Tralles seems to have been especially interested in epilepsy and gout.¹⁰¹⁰

Protection and benefits

Textual amulets, the papyrus handbooks from Roman Egypt, and other sources on amulets indicate the continued use of amulets to obtain protection, healing or benefits in the fourth-to-sixth centuries. Protective agricultural amulets remained in use, for instance. Two second-century hailstorm amulets inscribed on metal tablets carry the following text: ‘divert from this property all hail and all snow’.¹⁰¹¹ This type of amulet is also described in the fourth-century Edict of Constantine; the use of *remedia* is allowed ‘in order that rains may not be feared for the ripe harvest’.¹⁰¹² Examples from Late Antiquity can be found as well, but with the addition of new Christian elements: ‘With respect to you, Jesus Christ, grant the fruit and tribute to the vineyard of Cyriacus, son of Zosimus’.¹⁰¹³ T.S. de Bruyn has shown that *charitësia*, favour amulets, likewise remained in use in a Christian world. The structure of the texts, the use, and the perceived functioning of the object remained the same.¹⁰¹⁴

In all of these objects, however, changes do occur. As the hailstorm amulets show, instead of the traditional supernatural powers, the text now addresses Jesus Christ. The favour amulets also show Christian innovations as well as the use of the Coptic language.¹⁰¹⁵ These textual changes will be further analysed in section 4.3D.

All in all, there is much evidence for continuity in the use of amulets. Amulets were still used by the same social groups for healing, protection, and other benefits. Using amulets for digestive problems became more popular, although the reasons for this remain obscure. The medical handbooks also show several developments. Instead of Pliny the Elder’s original work, the *Medicina Plinii* was often copied, which shifted the focus away from women and children. Authors also had preferences of their own and tended to prescribe certain types of amulets. Longstanding habits ensured that amulets remained the ‘go-to’ option when in need.

B. How to acquire an amulet and the role of the priest

If an issue occurred that could be solved with the help of an amulet, the object had to be

1009 Marcellus, *De Medicamentis*: fever: 8.45 and uvula and tonsils, for example: 14.20, 14.23, 14.25, 14.26, 14.30, 14.53, 14.63, 14.65, 14.67, 14.68–69, 15.12–13, 15.67; 15.71, 15.89, 18.108.

1010 Alexander of Tralles, *Therapeutica*: epilepsy, see for example: 1.561.3–9, 1.567.10–13, 1.567.13–16, 1.567.16–18, 1.571.16–19. For gout, see for example: 2.579.20–31, 2.581.14–19, 2.581.20–21, 2.583.4–13, 2.585.5–19.

1011 GMA 11. Translation by Kotansky, GMA 11.

1012 *Codex Theodosianus* 9.16.3. Translation by Pharr, *Theodosian Code*, 237.

1013 SEG 50 (2000): 1014. Translation by Alvar Nuño, ‘Ritual Power’, 89.

1014 T.S. de Bruyn, ‘An Anatomy of Tradition: The Case of the Charitësiön’, *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 16.1 (2015) 31–50.

1015 De Bruyn, ‘Anatomy of Tradition’.

bought, received, or made. The early Christian sermons provide insight into the ways in which people could reach out to amulets. In addition, the arrival of Christianity saw a new category of providers of amulets: priests, monks, and other clerics. They became new authorities in the field of amulet makers. What did the creation of amulets by people belonging to Christian institutions mean for the experiences of the amulet user?

Advice from friends and family

In his analysis of the creation of Christian textual amulets, T.S. de Bruyn argued that the social context of amulet use is of importance for understanding the continuation of amulets. In his view, ‘the durability of the practice was not simply a result of the urgency of the need to which it responded. It was also – if not even more so – a result of the social matrix in which people lived.’¹⁰¹⁶ As will become clear, the use of amulets was not only accepted in Late Antiquity, but also promoted by relatives, neighbours, and acquaintances. This is not necessarily a new development, but earlier sources on this issue are scarce and mainly concerned with the use of amulets in a family context.¹⁰¹⁷ The lens of the bishops enables a broader picture of the social context of amulet use.

Critical texts concerning healing amulets are a valuable source for references to people advising others to use amulets in life-threatening situations. John Chrysostom,¹⁰¹⁸ Augustine of Hippo¹⁰¹⁹ and Caesarius of Arles¹⁰²⁰ describe similar sickbed scenes in which patients receive such advice. One example is the following passage:

You are lying on your sickbed, and are one of God’s athletes. You can’t move hand or foot, and you’re fighting battles to the finish. The fever doesn’t leave you, and your faith goes ahead to God. But lo and behold, a neighbor at your bedside, and a friend and a maid, even perhaps, as I said, your old nurse, bringing wax and an egg in her hand and saying, “Do this and get better. Why prolong your illness? Tie on this amulet (*ligatura*). I heard someone invoke the name of God and the angels over it, and you will get better. To whose care will you leave your widowed wife, to whose care your young children?”

But he says, “I won’t do it, because I’m a Christian. Let me die in such a way that

I don’t thereby die forever”¹⁰²¹

1016 De Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 28.

1017 See for example the discussion on making amulets in a family context in 2.3.2.

1018 John Chrysostom, *In epistulam ad Colossenses* 8.5 (PG 62.357-359); John Chrysostom, *In epistulam I ad Thessalonicenses* 3 (PG 62.412).

1019 Augustine of Hippo, *Sermones (ad populum)* 286.7 (PL 38.1297-1301), 328 (PLS 2.800), 335D.3 and 335D.5 (PLS 2.778-780); Augustine of Hippo, *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 93.20 (CCSL 39.1322).

1020 Caesarius of Arles, *Sermones* 184.4.

1021 Augustine of Hippo, *Sermones* 335D.5 (PLS 2.778-780). Translation by Rebillard, *Christians and Their Many Identities*, 74-75.

Similar passages were discussed in section 4.2. Although these texts had a rhetorical purpose, it is reasonable to assume that the bishops of the early church reacted to a practice of talking about amulets and their effects and of giving advice to sick loved ones.

In the work of John Chrysostom, those who are trying to persuade others to use amulets are mostly female: mothers or old and drunken women.¹⁰²² In Augustine's sermons the group is more diverse and consists of neighbours, friends, maids, old nurses, husbands, and wives.¹⁰²³ In their attempts to persuade sick relatives or acquaintances, these people would also mention others who actually had used amulets with positive effects: 'So-and-so, and So-and-so and So-and-so; ask, they all got better by using it.'¹⁰²⁴ In some passages, those urging others to use a certain amulet present the argument that other users are Christians: 'So-and-so did it and was cured immediately. Don't you know Such-and-such, that he's a Christian, a believer? Look, he did it, and he got well.'¹⁰²⁵ Hearing the success stories of others, from within the group they identified with, would have motivated people to reach out to amulets.¹⁰²⁶ These passages also imply that Christians experienced social pressure from others identifying as Christians.¹⁰²⁷

The sources suggest that amulets continued to be widely used, despite the objections of some bishops. The sickbed scenes provide insight into the social context of the continued acceptance of amulets.¹⁰²⁸ Persistent social habits supported the decision to reach out to an amulet and contributed to their acceptability – even though the bishops did not agree.

Acquiring an amulet

Since amulets continued to be used, they must have been available. In Late Antiquity people could still reach out to a variety of craftspeople and ritual specialists for practices such as amulets.¹⁰²⁹ Especially in areas outside the church's direct sphere of influence, the more traditional ritual specialists probably retained their importance.¹⁰³⁰ However, new providers of amulets appeared on the market in the form of people affiliated with Christian

1022 Dickie, *Magic and Magicians*, 281-283. Or Jews: Luijendijk, 'Gospel Amulet for Joannia', 429-430. The Jew or old woman as amulet advisers in John Chrysostom: John Chrysostom, *In epistulam ad Colossenses* 8.5 (PG 62.357-359).

1023 De Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 28; Augustine of Hippo, *Sermones (ad populum)* 335D.5 and 335D.3 (PLS 2.778-780), and Augustine of Hippo, *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 93.20 (CCSL 39.1322).

1024 Augustine of Hippo, *Sermones (ad populum)* 286.7 (PL 38.1300-1). Rebillard, *Christians and Their Many Identities*, 74. Similar in Augustine of Hippo, *Sermones (ad populum)* 335D.3 (PLS 2.778-780).

1025 Augustine of Hippo, *Sermones (ad populum)* 335D.3 (PLS 2.778-780). Translation by E. Hill, *The Works of Saint Augustine. A Translation for the 21st Century, Vol. III 9, Sermons 306-340A on the Saints* (New York 1994) 229-231.

1026 Getting better for example: Augustine of Hippo, *Sermones (ad populum)* 286.7 (PL 38.1300-1), 318.3 (PL 38.1437-1440) and 335D.5 (PLS 2.778-80).

1027 Stander, 'Amulets and the Church Fathers', 60.

1028 De Bruyn gives 'accepted in the social circles of many in the population' as one of the reasons for the continuation of amulet use. De Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 42.

1029 Klingshirn, *Caesarius of Arles*, 208-209, 223.

1030 Klingshirn, *Caesarius of Arles*, 222.

institutionalised environments. Although the level of institutionalisation varied from region to region, priests, monks, and clerics were certainly involved in making amulets and this constitutes a significant change.

That members of the clergy participated in amulet production is evident from the criticism formulated in canonical texts and by authors such as the bishop Caesarius of Arles and the abbot Shenoute.¹⁰³¹ Shenoute, for instance, mentions that an amulet user justified himself by claiming that ‘a respectable monk gave them to me.’¹⁰³² Because of their level of literacy and their knowledge of the Scriptures and the liturgy, clerics were well-suited for amulet production.¹⁰³³ Modern scholars have analysed textual amulets with Christian elements and argued that many of them were made by scribes belonging to Christian institutions such as a church or monastery.¹⁰³⁴ Elements from Scriptures and liturgy found their way to amulets and the new amulet makers were important agents of innovation.¹⁰³⁵ T.S. de Bruyn demonstrated that scriptural passages were added to amulets ‘as a means to invest the amulet with protective or healing power.’¹⁰³⁶ The following fifth- or sixth-century papyrus amulet from the Faiyum region may serve as an example:

In the name of the father, the son, and the Holy Spirit. (Ps. 90.1) The one who lives in the help of the Most High will abide in the shelter of the Lord of heaven ... (Jn 1.1-2) (...)

The Lord is a helper to me and I will not fear what a person may do to me. The Lord is a helper to me and I will observe my enemies. (Ps. 17:3) The Lord is my firmness and my refuge and my rescuer. (Mt. 4:23) The Lord Jesus went around all of Galilee teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom and healing every illness and every infirmity. (Incantation) The body and the blood of Christ spare your servant who carries this amulet. Amen. Alleloujah. † α † ω †¹⁰³⁷

The level of scriptural or liturgical knowledge and the writing skills of the scribes varied. Some amulets were probably made by scribes working at the centre of an early Christian

1031 See below and for example Caesarius of Arles, *Sermones* 50.1.

1032 Translation by Van der Vliet, ‘Roman and Byzantine Egypt’, 253-254; Shenoute of Atripe, *Acephalous work A14* par. 255-262 (Orlandi 18-20). In the Apostolic tradition and the Phrygian canon: Sanzo, ‘Early Christianity’, 220-223. On the ‘magical’ handbooks found in a jar in the floor of a monk’s cave and other finds see de Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 84-86.

1033 Skemer, *Binding Words*, 72-73.

1034 In general, see: de Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*; Luijendijk, ‘Gospel Amulet for Joannia’.

1035 De Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, see for example 233-237. Directly copied or written down from memory: de Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 181-182. For liturgical language see: *PGMP*13; *GMA* 35; *P.Oxy.* LXXXII 5306, 5307 and *PGM* P5a.

1036 Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 181, see also 238-244. In general, see: Jones, *New Testament Texts*; Sanzo, *Scriptural Incipits*.

1037 Translation and references to biblical passages by Jones, *New Testament Texts*, 65-71, nr. 2. Staatliche Museen, Berlin (P. 6096).

institution, others by people who operated on the periphery, but within a Christian framework and after receiving a Christian training.¹⁰³⁸ T.S. de Bruyn deems it unlikely that personalised amulets with elements such as the *charaktères* were made by members of the higher clergy.¹⁰³⁹ Still, the people who did make these amulets must have conceived of their practice as Christian.¹⁰⁴⁰ Writing about priests who were involved in amulet production in medieval times, D.C. Skemer suggest that ‘they might even interpret it as an act of Christian devotion and generosity, worthy of divine blessing and heavenly rewards.’¹⁰⁴¹

The role of the priests

Although we know who made amulets, we do not know exactly how their customers acquired them. T.S. de Bruyn distinguishes between amulets with primarily scriptural passages and personalised amulets reflecting specific personal requests.¹⁰⁴² The acquisition of scriptural amulets may not always have required personal contact with a priest, as they may have been available from stock. For personalised amulets some contact with the scribe would have been necessary for the communication of a name, the nature of an ailment or a specific request.¹⁰⁴³ Although not every customer required direct contact with a monk or priest, the institutional background of Christian amulet makers must have impacted users. What did it mean for the user that the amulet came from within this particular authoritative environment?

As I have argued earlier, contact with a ritual specialist involved interaction and ritual practices of various kinds which added to the experience of the object and the formation of a sense of control.¹⁰⁴⁴ Several early Christian authors certainly disapproved of amulet use, but why would an ancient individual question the use of amulets when the amulets came from an institutionalised Christian environment?¹⁰⁴⁵ On the contrary, faith in the institution the provider belonged to probably contributed to the provider’s credibility.¹⁰⁴⁶ Because of their position as members of the Christian clergy, customers regarded these creators of

1038 Because of the mistakes they make and the types of texts they cite. De Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 107, 114, 120, 238, 240-241.

1039 De Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 244-245

1040 See also: Klingshirn, *Caesarius of Arles*, 223-224.

1041 Skemer, *Binding Words*, 22.

1042 De Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, devotes two chapters to these different types of amulets. De Bruyn stresses that it is impossible to determine why some amulets contain a specific request and others only scriptural passages: de Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 181-182.

1043 According to de Bruyn even personalised amulets were often copied, for instance the many similar scorpion amulets beginning with the ‘hor hor’ phrase: de Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 90-98.

1044 See section 2.3 of chapter two of this book and Frankfurter, ‘The Demonic in Christian Egypt’, 59-62; D. Frankfurter, *Evil incarnate. Rumors of Demonic Conspiracy and Satanic Abuse in History* (Princeton/Oxford 2006) 19-20.

1045 See also: Lujendijk, ‘Gospel Amulet for Joannia’, 429-430.

1046 As argued in chapter two section 2.3.

amulets as trustworthy sources of authority.¹⁰⁴⁷

The production of amulets by monks and priests created new experiences for amulet users. These people were able to endow amulets with the power associated with the institutions they belonged to, especially in the case of textual amulets containing passages from the Scriptures or in relation to rituals derived from the liturgy. The use of these sources of power would have enhanced the agency of the amulet and created trust in the customers.¹⁰⁴⁸

Christian authority

As I have shown earlier, early church authors criticising the use of amulets included colleagues who made and used amulets in their criticism.¹⁰⁴⁹ On the other hand, church members conceived of amulets as compatible with their Christian identity precisely because they were made by members of the clergy. In these circumstances amulets with Christian elements were not seen as a non-Christian alternative to common Christian religious practices – such as the oils, relics and church rituals for healing that Caesarius mentions – but as a fully legitimate option.¹⁰⁵⁰ Priests, monks, and clerics must have been considered by many as authoritative church officials, capable of creating legitimate, reliable, and effective amulets. By becoming part of Christian practices, amulets became acceptable. This ensured their continuation.

We may ask ourselves whether the experiences of amulet users in Late Antiquity were fundamentally different from those of the era before the advent of Christianity. After all, the traditional Graeco-Roman religious specialist was also considered a figure of authority. However, from an emic point of view, these new figures were clearly an important development. They created amulets based on a new religious power and brought Christian religion into people's lives and homes in the form of amulets with Christian texts and imagery. On the level of access to the amulet and the role of the specialist we therefore see some notable developments. The introduction of amulets into the Christian repertoire by priests and monks provided amulets with connections to Christian institutions. This must have made an impact on the amulet user. Those using amulets made by monks or priests would have regarded their course of action as a fully Christian practice. Secondly, it is highly likely that the involvement of these specialists enhanced the belief in the capacity of the amulets they made.

C. The efficacy of amulets: externalisation of danger

In Late Antiquity, people continued to ascribe power to objects. Augustine, for example,

1047 De Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 243.

1048 De Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 9-11, 184-185, 223-234; Luijendijk, 'Gospel Amulet for Joannia', 428.

1049 Luijendijk, 'Gospel Amulet for Joannia', 429.

1050 Jones, *New Testament Texts*, 29: 'Alternative to the religious institution of the Church'.

describes the healing power of holding the Gospels against the head of someone suffering from headaches.¹⁰⁵¹ Amulets remained in use for hundreds of years and their users continued to believe in their efficacy in the fields of healing, protecting, and providing benefits. If the bishops can be believed, the power of amulets was talked about and even praised.¹⁰⁵² To shed some further light on the interaction between continuity and change in amulet use, I will in what follows explore belief in the efficacy of amulets in relation to the externalisation of danger by focussing on exorcism. As will become clear, exorcism is not a late antique development, but gained in importance in this period.

Exorcism and amulets

Exorcism, in general, is based on the idea of ‘an unfamiliar spirit possessing a human being by somehow infiltrating the body and securing control,’ and the conviction that the spirit in question can be driven out with the help of religious practices.¹⁰⁵³ Exorcism was practiced before Late Antiquity and was shaped by a variety of cultural influences. It has Near Eastern origins; Graeco-Roman and early Christian amulets largely derive from Jewish exorcistic traditions, but also show Egyptian influences.¹⁰⁵⁴ M. Zellmann-Rohrer, who studied Greek exorcistic epilepsy amulets, found that they not only use the Greek Hippocratic diagnosis and classification of epilepsy, but also the Jewish idea that epilepsy is caused by a demon that can be expelled.¹⁰⁵⁵

Exorcism started as an oral practice; in due course the spoken formulae were written on amulets when these became more textual.¹⁰⁵⁶ Demons, diseases and other inconveniences caused by demons, and personified illnesses would be expelled from the body of the person who used an amulet inscribed with such formulae – thus healing the body. Other amulets of this kind served as a protective measure against evil (re-)entering from the outside. Exorcism is thus based on the externalisation of danger, an idea that already played a role in the amulets of the first-to-third centuries CE, for example two second- or-third-century amulets to ‘protect from every male and female demon’ and release

1051 Augustine of Hippo, *In Iohannis euangelium tractatus* 7.12 (CCSL 36.73). The Scriptures, the eucharist, holy oil and other material aspects of religion were believed to have some sort of power and these will be discussed below: see section 4.3D-H of this book.

1052 Augustine of Hippo, *Sermones (ad populum)* 286.7 (PL 38.1297-1301). Translation: Rebillard, *Christians and Their Many Identities*, 74.

1053 Kotansky, ‘Greek Exorcistic Amulets’, 246, 276.

1054 S. Lunn-Rockliffe, ‘Demons and Demonologies’ in: J. Lössl, N.J. Baker-Brian (eds.), *A Companion to Religion in Late Antiquity* (Hoboken 2018) 493-509: 494; Kotansky, ‘Greek Exorcistic amulets’, 246-247; M. Zellmann-Rohrer, ‘Hippocratic Diagnosis, Solomonic Therapy, Roman Amulets: Epilepsy, Exorcism, and the Diffusion of a Jewish Tradition in the Roman World’, *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 53 (2022) 69-93: 69-70.

1055 Zellmann-Rohrer, ‘Hippocratic Diagnosis’, 80-82.

1056 Zellmann-Rohrer, ‘Hippocratic Diagnosis’, 76, 89; Kotansky, ‘Greek Exorcistic Amulets’, 267.

the wearer from ‘demonic apparition’.¹⁰⁵⁷ Another example is a first-to-second-century amulet now in the British Library: ‘Serve as amulet (φυλακτηριάζω) for Alexandros *alias* Makedon! (...) Whether spirit of epilepsy or of derangement or of ill speech or of draught of poisons (...) I adjure you, spirit entering the body of Alexandros *alias* Makedon.’¹⁰⁵⁸

The practice of exorcism was taken up in the early Christian era, heavily influenced by Jewish practices.¹⁰⁵⁹ As an oral practice it used the names of Jesus or God to expel demons. The ritual might include the laying on of hands and making the sign of the cross. The powerful name of Jesus could also be used on its own in an oral performance.¹⁰⁶⁰ This new Christian form of exorcism aligned with practices of amulet use and the formulae came to be used for amulets.¹⁰⁶¹ SM 25, a fifth-century amulet, presents Christ as a pursuer of fever: ‘Shivering, and fever with shivering, and fever, the Son of God pursues you’.¹⁰⁶² Other late antique amulets use a combination of religious elements to release the wearer from a demon. A fourth-to-sixth-century amulet from Xanthus, for example, contains the following text: ‘† Lord, help the bearer, Epiphanius, whom Anastasia bore. I adjure you by Solomon, the great angel Michael, Gabriel, Uriel, Raphael. I adjure you by Abrasax. I adjure you in Hebrew, ‘Phthaôthbaraô’, by Sabaoth.’¹⁰⁶³ In this text a Christian cross, the ‘magical’ Abrasax, and Hebrew terminology are combined.

Surviving textual amulets present various different formulations to expel demons from human bodies. R.D. Kotansky stresses the consistency of these formulations over time.¹⁰⁶⁴ He describes the phrases used to ‘adjure’ the demon or make the demon ‘flee’.¹⁰⁶⁵ As I mentioned above, amulets were also used to make sure the demon would not enter, or re-enter after expulsion.¹⁰⁶⁶ Some amulets directly address the demon in question (‘I adjure you, spirit’), others introduce benevolent beings to perform the exorcism (‘the Son of God pursues you’).¹⁰⁶⁷ As the latter example shows, over time Christian aspects of exorcism were

1057 GMA 38. Translation by Kotansky GMA 38; GMA 46. Translation by Kotansky GMA 46. In the case of amulets of this type, demonology is often seen as a Jewish influence.

1058 British Library, London, registration number: Add. MS 57302. Translation: M. Zellmann-Rohrer, ‘A Greek Exorcistic Amulet against Epilepsy and Other Ills (with an Appendix on the Early Greek Exorcism Formulary of P. Fouad 203)’, *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 218 (2021) 143-157: 149.

1059 On New Testament texts see Zellmann-Rohrer, ‘Hippocratic Diagnosis’, 73-74, 89; de Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 204-212.

1060 De Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 204-205; Zellmann-Rohrer, ‘Hippocratic Diagnosis’, 73-76.

1061 Zellmann-Rohrer, ‘A Greek Exorcistic Amulet’, 145.

1062 SM 25. Translation by Daniel, Maltomini, SM 25.

1063 D.R. Jordan, R.D. Kotansky, ‘Two Phylacteries from Xanthus’, *Revue archéologique* (1996) 161-74: 168-169. See also: Faraone, ‘Circular Gem-Designs’.

1064 Kotansky, ‘Greek Exorcistic Amulets’, 276.

1065 In earlier Greek amulets, but this continued in the Christian amulets: Kotansky, ‘Greek Exorcistic Amulets’, 249-254, 276.

1066 Kotansky, ‘Greek Exorcistic Amulets’, 259.

1067 Zellmann-Rohrer, ‘Hippocratic Diagnosis’, 88 and 149. British Library, London, registration number: Add. MS 57302 and SM 25.

added to the amulets' texts such as invoking or naming Jesus Christ, quoting the Christian creed, or using multiple adjurations in the same text.¹⁰⁶⁸ PGM P9 is an example of a sixth-century amulet reaching out to God and Jesus:

(Prayer) Master, Oh God Almighty, The Fath[er] of our Lord and Savior [Jesus Christ], and St. Serenus: I, Silvanus, son of Sarapion, give thanks and bow [my] head before you, asking and beseeching that you might chase away from me, your servant, the demon of the evil eye, the (demon) of the e[vil d[e]d an[d] the (demon) of unpleasantness and take away from me every illness and every infirmity so that I might be healthy and [able] to say the Gospel-prayer [of health] (...) ¹⁰⁶⁹

PGM P5b directly addresses the demon: 'Flee, hateful spirit, Christ drives you out. The son of God and the Holy Spirit have gained advantage over you.'¹⁰⁷⁰ Alongside these examples, which address a demon or a spirit, there are amulets that address an illness – often believed to be caused by a demon.¹⁰⁷¹ SM 23, for instance, a fifth-century amulet, uses the Christian creed to directly address the fever with the flee formula: '† Christ was born, amen. Christ was crucified, amen. Christ was buried, amen. Christ arose, amen. He has woken to judge the living and the dead. You too, fever with shivering, flee from Kale, who wears this phylactery.'¹⁰⁷²

Many objects, textual amulets as well as gemstone or bronze pendant amulets, refer to Solomon or the seal of Solomon.¹⁰⁷³ In Late Antiquity this became a popular reference. Solomon was believed to have imprisoned demons in the foundations of the temple in Jerusalem and to have used a seal (or signet ring) to do so.¹⁰⁷⁴ The seal enabled Solomon to control the demons and make them work for him.¹⁰⁷⁵ One textual amulet for the expulsion of demons describes the user, Allous, as 'the holder of the Seal of Solomon'. The text ends with an instruction to draw a seal of Solomon on the amulet; instead of drawing an image,

1068 De Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christians*, 206-208.

1069 PGM P9. Translation by Jones, *New Testament Texts*, 108.

1070 Translation Luijendijk, 'Gospel Amulet for Joannia', 420.

1071 This is the case in most of the amulets de Bruyn discusses in his text on exorcistic amulets: de Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 206-208; see also SM 22, 30, 34 and PGM P18.

1072 This is the first part of the text on the amulet, in the second a stele and *caractères* are invoked: SM 23. Translation by Daniel, Maltomini, SM 23.

1073 See for example: J. Franek, *Solomonica Magica: Solomon, Sisinnius, and the Holy Rider on Greek-Inscribed Amulets from Late Antiquity and the Early Byzantium* (Leiden 2025); R.H. Cline, 'Amulets and the Ritual Efficacy of Christian Symbols' in: D.K. Pettegrew, *et al.* (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Archaeology* (Oxford 2019) 350-366: 356-358; Zellmann-Rohrer, 'Hippocratic Diagnosis'; Kotansky, 'Greek Exorcistic Amulets', 268.

1074 Faraone, 'Circular Gem-Design', 87.

1075 Frankfurter, 'Demonology in the Roman Mediterranean World', 127.

the maker copied this instruction onto the amulet.¹⁰⁷⁶ Other Solomonic amulets include the iconography of a mounted rider spearing a demon. This iconography resembles earlier holy rider figures conquering evil.¹⁰⁷⁷

The ‘external’ danger that amulets were supposed to deal with might come from outside the body, the house, or from outside even larger areas. Amulets demarcated the inside, protected it from the intrusion of evil and/or expelled danger and disease.¹⁰⁷⁸ This is in line with my analysis of pre-Christian amulets as described in chapters two and three. The large textual amulets with demonological elements from Late Antiquity show that the vocabulary of demonology was used to express existing ideas, but now included the new Christian vocabulary. The power of Jesus Christ or Solomon could easily be integrated into existing amulet structures and added the experience of the involvement of the Christian supernatural. (Jewish) demonology had informed texts written on amulets before the arrival of Christianity, but Christian demonology and amulets turned out to be an attractive combination for users living in a world in which ‘Christian’ identities became increasingly important.

D. The role and experience of text

One specific significant change that took place over time was the rise of textuality. This important development is not directly related to the advent of Christianity.¹⁰⁷⁹ The increased use of text is reflected by handbooks with instructions for amulets. While Pliny in the first century only describes (not ‘prescribes’) one textual amulet containing two Greek letters, Marcellus of Bordeaux includes no fewer than seventeen instructions for amulets carrying a text inscribed on a piece of metal or papyrus.¹⁰⁸⁰ To stop bleeding, for instance, he prescribes the inscription of a ‘vanishing act’: ‘Write this charm on a clean papyrus and tie it with a linen thread and attach it to him or her around the middle, those who suffer a flow of blood from whatever part of the body: sycuma, cucuma, ucuma, cuma, uma, ma, a.’¹⁰⁸¹ Marcellus wrote in Latin, but sometimes his instructions prescribe Greek amulet texts.¹⁰⁸² In due course, new Christian elements were added to these textual amulets. For one of his

1076 P.Köln VIII 338. Translation and comments by D.R. Jordan and R.D. Kotansky on page 53-69 of P.Köln VIII. For an explanation: Faraone, ‘Circular Gem-Design’, 86-87.

1077 Faraone, *Transformation*, 113-115.

1078 Kotansky also noticed a spatial relationship between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ in exorcistic amulets: Kotansky, ‘Greek Exorcistic Amulets’, 256, 261-263 and 276.

1079 See the discussion in section 4.1 of this chapter.

1080 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.29. Marcellus of Bordeaux, *De Medicamentis*: 8.56, 8.57-58, 8.58-59, 8.59-60, 10.34-35, 10.35, 10.70, 14.67, 15.89, 15.108, 20.66, 20.89 (gemstone), 21.2-3, 21.8, 22.10, 24.7 (gemstone), 26.43, 29.26, 32.25.

1081 Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 10.34-35. Translation in Faraone, *Vanishing acts*, 7.

1082 This is often the case for amulets. Latin amulets in Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* are: 10.34-35, 10.35, 14.67, 20.66 and 21.2-3.

amulets Marcellus advises adding a Christian symbol: the Chi-Rho.¹⁰⁸³ Still, amulets did not become Christian overnight and older elements interacted with the new ones.

While all sorts of amulets were present in Late Antiquity, the textual ones have attracted most attention from modern scholars. As G. Bohak argues with regard to the textual tradition in general: ‘the scribal nature of the Greco-Egyptian magical tradition probably creates a distorted image of its supremacy within late-antique society’, and this statement appears valid for amulets as well.¹⁰⁸⁴ The early Christian textual amulets have recently been extensively studied, not only because many of them have survived, but also because textual amulets are more recognisable than non-textual ones and because they can provide information on aspects of the gradual ‘Christianisation’ of amulets.¹⁰⁸⁵ In what follows, I will investigate the textuality of amulets with a focus on the experience of the user, still an underdeveloped topic. Was the experience of textual amulets containing Christian elements different from amulet experiences of earlier centuries or did the experiences of amulet users remain largely the same?

Continuation of the format

In 1997 R. MacMullen wrote: ‘Yet in wording, tone, and strategy, though not in the deity addressed, the old traditions persisted also among the bishops and lower clergy themselves.’¹⁰⁸⁶ T.S. de Bruyn argues that ‘Christian elements tend to frame rather than modify the traditional adjuration.’¹⁰⁸⁷ In practice, the ‘Christianisation’ of amulets was much more complicated, as will be shown below, but in general it can be stated that many of the traditional textual elements remained in use. There was, however, a change in the supernatural powers they addressed.

New Christian elements were added to existing formulations and structures. One example is the often used formula: ‘now, now, quickly, quickly’.¹⁰⁸⁸ In amulets, this formula remained in use, but would, for instance, be introduced to urge Christ to perform the healing.¹⁰⁸⁹ One sixth-century amulet starts with a version of the Christian creed and continues with the following formula: ‘Christ saves Vibius, whom Gennaia bore, from all

1083 In this particular instruction, Marcellus advises to use a Greek inscription that included three Chi-Rho signs (or perhaps a combination of Chi-Rho signs and staurograms). Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 8.58-59.

1084 Bohak, ‘Diffusion of Greco-Egyptian Magical Tradition’, 359, see 358-360.

1085 De Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*; de Bruyn, Dijkstra, ‘A Checklist’; Sanzo, *Scriptural Incipits*; Jones, *New Testament Texts*. See also: Van der Vliet, ‘Tradition and Innovation’, 261-267. Van der Vliet studied late antique Egyptian ‘magic’ and noticed four forms of ‘Christianisation’: reframing, rewriting, overwriting, and supplanting.

1086 MacMullen, *Christianity and Paganism*, 142.

1087 De Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 137. He makes this statement in relation to customary amulets, distinguishing between customary and scriptural amulets.

1088 This formula also made it into the sixth-century medical handbook of Alexander of Tralles, *Therapeutica* P. 2.583.4-13.

1089 Now, now, quickly, quickly, for example in: SM 35; SM 32; *PGM* CXXXVIII.; *PGM* C.; P.Köln VI 257.

fever and from all shivering, daily, quotidian, now now, quickly quickly.¹⁰⁹⁰ Other textual elements, such as powerful names, vowel series, and ‘vanishing acts’, also remained in use, as did *charaktêres*. These were even themselves addressed as powerful entities in late antique amulets, for example in SM 21: ‘Holy signs (*charaktêres*), heal Tiron, whom Palladia bore.’¹⁰⁹¹ When Caesarius of Arles criticised amulet use, he included older traditions such as the use of *charaktêres*: ‘Do not hang on yourself and your family diabolical phylacteries, *caracteres*, amber charms, and herbs.’¹⁰⁹² This demonstrates that these elements were still known in Caesarius’s times.

What did the continuation of old formats mean for the experiences of amulet users? T.S. de Bruyn has studied continuity and change in *charitesia*, favour amulets.¹⁰⁹³ In this group many formulae and other textual elements remained the same, but in due course Christian features began to appear. Which elements remained in use, and which were added probably depended on the preference of the scribes or on local circumstances.¹⁰⁹⁴ One reason for hanging on to traditional formulae may have been that, in this way, amulets corresponded to the users’ expectations. The efficacy of amulets was associated with traditional textual features, such as the ‘now, now’ formula and the *charaktêres*; these familiar elements created trust. According to de Bruyn: ‘Knowing and recognizing trusted formulations (...) would have been inherent to writing an amulet.’¹⁰⁹⁵ In other words, the traditional elements made amulets recognisable as amulets and ensured belief in their power.

The textual amulets of the fourth-to-sixth centuries show that the elimination of non-Christian elements was a gradual process. G. Bohak stressed that Greek-Egyptian ‘magical’ traditions could not compete with what Christianity had to offer, but it took time for these traditions to disappear. Elements of the older traditions remained in use for centuries.¹⁰⁹⁶ As noted by K. Dosoo, Coptic had been used in handbook instructions from the sixth century onwards, but it was only in the seventh century that Coptic appeared in the activated ‘magical’ texts, such as amulets. The explanation might be that the amulets were copied from centuries-old handbooks.¹⁰⁹⁷ Similarly, non-Christian elements may have remained part of amulet use because of copying practices.¹⁰⁹⁸ Dosoo has researched the names of supernatural powers referred to in late antique ‘magical’ texts from Egypt and found that in the course of the fourth century the number of Greek and Egyptian religious names

1090 SM 35. Translation by Daniel, Maltomini, SM 35.

1091 SM 21. Translation by Daniel, Maltomini, SM 21. See also SM 23.

1092 Caesarius of Arles, *Sermones* 14.4. Translation by Mueller, *Volume*, 82, adapted by the author. Similarly in Sermon 1.12, 13.5, 50.1, 184.4, 204.3.

1093 De Bruyn, ‘Anatomy of Tradition’.

1094 De Bruyn, Dijkstra, ‘A Checklist’, 182.

1095 De Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 235.

1096 Perhaps even still: Bohak, ‘Diffusion of Greco-Egyptian Magical Tradition’, 378.

1097 Dosoo, ‘Magical Names’, 89–90.

1098 Dosoo, ‘Magical Names’, 131–132.

decreased as the use of Christian elements gained ground. While this development is in line with expectations, it is remarkable that the use of Jewish elements and ‘magical’ names continued. It seems possible that some ‘magical’ names, such as Abrasax, continued as part of the textual tradition. They may have survived because they were no longer connected to non-Christian public cults with temples, but still part of a longstanding practice of inscribing private religious objects.¹⁰⁹⁹

Although many traditional textual elements remained in use, it does not follow that their meaning remained the same in the experiences of amulet users.¹¹⁰⁰ Users may have come to see the formulae as Christian, or at least as not clashing with Christianity.¹¹⁰¹ Certain texts or images probably became formulaic; their meaning changed when they were used in the new Christian context.¹¹⁰² Two papyrus amulets of the fourth or fifth century used by people to keep scorpions out of their houses illustrate the interpretational difficulties posed by formulaic continuities:¹¹⁰³

† The door, Aphroditên phroditên roditên oditên ditên itên tèn tèn ên. Hôr Hôr Phôr Phôr
Iaô Sabaôth Adône. I bind you, Artemisian scorpion. Deliver this house from every evil
creeping thing, quickly, quickly. St. Phocas is here. Phamenoth 13, third indiction.¹¹⁰⁴

Hor, Hor, Phor, Eloei, Adonai, Iao, Sabaoth, Michael, Jesus Christ. Help us and this house.

Amen¹¹⁰⁵

Both amulets refer to the Egyptian god Horus (Hor/Phor) who was often called upon in connection with scorpion stings. The objects also use Jewish divine names, such as Iao, Adonai and Sabaoth, which frequently appear in Greek-Egyptian ‘magical’ texts. The first text features a ‘vanishing act’ based on the name of the Greek goddess Aphrodite. It also mentions the Christian St. Phocas, who was commonly called upon to heal snake bites. The second refers to the archangel Michael and to Jesus Christ and ends with Amen.¹¹⁰⁶ The first text seems to contain some copying mistakes: ‘the door’ was most likely part of the instruction for the location the amulet had to be attached to and the words of the vanishing

1099 Dosoo, ‘Magical Names’, 128-130.

1100 Certain ‘magical’ formulae may have lost their original meaning over time while still being kept in use: Versnel, ‘Poetics of the Magical Charm’, 105-109.

1101 Van der Vliet, ‘Christian Spells’, 329-330.

1102 Sanzo, *Ritual Boundaries*, 110.

1103 In total six amulets with similar formulations have been found, the others are: *PGM* P3; *PGM* XXVIIIa.; *PGM* XXVIIIb. 1-9; *PGM* XXVIIIc. For an analysis of *PGM* P3 see: Korsvoll, ‘Same, Same, But Different’.

1104 *PGM* P2, sixth century. Translation: de Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 93.

1105 Fifth to sixth century, *PGM* P6a. Translation in P.Oxy. VII 1152. See also Sanzo, *Ritual Boundaries*, 32.

1106 More on these types of amulets in de Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 90-97.

act are supposed to be written as successive lines. The two amulets thus show a combination of a variety of ‘new’ and ‘old’ religious elements. T.S. de Bruyn, however, wonders whether the inclusion of Horus was still understood by the makers as a reference to a non-Christian deity: ‘Did they understand the invocation to refer to Horus, or was the meaning of the sequence attenuated into something one simply said to ward off scorpions and snakes?’¹¹⁰⁷ The same can be said for the Jewish and Greek elements. Since part of the instruction for the creation of the amulet was copied inadvertently, other elements may also have been copied without giving thought to their meaning. The examples illustrate that it is far from easy to say anything definite about the meaning of traditional elements for amulet users. Although the old formulas were evidently still believed to have performative powers, their religious meaning may have changed in the new religious context of late antique society.

Adding Christian elements to an existing framework

The textual amulets from the fourth to sixth centuries contain many new Christian elements.¹¹⁰⁸ Augustine writes that amulet makers ‘mingle the name of Christ in their enchantments’.¹¹⁰⁹ The following papyrus amulet contains the incipits of the four Gospels as well as several (references to) passages from the Bible:

Christ savior: (Jn 1.1) In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God. (Mt. 1.1) An account of the genealogy of Jesus Christ son of David, son of Abraham. (Mk 1.2) Just as Isaiah the prophet said, (Mk 1.1) [The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, son of God, son of Abraham. (Lk. 1.1) Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us. (Ps. 90.1) The one who lives [in the help] of the Most High, and so forth. (Mt. 6.9) Our father who is in heaven hallowed be your name, a[nd so forth]. Glory to the father and son and Holy Spirit, both now and always, and forever and ever. Amen.¹¹¹⁰

In many other textual amulets we likewise find direct quotes from the Scriptures,¹¹¹¹ liturgical formulae, prayers, acclamations such as ‘amen’, incantations, as well as elements from

1107 De Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 97-98.

1108 For example: de Bruyn, Dijkstra, ‘A Checklist’, 180-181; Dosoo, ‘Magical Names’, 130. For other publications on the discussion of emphasis on continuity or change, see for example: de Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*; Van der Vliet, ‘Tradition and Innovation’; N.H. Korsvoll, ‘Official Teaching and Popular Practice. Are Church Opinions on Magic Reflected in the Surviving Amulets from the Early Middle Ages?’ in: S. Kiyanrad, C. Theis, L. Willer (eds.), *Bild und Schrift auf ‘magischen’ Artefakten* (Heidelberg 2018) 149-163: 151 and 161.

1109 Augustine of Hippo, *In Iohannis euangelium tractatus* 7.6 (section 5) (CCSL 36.73). Translation by Rettig, *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, 160.

1110 PSI 6.719. Translation by Jones, *New Testament Texts*, 77. Jones added the references to the scriptural passages used for this amulet: Jones number 4.

1111 Jones, *New Testament Texts*; Sanzo, *Scriptural Incipits*.

sermons and various rituals.¹¹¹² All of these were incorporated in existing frameworks, for example in amulets with exorcistic formulae.¹¹¹³ Three fourth-century ‘traditional’ amulets to expel fever all end with the formula ‘Power of Jesus Christ! Father, Son, Mother, Holy Spirit. A-O Abrasax.’¹¹¹⁴ Abrasax is the snake-legged, cock-headed non-Christian supernatural being often mentioned in the Graeco-Roman Egyptian ‘magical’ texts and amulets.

Some amulets only contain small details, such as a cross, others contain multiple references to the Bible.¹¹¹⁵ Often only short passages or incipits were used to represent the whole text.¹¹¹⁶ In addition, excavations have yielded a number of small papyrus scraps inscribed with biblical or liturgical texts. Although they contain no information regarding their function, scholars argue that these scraps may have been used as amulets, because of their size or because they were folded.¹¹¹⁷ The biblical references would have legitimised the power of the amulet, and amulet users who were literate would have recognised passages, names and elements from church ritual.¹¹¹⁸

Even the inclusion of small elements of scriptural texts may have been seen as significant. J.N. Bremmer argues that, from the fourth century onwards, the Bible – or specific books such as the Gospels – was understood as a book with active healing or apotropaic powers and points out that this same period saw an increase in the use of scriptural amulets. References to the use of Gospel amulets can be found in the works of various Christian authors of this period.¹¹¹⁹ C. Rapp compared small scriptural textual amulets to relics. These could be divided into smaller pieces that were believed to contain the power of the original whole. Similarly, incipits and small passages contained the power associated with the larger texts they represented: ‘the physical depositories of the Word of God shared in the holiness of the message they contained’.¹¹²⁰ Adding biblical texts can thus be seen as a new strategy that could be used alongside existing ones to create and enhance

1112 De Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 139, 184-187, 204-220, 237; de Bruyn, Dijkstra, ‘A Checklist’, 179-182. For developments in liturgical rituals see for example: M.E. Johnson, ‘Worship, Practice and Belief’ in: P. Esler (ed.), *The Early Christian World* (London 2017) 406-426.

1113 De Bruyn, Dijkstra, ‘A Checklist’, 179-180; de Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 139-141.

1114 *PGMP* P5a; P. Oxy. LXXXII 5306 and P. Oxy. LXXXII 5307. Translation by Maltomini, P. Oxy. LXXXII 5306 and P. Oxy. LXXXII 5307, 76-91.

1115 De Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 236.

1116 De Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 139.

1117 See for example the probable and possible amulets in de Bruyn, Dijkstra, ‘A Checklist’. Example: T.S. de Bruyn, ‘P. Ryl. III.471: A Baptismal Anointing Formula Used as an Amulet’, *The Journal of Theological Studies* 57 (2006) 94-109.

1118 This would require that the users would be able to see the amulet’s text. De Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 9-11, 184-185, 223-234; Luijendijk, ‘Gospel Amulet for Joannia’, 428.

1119 Bremmer, ‘Magical Books’, 264-267. See also Augustine about holding the Gospel to your head: Augustine of Hippo, *In Iohannis euangelium tractatus* 7.12 (CCSL 36.73); and Chrysostom on Gospel amulets: John Chrysostom, *In Mattheum (homiliae 1-90)* 72.2 (PG 58.669).

1120 C. Rapp, ‘Holy Texts, Holy Men, and Holy Scribes. Aspects of Scriptural Holiness in Late Antiquity’ in: W.E. Klingshirn, L. Safran (eds.), *The Early Christian Book* (Washington 2007) 194-222: 196, see also 199-202.

amuletic power. This would have changed the experiences of amulet users.

Impact of new Christian elements: wearing the Bible

As I have mentioned in chapter three, the question whether ancient amulet users knew what was written on their amulets is often overlooked. The objects were rolled up or folded and worn in a container.¹¹²¹ Some excavated amulets contained remains of the plants that had been folded into the object.¹¹²² Of course, it is possible that the text on the amulet was also spoken by the specialist or priests when creating or attaching the object and the user remembered it.¹¹²³ Although amulet users probably had some knowledge of the content, they may not have been aware of all the details that we can study today. According to some researchers, medieval amulets were rarely opened, perhaps even bought closed.¹¹²⁴ This may be compared to the invisibility of early relics, which were kept in reliquaries without ‘peepholes’. The relics would not be visible or touchable, but people would still try to be close to them.¹¹²⁵

For users’ experience of the object it was probably not necessary to know every textual detail; knowing that it contained a biblical text quite likely was a powerful experience in itself. In Late Antiquity, there was widespread belief in the protective and healing properties of the Scriptures.¹¹²⁶ The mere presence of scriptural passages would therefore have made the amulet in question more powerful and efficacious in the eyes of its user. Most people in Late Antiquity never actually handled a copy of the Scriptures: ‘They encountered the Scriptures in the liturgy of the church—in the form of acclamations, prayers, readings, and the like.’¹¹²⁷ For many, the Bible was not a book they could hold, but a multisensory experience: they could see the book from a distance and listen to the priest reading the words.¹¹²⁸ Adding parts of the Scriptures to amulets made these texts tangible. Amulets brought people into direct contact with the Bible. In this way, its healing and protective powers became palpable. The act of writing Biblical and liturgical texts on it would provide an amulet with long-lasting efficacy – quite apart from the fact that these authoritative sources would enhance the user’s trust. In the end, the exact details did not matter, the presence of the Scriptures did.

Textual amulets carrying Scriptural and liturgical passages not only made these

1121 See chapter three. Dosoo also points this out in his discussion of late antique amulets: Dosoo, ‘Magical Names’, 132.

1122 *PGM* P15b; *GMA* 8.

1123 As Luijendijk suggests for example: Luijendijk, ‘Gospel Amulet for Joannia’, 421.

1124 Although some textual amulets were opened and read, see: Skemer, *Binding Words*, 134, 144–158 (opening on 156).

1125 Wiśniewski, ‘Relics’.

1126 Bremmer, ‘Magical Books’, 264–267, see also: Rapp, ‘Holy Texts’.

1127 De Bruyn, ‘Appeals to Jesus’, 81.

1128 Sanzo, *Ritual Boundaries*.

texts and practices tangible and personal, but they also played a part in decentralising Christian practices – taking them into the lives of individual people. This fits K. Bowes’s findings regarding the relationship between Christian institutions and private rituals. She argues that in sixth-century domestic or private religious practices, the miniaturisation or fragmentation of public rituals and buildings is reflected by private chapels with a miniaturised basilica structure.¹¹²⁹ In these practices the ‘ritual of the mass is reified into possessable objects’;¹¹³⁰ in this way, the power and meaning of the ritual also becomes possessable. The same holds true for objects that could be taken home from pilgrimages and healing sites. These developments relate to the expansion of the institutional church.¹¹³¹ Amulets carrying biblical or liturgical texts may be understood as miniaturised versions of church ritual. The books and rituals were fragmented into ‘portable, possessable holy objects’, which had power, not because they referred to the original sources, but because they were a version of the original.¹¹³² For users of amulets owning a portable, palpable, and personal version of a holy book must have been a profoundly meaningful experience. Those who were illiterate or did not have access to an actual copy of the Bible thus obtained a tangible version of the Scriptures – and the power inherent in its material presence – or of other important and powerful religious phrases they knew from sermons or rituals.¹¹³³

The portable and tangible nature of textual amulets sets them apart from alternatives such as those mentioned by Caesarius of Arles: oral prayer, anointing with oils, going to the church.¹¹³⁴ However, Caesarius does not mention portable, possessable objects carrying written texts.¹¹³⁵ As we have seen, Augustine advises holding the Gospels to the patient’s head against headaches, but this would not be the same as wearing an amulet.¹¹³⁶ It would seem that the alternatives did not bring what amulets could bring. As the Scriptures were understood as inherently powerful, possessing a material and personal version of the Scriptures to carry with them, must have impacted users. While the experience of having a powerful amulet was not new, in the context of early Christianity having a powerful, personal, possessable Biblical amulet could bring about a significant new experience.

It seems possible to conclude that both continuities and changes had meaning for the users. The continued use of familiar formularies made amulets recognisable and created trust. It cannot be ruled out that the old elements gradually lost their connection with earlier religions, but were, even in a Christian context, still considered powerful.

1129 Bowes, ‘Sixth-Century Individual Rituals’, 66-71.

1130 Bowes, ‘Sixth-Century Individual Rituals’, 75.

1131 Bowes, ‘Sixth-Century Individual Rituals’, 75-78.

1132 Bowes, ‘Sixth-Century Individual Rituals’, 80.

1133 For example: Frankfurter, ‘Syncretism and the Holy Man’, 379.

1134 De Bruyn, ‘Appeals to Jesus’, 79-80.

1135 Caesarius, *Sermones* 50.1.

1136 For Augustine’s advice, see Augustine of Hippo, *In Iohannis euangelium tractatus* (CCSL 36.73). Bremmer, ‘Magical Books’, 264-267; Rapp, ‘Holy Texts’, 196, 199-202.

The addition of new elements to amulets meant a shift in the perception of the religious power behind them and created new experiences. Textual amulets were portable objects full of possessable Christian power. The biblical and liturgical elements associated with an authoritative institution created trust, strengthened belief in the objects' efficacy, and brought Christianity closer to people. Within the existing framework of amulet use, a new power was possessable, which meant additional motivation for reaching out to them.

E. The sensory experience of amulet use

As discussed in chapter three, the materiality of amulets provided a variety of sensory experiences, which was of great influence for the way in which they were experienced. From an etic point of view, one would be inclined to say that the experience of amulets changed little in Late Antiquity because the size, shapes, and uses of the objects were similar to those of the preceding period. We must, however, also take into account possible changes in sensory experience in the emic context of early Christianity.

Sensing late antique amulets

In general, the tangible experience of late antique amulets was probably not very different from that of earlier times, because the objects were of comparable shapes and sizes. Papyrus or parchment strips and metal tablets were still rolled up or folded and worn in a capsule or tied with a string. Although new shapes became popular – the bronze pendants with Solomonic exorcistic iconography are a case in point –, wearing a metal pendant will not have felt 'new'.¹¹³⁷ All in all, in terms of sensory experience the situation remained much the same.

The proximity of amulets to their designated locations was a precondition for their positive impact. In Late Antiquity, amulets were still placed at significant boundary locations. They protected an 'inside area' from external danger or took danger that had already penetrated out of it. This inside area could be a human body. In a fifth-or-sixth-century amulet we read: 'The body and the blood of Christ spare your servant who carries this amulet.'¹¹³⁸ As in earlier centuries, the power of the amulet was believed to be effective for its wearer. In Late Antiquity individuals could also still encounter amulets attached to doors and gates to protect houses or vineyards, and they could touch the amulet when

1137 For the Solomonic pendants see: Franek, *Solomonica Magica*. The experience was probably similar to that of wearing a *bulla*. Developments in the use of the *bulla* deserve more research. It has been argued that their use went into a decline after the first century (although many later examples were found, which were not only worn by young boys but also, for instance, by adult women). See for example: A. Croom, *Roman Clothing and Fashion* (Gloucestershire 2010) 84–85; Szilágyi, 'Late Roman Bullae'; Kotansky, *Greek Magical Amulets*, xix.

1138 ACM 9. Translation by Jones, *New Testament Texts*, 66. Still including name references as well: SM 34 and P.Oxy LXXXII 5312.

passing the boundary location.¹¹³⁹ The wish to create a safe space remained an important motivation for amulet use.¹¹⁴⁰

Amulets will still have been visible. We have, for instance, a fourth-or-fifth-century house amulet in the form of a gold *lamella* with small pinholes, which was probably placed on a wall.¹¹⁴¹ A written text on another papyrus amulet made for the protection of a house starts with the words ‘the door’, after which the amulet text follows. In all likelihood, the instruction that was used to make this amulet, part of which was copied inadvertently, referred to the location where the object had to be placed.¹¹⁴² Of course, some amulets carried new Christian iconography, such as the cross that was also often visibly worn. Sound, smell and taste will only occasionally have played a role, as was the case before. A. Luijendijk suggests that the text on a papyrus amulet with many Christian elements may have been read aloud.¹¹⁴³ John Chrysostom describes the use of bells tied as amulets around the arms of little children; the sounds were believed to be apotropaic.¹¹⁴⁴ Smell and taste can be found in the handbook instructions that resemble the instructions from the first-to-third centuries.¹¹⁴⁵

Although some details were certainly different, experiences of wearing a portable object that could be seen and felt, and sometimes heard or smelled, must have remained fundamentally the same. The user would experience the object and the material it was made of. The iconography and/or text inspired feelings of trust, and sensing the object made wearers feel they were ‘undergoing treatment’ – being healed, protected, or favoured by the supernatural.¹¹⁴⁶ Because of the proximity of amulets, sensory experience was a consistent element of amulet use.

Sensing amulets in a Christian context

With the dissemination of Christian material culture from the fourth century onwards, sensory experiences became more important in a Christian context. An obvious example is the increased use of incense. Sensory experiences not only became more prominent, they also gained in meaning because they were seen as ways to acquire knowledge about the holy.¹¹⁴⁷ From an emic perspective, the sensory experiences of amulets thus received a

1139 Late antique house amulets with many Christian elements: *PGM* P2a, *PGM* P2, *PGM* P6a, *PGM* P3, *GMA* 41. For the protection of vineyards see for example: Alvar Nuño, ‘Ritual Power’, 89.

1140 And remained so during the Middle Ages: Skemer, *Binding Words*, 133-135.

1141 *GMA* 41.

1142 *PGM* P2.

1143 *PGM* P5b. Luijendijk, ‘Gospel Amulet for Joannia’, 420.

1144 John Chrysostom, *In epistulam I ad Corinthios* 12.13 (PG 61.105-106).

1145 On using dried dung (to reduce smells?) in Marcellus of Bordeaux: Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 14.53, 16.11. On consuming something while using the amulet: Alexander of Tralles, *Therapeutica*, P. 1.571.16-19, P. 1.567.16-18; Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 28.52, 28.20.

1146 See the conclusion of chapter three of this study.

1147 Harvey, ‘The Senses in Religion’, 97-98; Toner, ‘Sensing the Ancient Past’, 18-20.

new layer of impact.

One of the new elements in amulet use is the introduction of the cross iconography. The cross on which Jesus had died became a powerful symbol to avert evil.¹¹⁴⁸ Making the sign of the cross was a potent gesture and images of crosses were added to a variety of amulets. According to John Chrysostom, the symbol of the cross had exorcistic powers. He even compares this power to that of amulets: ‘But the cross has the strength of a wonderful amulet (περίαιπτον).’¹¹⁴⁹ It has been argued that a cross (or its variations such as the staurogram) in amulet texts indicates performing the actual gesture (i.e. making the sign of the cross) when reading the text aloud, which would have added sound and movement to the experience of the amulet.¹¹⁵⁰ In general, the iconography of the cross must have had many meanings for amulet users, ranging from recognition of its apotropaic powers, to associations with church ritual and perhaps feeling the urge to make the sign of the cross. In relation to cross-shaped amulets, N.H. Korsvoll argues that they become more Christian over time and that these examples demonstrate the impact of the rising church.¹¹⁵¹ Seeing or feeling the cross on their amulets and/or making the sign of the cross when remembering the amulets’ rituals thus created a new and impactful embodied experience.

Many late antique amulets seem to have a connection to church rituals, which means that there was a larger context for the experience of amulet use. One illustration is a third-or-fourth-century textual amulet that seems to include references to pre-baptismal ritual exorcisms.¹¹⁵² Other textual amulets apparently refer to church liturgy; the objects’ texts reflect the language of prayers and sermons.¹¹⁵³ In the process of reaching out to a Christian specialist, such as a monk or a priest, certain rituals may have taken place when making and attaching the amulet. If prayers were spoken aloud, they will have brought about an impactful experience of sound.

As argued above, amulets would have been especially impactful in a Christian context, because of the power ascribed to the Scriptures in their concrete, written form. Seeing, but most of all feeling the presence of the Scriptures when wearing an amulet or placing an amulet at a door, must have been a powerful experience. Through amulets, the Bible

1148 R. Popa, ‘The Evil Eye and the Cross: The Unity of the Magic Metaphor in Gal 3:1 from a Mainly Papyrological Perspective’, *Early Christianity* 12 (2021) 447-470: 464.

1149 John Chrysostom, *Catachesis ultima ad baptizandos* 3.6 (SC 366, 232-235). Translation by P.W. Harkins, *John Chrysostom: Baptismal Instructions* (London 1963) 11.25 on page 168. On the cross see also: *In epistulam I ad Corinthios* 12.13 (PG 61.105-106); John Chrysostom, *In epistulam ad Colossenses* 8.5 (PG 62.357-359).

1150 Sanzo, *Ritual Boundaries*, 81, 86-87.

1151 Korsvoll, ‘Official Teaching and Popular Practice’, 161-162.

1152 GMA 35, Kotansky, GMA, 177-180. Possibly also in P. Oxy. 82 5306 and see *PGM* P13 whose text also reminds us of exorcistic rites.

1153 As suggested by de Bruyn in *PGM* P15b; de Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 216-217; for more examples of Christian ritual language in textual amulets, see 184-234.

could turn into an embodied interactive phenomenon.¹¹⁵⁴ The amulet became a carrier of Christian power, especially in its text and imagery. Furthermore, as has also been discussed above, the authority of Christian amulet makers, such as priests and monks, enhanced the experience. The abbot Shenoute, for example, refers to amulets made from animal parts and distributed by monks: 'I saw myself the head of the snake bound on the hand of some. With another the tooth of the crocodile is bound on his arms; yet another has the claws of foxes bound on his feet.'¹¹⁵⁵ The agency of such amulets was 'guaranteed' through the involvement of Christian functionaries and the experience of having them attached to one's body, feeling the object press to one's skin, and hearing the prayers uttered by the monk or priest must have been very impactful.

The appearance of Christian elements in iconography and text, and the involvement of Christian specialists carrying out Christian rituals, brought about a new 'Christian' sensory experience. This experience was personal and engaged touch, as well as sight and hearing. In this context the amulet may have acquired an additional level of meaning: the sensory, personal, and portable aspects of amulets made them the perfect religious strategy to bring early 'church' practices closer to home. The sensory experience remained central to the use of amulets in Late Antiquity. In a Christian context, this experience was enhanced and meaning was added through the personalisation of institutional practices.

F. The experience of a controlled amulet space

In chapter three I discussed the way in which amulets facilitated experiences of place and created a sense of protection and control within a space. What happened to such experiences of place in Late Antiquity? Although the texts inscribed on late antique amulets contained new elements, these amulets still demarcated places, kept danger away from a designated area or drove illness and demons out of this area. For example, a late handbook text states that 'the place to which this manuscript [the fictional letter of Christ to king Abgar] will be affixed, no power of the Adversary nor unclean spirit will be able to approach nor to reach into the place, and forever.'¹¹⁵⁶ Compared to amulets of the first-to-third centuries, late antique amulets include more references to the spatial proximity of amulets. The descriptions of the place in question are also more elaborate. What does this tell us about the practice of using amulets in Late Antiquity?

Listing and place

A fourth-century metal amulet from Beirut, GMA 52, begins with a long list containing the names of angels and the locations (or natural phenomena) they are associated with.

1154 Sanzo, *Ritual Boundaries*, 112-113.

1155 Shenoute of Atriye, *Acephalous work A14* par. 255-262 (Orlandi 18-20). Translation by van der Vliet, 'Roman and Byzantine Egypt', 253-254.

1156 *PCM* I 11, p. 25. Translation by K. Dosoo, E. Love, M. Preininger, *PCM*, 161.

The following passage may serve as an example: 'I call upon the one who sits in charge of rivers, Bêdliā. I call upon the one who sits in charge of roads, Phasousouêl.'¹¹⁵⁷ The amulet's editor, R.D. Kotansky, explains that these types of lists originated in a Jewish tradition and can be found in other amulets as well. *PGM* XXXV. and P.Oxy. LXXXII 5312, for example, both favour amulets from Late Antiquity, call upon angels who are responsible for the seas, snow, rain, and other phenomena.¹¹⁵⁸ The locations (or natural phenomena) mentioned in these protective angel lists are very general and describe a generic landscape any amulet user might traverse. Wearing such an object, the user carries the power of all the angels addressed in the lists.

Other lists enumerate potentially dangerous locations and situations where the help of the amulet was needed. GMA 52 also contains a list of situations in which danger in the form of demons or curses could strike: 'lest you harm or defile her, or use magic drugs on her (...) either on the street or abroad; or while river-bathing or a bath.'¹¹⁵⁹ At these locations the wearer of the object needed extra protection. *PGM* P10, a sixth-century papyrus amulet, also lists places where a person would need protection. The text adjures 'unclean spirits' or demons to leave specific locations where they apparently could be found: 'Do not hide down here in the ground; do not lurk under a bed, nor under a window, nor under a door, nor under beams, nor under utensils, nor below a pit.'¹¹⁶⁰ *PCM* I 11, a sixth-to-eighth-century Coptic codex with amuletic texts, requests the protection of the Christian God and Christ for the enumerated locations: 'may you watch over the entrance and the exit and all its dwelling places and its windows and its courtyards and its bedrooms and its open places and its lands that belong to it and its foundations and its gardens and its wells and its trees which bear fruit and its trees which do not bear fruit!'¹¹⁶¹ The text subsequently asks God and Christ to 'undo' possible curses which may have been placed on a long list of locations:

or if someone bound a place, having placed in it the bond of deceit, hidden in its foundations, or in its extended places, or in its entrance or in its exit, or in the door, or in the window, or in the bedroom or in the yard, or in the dining-room or in the courtyard in the middle of it, or in the field, or among the fruits, or in the garden, or at a forked road or crossroad, or in a fruitless tree, or in the waters that are in the rivers or in the canals, or in vineyards, or in any place!¹¹⁶²

1157 Translation by Kotansky, GMA 52. Christian element: 'One God and his Christ, help Alexandra'.

1158 *PGM* XXXV. from the third to fourth century and P.Oxy. LXXXII 5312 from the sixth century. Neither contains clear Christian elements. The latter is a favour amulet and includes angels taking care of 'good appearance' and 'tribunals'. Translation by F. Maltomini, P.Oxy. LXXXII 5312, 100.

1159 GMA 52. Other parts of the text concern specific protection against demons and binding spells.

1160 Fourth century, *PGM* P10. Translation by Marvin Meyer in ACM, nr. 20.

1161 *PCM* I 11, p. 3. Translation by Dosoo, Love and Preininger, *PCM*, 117.

1162 *PCM* I 11, p. 4. Translation by Dosoo, Love and Preininger, *PCM*, 117.

All these examples refer to the geographical influence sphere of amulets. Usually, the locations are boundary locations, places where help was needed or where danger was believed to linger.

The lists present a world full of danger.¹¹⁶³ In the domestic sphere, evil influences might lurk almost everywhere, particularly at boundary locations and ‘under’ all sorts of things. Penetrable boundary locations such as entrances, exits, doors, and windows were believed to be danger zones because of their liminal character. These were the locations that required the agency of an amulet to close off the area, as is borne out by the activated late antique house amulets found on or near doors.¹¹⁶⁴ These amulets demonstrate that ideas about amulets’ ability to create protected spaces were still present in Late Antiquity. Indeed, the focus on the spatial proximity of amulets seems to have become stronger.

D. Frankfurter and others connect these amulets with ancient demonology and the idea of ‘listing’. In relation to *PGM* P10 he writes: ‘what is listed are the various domestic sites popularly regarded as susceptible to demonic presence as well as the effects wrought by demonic beings in proximity.’¹¹⁶⁵ As S. Lunn-Rockcliffe points out, the belief in demons or ‘intermediate spirits’ was present in many of the late antique religions and the beliefs and practices also had much in common.¹¹⁶⁶ As noted in my discussion of amulets with exorcistic formulae, the idea of demons as the force behind danger and disease was taken up by Christian makers of amulets. The monks and priests used, for example, Jewish lists with the names of angels as well as the *Testament of Solomon*, a text which lists demons and their areas of influence.¹¹⁶⁷ There is also a connection between the late antique amulets containing lists and older Egyptian temple oracles. In the texts that would be worn as amulets, traditional Egyptian priests listed topological (demons of rivers etc.), ethnic, zoological, and theological dangers that might threaten the customer. When worn on the body, the rolled up text would work apotropaically and protect the wearer.¹¹⁶⁸ So, neither the idea of lists nor the idea that places were threatened by demons were exclusively Christian.

The amulets with lists point to a deeply felt urge to control certain locations. D. Frankfurter suggests that, a monk, a scribe, or another amulet maker might use the technique of listing when asked for a solution to a problem and that, moreover, what was included in the list would probably resonate with the knowledge of the customer.¹¹⁶⁹ According to Frankfurter, the lists reflect ‘the scribal impulse to arrange and systematize.’¹¹⁷⁰ The lists present the world as catalogued and structured; places marked as dangerous

1163 Sanzo, *Ritual Boundaries*, 32.

1164 *PGM* P2 which starts with ‘door’ and *PGM* P2a which is a *historiola* in which the door is protected.

1165 Frankfurter, ‘The Demonic in Christian Egypt’, 67.

1166 Lunn-Rockcliffe, ‘Demons and Demonologies’, 494.

1167 Zellmann-Rohrer, ‘Hippocratic Diagnosis’, 76.

1168 Frankfurter, *Evil Incarnate*, 18.

1169 Frankfurter, ‘The Demonic in Christian Egypt’, 61, 66-67, 73.

1170 Frankfurter, ‘The Demonic in Christian Egypt’, 66-67.

could be controlled with the proximity of amulets.¹¹⁷¹ The scribes' ability to create such lists would give them authority; the lists themselves gave amulet users a sense of (spatial) control.¹¹⁷² They would have felt reassured about the locations and situations mentioned in these texts; the demonic dangers would be controlled at the dangerous boundaries where they were lurking and order would be created.¹¹⁷³

Taken together, the surviving sources suggest that the relationship between amulet, user, and place became more prominent in Late Antiquity. The scribes (many of whom were connected to church institutions) took spatial elements from existing and developing ideas about demonology, put them in a Christian context, and used them when people reached out to them for the creation of an amulet.¹¹⁷⁴ However, the idea of amulets' faculty to create safe spaces within a world full of demons, danger, misfortune, and disease was not new. Early Christian amulets makers must have shared developing ideas about demons in relation to space. As amulets in general became more textual, the urge to systematise also grew stronger and longer lists of dangerous places were added to amulets. Early scribes making amulets and adding the Christian elements to them thus participated in larger developments in ancient religion and amulet use.

Place and portable power

A considerable number of amulets were used to demarcate and control the landscape. Many amulets, however, were made for the human bodies that moved through the landscape. Danger and illness could be everywhere, and one might have to leave the closed-off, protected environment of one's house. A fourth-century papyrus amulet (*PGM LXXXIX*.) requests the supernatural to 'check and annihilate him who is approaching upon' the wearer.¹¹⁷⁵ In the sixth-century *PGM P6d* we read that the object will protect its wearer against all danger surrounding them.¹¹⁷⁶ Other amulets are said to act for 'the one wearing your holy and unconquerable power' and for 'who wears this divine amulet'.¹¹⁷⁷ Amulets thus provided a portable form of protection. With the help of body amulets, protection could be permanently present.

This particular function of amulets is most explicitly described in amulets from Late Antiquity. For example, *PGM XXXV*. 1-42 requests 'the god of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob'

1171 Lunn-Rockcliffe, 'Demons and Demonologies', 505.

1172 Frankfurter, *Evil Incarnate*, 22.

1173 See for example: Frankfurter, 'Demonology in the Roman Mediterranean World', 128-129; Frankfurter, *Evil Incarnate*, 22, 26, 30.

1174 Frankfurter, *Christianizing Egypt*, 85.

1175 *PGM LXXXIX*. Translation by Daniel, Maltomini, SM 13. See also: *PCM I* 11, p. 10.

1176 *PGM P6d*.

1177 GMA 58; *PGM P18*. Other late-antique references to wearing something powerful can be found in *PGM P10* and SM 31.

to ‘stay beside me and give me favor’.¹¹⁷⁸ *PGM* P21 gives a list of angels and continues by saying: ‘let them accompany me today, during all the hours of day and night’. This amulet also contains the following text: ‘For I have before me Jesus Christ, who attends me and accompanies me; behind me Yao Sabaoth Ado[nai]; on my right and [left] the god of Ab[raham, Isaac and Jacob]; over [my] face [and] my heart Ga[briel, Michael], Raphael, Saruel, [Raguel], Nuriel, Anael.’¹¹⁷⁹ The creation of boundaries to demarcate a religious place has been connected to speech acts spoken towards the four cardinal directions and to early Christian texts mentioning four angels at the four sides of the divine realm. The creators of these amulets must have been familiar with the idea of using the (Christian) supernatural to demarcate space.¹¹⁸⁰ In all these cases the body amulets provide a portable safe space. A much later amulet, datable to the ninth to twelfth century, has the following text: ‘Watch and protect the 4 sides of the body and the soul and the spirit and the entire house of N. daughter of N.’ and also specifies the area of protection: ‘Do not permit them [evil things] ever to visit her or the child with whom she is pregnant for approximately two hundred miles around’.¹¹⁸¹

Portability was not only a property of protective amulets but also of healing amulets and amulets providing benefits. A healing amulet would be constantly working to heal the body and a charisma amulet would be effective wherever it was worn. The fifth-or-sixth-century *PGM* P17 urges the supernatural to ‘expel toxin or any disease or evil plague from the one who carries (this amulet)’.¹¹⁸² The demarcated area surrounding the user of the amulet could protect against evil, expel evil, or attract good luck.

The need to sustain the proximity of the supernatural with portable amulets was fundamental to the functioning of amulets and was already prominent before the rise of Christian influence in amulet production. As K.A. Rask argues for early amulets, ‘these small objects had the capacity to be intimate portable presences, in keeping with the desire that sacred beings remain close’.¹¹⁸³ Late Antiquity saw the development of explicit textual references on amulets to the portable protection they provided. This is in line with what has been stated above regarding a shift from oral practices to written text.¹¹⁸⁴ Objects such as jewellery and gemstones were given an inscription of the ‘protect the wearer’ type, asking for protection, favour, help, and health. As pointed out by D.C. Skemer in a publication

1178 *PGM* XXXV. 1-42. Translation by R.F. Hock in GMPT.

1179 *PGM* P2. Translation by M.W. Meyer in ACM, nr. 36.

1180 Theis, ‘Präsenz und (Un-)Sichtbarkeit’, 59-60.

1181 ACM 64. Translation by R. Smith in ACM, nr. 64. The aspect of place is very important in this text, but the text is not clear about the demarcated location: it seems to focus on the body of the owner, but also mentions the owner’s house.

1182 Translation by Jones, *New Testament Texts*, 90.

1183 Rask, *Personal Experience*, 114.

1184 See above, but also in relation to exorcistic amulets Zellmann-Rohrer, ‘Hippocratic Diagnosis, 76; see also Kotansky, ‘Greek Exorcistic Amulets’, 267; Van den Hoek, Feissel, Herrmann jr., ‘Magic of Portable Inscriptions’.

dealing with medieval amulets, belief in the portable properties of amulets continued beyond Late Antiquity: ‘As a renewable source of Christian empowerment, textual [body] amulets promised safe passage through a precarious world.’¹¹⁸⁵

Same ideas, new words

Late antique amulet texts testify to the importance of the experience of place for the amulet user. In Late Antiquity there were many sacred and safe places people could go to, such as church buildings, shrines of martyrs, healing sanctuaries and other pilgrimage sites.¹¹⁸⁶ However, by acquiring and wearing an amulet, people could create a portable safe space for themselves. Taking control of a demarcated space gave amulet users the feeling that they were in control of their personal situation. The certainty of being in a safe space that moved with them gave amulet users confidence, a sense of security and control, and the feeling that they were permanently ‘under treatment’ and protected. Amulets used to protect houses and vineyards inspired similar feelings, despite the fact that the safe spaces created through the amulet were not portable.

As we have seen, from the Imperial period onwards the use of amuletic texts increased. Because of this development, amulets of this period are more recognisable for modern scholars. In many cases, formerly oral practices now took some written form.¹¹⁸⁷ The ideas about the functioning of amulets in relation to place reflected by late antique texts were by no means new. They were, however, more often made explicit. In a way they present the same stories as earlier sources, but with more words. It is true that the development of demonology created a new vocabulary with regard to space, but this novelty could easily be accommodated in existing conceptions.

G. The experience of time: reuse in the early Christian era

At the end of the process of amulet use, that use could be assessed. Information on this final step is limited, but through an analysis of processes of reuse at least some insights may be gained. As I noted in chapter three, not every person who had acquired an amulet discarded it after use. There was, in fact, a variety of circular processes. New amulets could be made from used materials, amulets could be reused as amulets, or they could be turned into something new.¹¹⁸⁸ Because of the expanding textuality, such practices become more visible in Late Antiquity, but they must have existed before. In addition, processes of circularity take time – they become more evident as time passes.

1185 Skemer, *Binding Words*, 1.

1186 See for example: Van Opstall, ‘General introduction’.

1187 Faraone, *Transformation*.

1188 See my discussion of reuse in chapter three, section 3.7.

Using existing materials to create amulets

A variety of second-hand materials were reused as amulets, for practical reasons or because of their perceived efficacy or iconographic power. For example, Late Antiquity saw an increasing reuse of scriptural parchment or papyrus sheets.¹¹⁸⁹ Pages taken from scriptural codices were used as amulets.¹¹⁹⁰ Because of the power ascribed to the Scriptures, such objects must have been considered very effective.

In the late antique period, coins were reused for various reasons, but some show reuse as amulets. John Chrysostom criticises the use of amulets by asking: ‘And what is one to say about them who use charms and amulets and encircle their heads and feet with golden coins of Alexander of Macedon. Are these our hopes, tell me, that after the cross and death of our Master, we should place our hopes of salvation on an image of a Greek king?’¹¹⁹¹ The practice of reusing coins as jewellery is older than Late Antiquity, but becomes more prominent from the third century onwards.¹¹⁹² Coins could be mounted, for example as a pendant, or pierced to be worn.¹¹⁹³ Both contemporary and older coins were used as amulets.¹¹⁹⁴ It is often unclear whether coins incorporated in jewellery were used and interpreted as amulets. In their study dealing with coin pendants (not necessarily amulets) from sixth-to-seventh-century England, K.D. Haworth and K.M. Clarke Neish did not find any specific meaning as regards iconography, which would indicate that the coins in their study were valued solely for being coins.¹¹⁹⁵ Still, a clear example of a coin used as an amulet is a pierced follis of Justinian from 538 carrying the inscription: ‘Lord, protect the wearer’.¹¹⁹⁶

As Faraone observes, coins were of an ideal shape and size to be reused as amulets, but

1189 Reused papyrus in: SM 34; *PGM* P15a; *PGM* P6c. (Text could be scraped off, but signs of reuse are often still visible).

1190 The amuletic function was not written on them, but because of elements such as fold lines it has been argued that they were used as amulets. See for example Jones, *New Testament Texts*, 8 on 100-103.

1191 John Chrysostom, *Ad illuminandos catecheses* 2 (PG 49.240). Translation by W.R.W. Stephens, *Instructions to Catechumens*. A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Series 1, Vol. 9 (New York 1889) 171.

1192 C. Perassi, ‘Wearing Coins in Roman Times: When, How, for Whom and Why?’, *Gemmae: An International Journal on Glyptic Studies* 3 (2021) 39-60: 39-42; Faraone, *Transformation*, 43-44; M.M. Fulghum, ‘Coins used as Amulets in Late Antiquity’ in: S.R. Asirvatham, C.O. Pache, J. Watrous (eds.), *Between Magic and Religion: Interdisciplinary Studies in Ancient Mediterranean Religion and Society* (Lanham 2001) 139-47; J. Stoner, *The Cultural Lives of Domestic Objects in Late Antiquity* (Leiden 2019) 14-16.

1193 Perassi, ‘Wearing Coins’, 43-49, 55-57. For example: E. Szabo, ‘Alternative uses of Coins in the Late Roman Cemetery of Unterloisdorf/Austria’ in: B. Zając, S. Jellonek (eds.), *Pecunia Omnes Vincit. Conference Proceedings of the Fifth and Sixth International Numismatic and Economic Conference* (Krakow 2020) 96-108: 100 and 105.

1194 Fulghum, ‘Coins used as Amulets’, 143-145. For example, pectoral: Metropolitan Museum, New York, registration number 17.190.1664, with coins from the fourth to the sixth century.

1195 K.D. Haworth, K.M. Clarke-Neish, ‘Pierced, Looped and Framed: The (Re)Use of Gold Coins in Jewellery in Sixth-and Seventh-Century England’, *Early Medieval Europe* 32.3 (2024) 337-386: 367-368.

1196 Fulghum, ‘Coins used as Amulets’, 140; Perassi, ‘Wearing Coins’, 57-58. Coin in *bullā* in GMA 20; combination of coins with other amulets in: Crummy, ‘Bears and Coins’, 62-74.

this is not the only reason for their reuse. Materiality, value, and iconography were important too.¹¹⁹⁷ C. Perassi distinguishes between pendants with golden coins that were probably worn to show wealth and power, and less valuable pierced copper coins which, worn on a string, may have been intended as amulets.¹¹⁹⁸ These two functions are, however, not necessarily mutually exclusive. Monetary value does not seem to have been on Chrysostom's mind; he worried that people placed their hopes in the image of Alexander, instead of Christ.¹¹⁹⁹ He does not mention any other aspects of coins. In her analysis of the coins that were reused in late antique amulets and jewellery, M.M. Fulghum argues that certain coins were probably chosen because of their imagery.¹²⁰⁰ Coins carrying portraits of powerful men, ready to wrestle with 'evil', may have been considered apotropaic. The reverse of such coins often shows a reference to victory, which could have been interpreted as a victory over evil.¹²⁰¹ Fulghum argues that images and stories of Alexander the Great were still circulating in Late Antiquity and coins with his image may have been seen as powerful apotropaic objects.¹²⁰²



Figure 4. Fifth-to-fourth-century BCE pierced scaraboid that was reused in the second to third century CE when amuletic inscriptions were added. J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu, registration number 85.AN.444.1. Image in the public domain.

Gemstones were also frequently reused. They were applied to be worn as jewellery or to be used as a seal, but also to be used for amuletic purposes. Gemstones belonging to the former category could, at a later date, be inscribed with words or formulae that would

1197 Faraone, *Transformation*, 43; see also Crummy, 'Bears and Coins', 62 and 73-74 for the use of older coins as amulets in children's graves.

1198 Perassi, 'Wearing Coins', 57-58.

1199 Also analysed by Faraone, *Transformation*, 43-44.

1200 Fulghum, 'Coins used as Amulets', 139.

1201 See Fulghum, 'Coins used as Amulets', 141-146; see also: Crummy, 'Bears and Coins', 73-74.

1202 See also Fulghum, 'Coins used as Amulets', 144-146 for the possibility that Chrysostom is not referring to an actual old coin of Alexander but to a contemporary object.

not be out of place on a textual amulet.¹²⁰³ In this way, ‘regular’ intaglios were turned into amulets. This happened especially from the third century onwards.¹²⁰⁴ A gemstone ring of an earlier period, for example, was given a Christian amuletic addition in Late Antiquity. The protruding image (possibly a bust of Serapis) was shaved down and the following inscription was added to the bezel and shoulders of the ring: ‘Sesengenbarpharanges, Sabaoth, Jesus, Christ, Adonai, Elohai, Michael, Gabriël.’¹²⁰⁵ Another example is a gemstone carrying an image of two chariots with Helios and Selene, dated to the first to second century. At a later date, this gem was inscribed on the back with the following text ‘Iaô Sabaôth Abrasax, you the Lord, stand by me.’¹²⁰⁶ Other reworked gems were much older. A Minoan rock crystal seal carrying the image of a lion was, for example, reworked around the third century, when a powerful inscription containing the name of Abrasax was added.¹²⁰⁷ Finally, figure 4 shows a fifth-century BCE scarab that received an inscription much later, possibly in the third or fourth century.¹²⁰⁸

Thunderstones

A more complex example is the reuse of prehistoric stone axe heads. These were reused as amulets in Roman times, but it is not clear if the Romans knew they were using ‘second-hand’ materials. These axe heads were originally made to be held in the hand or to be attached to a haft. Archaeologists have found them at Roman sites, both in graves and in living areas.¹²⁰⁹ Pliny describes these axe-shaped stones as ‘thunderstones’. They were believed to protect against lightning, because they were assumed to be themselves a product of lightning. Pliny reports that ‘the Magi hunt for it zealously because it is found only in a place that has been struck by a thunderbolt.’¹²¹⁰ In his medical handbook (dating to

1203 On reuse of gems see for example: G. Sena Chiesa, ‘Myth Revisited. The Re-use of Mythological Cameos and Intaglios in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages’ in: C. Entwistle, N. Adams (eds.), *Gems of Heaven: Recent research on engraved gemstones in Late Antiquity, c. AD 200-600* (London 2011) 229-238: 229 – here Sena Chiesa pays special attention to a rise in reuse from the fourth century.

1204 Gemstones in general were often reused in Late Antiquity: Stoner, *Cultural lives of Domestic Objects*, 16.

1205 Spier, *Early Christian Gems*, 81-82: British Museum, London, registration number OA.10714. C.A. Faraone, ‘Some Magical Gems in London’, *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 57 (2017) 403-430: 429. This formula was often used without Christian elements, but see: P.Oxy. LXXXII 5306; GMA 38 and 48.

1206 British Museum, London, registration number 1864,1127.38. Translation from museum online catalogue, last accessed September 2025.

1207 The inscription included Abrasax and some additional script that is unclear. British Museum, London, registration number 1772,0315.439.

1208 British Museum, London, registration number OA.9582 and J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu, registration number 85.AN.444.1.

1209 C.A. Faraone, ‘Inscribed Greek Thunderstones as House-and Body-Amulets in Roman Imperial Times’, *Kernos* 27 (2014) 257-284: 1-3 (online version).

1210 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 37.135 (See 37.134-135). Translation by D.E. Eichholtz, *Pliny. Natural History. Books 36-37. Vol. X* (London 1971) 274-275. Faraone, ‘Thunderstones’, 2.

the second century), the Alexandrian physician Aelius Promotus prescribes the use of thunderstones to deal with fever.¹²¹¹ Although Pliny speaks of axe-shaped stones, there are no indications that the later users of these objects knew anything about their origins.¹²¹² A small proportion of the ‘thunderstones’ that can be placed in a Roman context were inscribed, which made the reuse recognisable for scholars.¹²¹³ C.A. Faraone describes ten inscribed ‘thunderstones’, five larger ones which were probably used to protect buildings, and five smaller ones that will have been used to protect bodies.¹²¹⁴ In addition, a bronze Mycenaean axe has been found, which carries a powerful text inscribed at a later date.¹²¹⁵

The drawings and inscriptions that can be found on the axes resemble the imagery and texts found on gemstone amulets: *charaktêres*, names (such as Abrasax), and drawings of gods such as the Egyptian Pantheos. Many of the designs are circular and thus fit gemstone iconography, for example because they were enclosed by an Ouroboros – an Egyptian snake biting its own tail.¹²¹⁶ As pointed out by C.A. Faraone, the positioning of the inscriptions indicates that the power of the axe was thought to reside in its cutting edge.¹²¹⁷ One of the axes has a drawing of a wreath with ‘magical’ names on each leaf. Pliny describes the emperor Tiberius as wearing a laurel wreath during thunderstorms as laurel was believed to protect against lightning.¹²¹⁸ Although we cannot be certain that the wreath depicted on the axe is supposed to be a laurel wreath, it may be useful to mention an instruction to write on a laurel sprig which can be found in a handbook from Roman Egypt.¹²¹⁹ This recipe is for protection, but not against lightning. Perhaps inscribed axes were also used for general protection.¹²²⁰

Prehistoric axes were thus reused, because they were believed to be powerful. It is, however, not clear if they were somehow stored or just accidentally found. Their users will have understood them as a form of reuse, but it is impossible to determine whether the stones were seen as byproducts of thunder, for example, or recognised as handmade products from an earlier age.

1211 Aelius Promotus: Wellmann 776.17.

1212 Faraone, ‘Thunderstones’, 1.

1213 Faraone, *Transformation*.

1214 Faraone, ‘Thunderstones’, 3-17.

1215 N. Franken, ‘Objects with (a) History: Observations on Reworking and Re-using Ancient Bronzes’ in: H.P. Hahn, A. Klöckner, D. Wicke (eds.), *Values and Revaluations. The Transformation and Genesis of ‘Values in Things’ from Archaeological and Anthropological Perspectives* (Oxford 2022) 59-86: 75-76.

1216 Faraone, ‘Thunderstones’, 17.

1217 Faraone, ‘Thunderstones’, 18.

1218 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*, 15.135. For other examples see Faraone, ‘Thunderstones’, 17n.94.

1219 Protecting houses: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 15.127. Writing on laurel to sleep well in GEMF 9.1-7 and on a sprig with leaves to use as protective object during larger ritual in GEMF 31.263-276.

1220 Faraone, ‘Thunderstones’, 17.

Reusing amulets as amulets

We have only a few examples of the reuse of textual amulets as amulets; gemstone amulets, however, yield more information.¹²²¹ As we have seen, amuletic inscriptions were added to ‘regular’ intaglios at a later stage. In addition, there are examples of late antique reuse of original gemstone amulets. As V. Dasen and Á.M. Nagy observe, gemstone amulets in general were not cheap and often set in mounts of precious metal.¹²²² They might be recut and inscriptions might be added.¹²²³ As gemstone use increased over time, these practices also expanded.¹²²⁴ When recutting the amulet, the original text and/or imagery could be altered or shaved off. Some gemstone amulets were, for example, recut from an oval to a round shape.¹²²⁵ It is not clear if such recutting was thought to somehow change the efficacy of the object. It is possible that it was still seen as powerful, although its original function or meaning was lost. We cannot exclude the possibility that some of these amulets were just seen as precious objects, valued for the memories attached to them or for some other reason, but not because of some belief in their power. Still, several examples show that belief in the efficacy of the object continued.

1221 See the discussion in chapter three of the amulets from Vindonissa, the second-century textual amulets in a fifth-century grave, which, unfortunately, posed many dating problems: W. Kosack, ‘Zwei altkoptische Talismane aus dem römischen Gräberfeld von Windisch-Oberburg’, *Pro Vindonissa* (2003) 11-15.

1222 Dasen, Nagy, ‘Gems’, 423; Spier, *Early Christian Gems*, 82: ‘reuse of old pagan magical gems in Christian contexts’ but for these objects it is difficult to draw a clear line between traditional and Christian practices.

1223 However, dating them and dating the moment of change is extremely difficult, if not impossible. For examples, see also the reuse of gems discussed above.

1224 See Dasen, Nagy, ‘Gems’, who noticed that this development continued into the seventh century.

1225 For example: British Museum, London, registration number 1866,1002.10.



Figure 5. Fifth-century necklace with medallion with Christ blessing a marriage and a second- or third-century Abrasax gemstone. Metropolitan Museum. New York, Rogers Fund, 1958, 58.12. Image in the public domain.

In Rome, a fifth-century hoard was found which included two fifth-century gold necklaces. Both had an Abrasax gemstone attached to them that was dated to the second or third century.¹²²⁶ The name and/or figure of Abrasax is layered. In general, he is a powerful figure, often depicted as a man with the head of a cock and two snakes as legs, wearing armour. Wearing an Abrasax gemstone was believed to offer general protection, because it would avert all evil.¹²²⁷ Figure 5 shows one of the necklaces, which consists of the Abrasax gem and a fifth-century medallion depicting two facing busts being crowned with wreaths by the small figure above them. This scene has been interpreted as Christ blessing a

¹²²⁶ As dating gemstones is extremely difficult, I would argue that they could also be from a later date. Still, the argument can be made that the gemstones are older than the rest of the necklaces. Metropolitan museum New York, Rogers Fund (RF), 1958, 58.12 and K.R. Brown, '283 Necklace with Gnostic Gem' in: K. Weitzmann (ed.), *Age of Spirituality: Late Antique and Early Christian Art, Third to Seventh Century* (New York 1979) 309 (in a private collection).

¹²²⁷ For an overview of the complexity see: M. Fallica, 'Abrasax', *Brill Encyclopedia of Early Christianity Online*, last accessed September 2025.

marriage.¹²²⁸ The transition to married life may have necessitated extra protection in the form of a gemstone amulet.¹²²⁹ As for the other necklace, here the Abrasax gem was attached as part of the clasp.¹²³⁰ Like other gems, Abrasax gems were often set in new mounts. The fourth-century hoard found in Thetford – the so-called Thetford Treasure – includes many fourth-century rings with older gems (not all with amuletic iconography) dating from the first-to-third centuries. This group contains one Abrasax gem.¹²³¹

Although it may come as a surprise that an Abrasax gem was combined with a (possibly) Christian medallion – viz. the condemnation of amulets by the bishops, discussed at the beginning of this chapter – the object quite likely kept its protective meaning in the eyes of Christian users. It may, however, have lost its traditional religious meaning. E. Zwierlein-Diehl describes the reuse of antique gems in the Middle Ages, mentioning Abrasax gems found in rings of twelfth-to-thirteenth-century bishops.¹²³² A twelfth-century text on the properties of gemstones still presents stones with the image of a man carrying a shield and spear with snakes at his feet as evil-averting – this is probably a description of an Abrasax figure.¹²³³ Although it would not necessarily have kept its original meaning, the figure seems to have kept its protective amuletic value over time.¹²³⁴

Historicity

Despite the presence of a variety of new (Christian) amuletic strategies in Late Antiquity, much older objects continued to be used and reused. In the case of coins, one might use old coins. In the case of gemstones, old gems were inscribed with amuletic inscriptions, which turned them into amulets (or made their use as amulet visible). Old gemstones amulets, such as the Abrasax ones, were reused in new settings. Reused amulets created a particular experience of time since they were known to be objects from earlier periods and sometimes confronted their users with memories.

Heirlooms had clear connections with memories shared by family members, but other

1228 Although the Christian elements could be discussed, the medallion is still younger than the gemstone. Metropolitan museum New York, Rogers Fund (RF), 1958, 58.12; G. Vikan, 'Art and Marriage in Early Byzantium', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 44 (1990) 145-163: 155-156. Also discussed in: Faraone, *Transformation*, 251; K.R. Brown, '281 Necklace with Marriage Scene and Amulet' in: K. Weitzmann (ed.), *Age of Spirituality: Late Antique and Early Christian Art, Third to Seventh Century* (New York 1979) 307-308.

1229 Faraone, *Transformation*, 251.

1230 Brown, '283 Necklace with Gnostic Gem', 309.

1231 British Museum, London, registration number 1981,0201.13. See, also: Spier, *Early Christian Gems*, 82.

1232 E. Zwierlein-Diehl, 'Antike Gemmen im Mittelalter: Wiederverwendung, Umdeutung, Nachahmung' in: D. Boschung, S. Wittekind (eds.), *Persistenz und Rezeption. Weiterverwendung, Wiederverwendung und Neuinterpretation antiker Werke im Mittelalter* (Wiesbaden 2008) 237-284: 256-258.

1233 Zwierlein-Diehl, 'Antike Gemmen im Mittelalter', 256-258.

1234 On 'magical' figures in Late Antique Greek and Coptic Egyptian 'magical' texts: Dosoo, 'Magical Names', 128-130.

‘old’ objects may also have made an impact.¹²³⁵ R. Hingley shows how Bronze Age objects were used in Iron Age sites to create what looks like genealogical associations. These objects connected past, present, and future.¹²³⁶ The ancient Greek and Roman world also valued historical sites and objects, for instance the votive objects believed to have been offered by legendary heroes or kings, such as Achilles, Herakles, Menelaos, and Minos, stored in temples.¹²³⁷ In Late Antiquity, statues and large architectural features from earlier periods were popular. People bought and used ‘antiques’ to give expression to their cultural identity.¹²³⁸ Old objects were not just there, they were given meaning, they reminded people of family members and local traditions, represented a socio-political narrative, or had a link with ancestral powers.¹²³⁹ In using amulets, we may assume that memories of family members and bygone days, or the meanings that had been attached to the object in the past impacted the users’ experience.¹²⁴⁰

The age of an object could in itself have had value. Certain of the house altars that have been found contained figurines from different time periods; these statuettes of gods were not after some time replaced with new ones, but new figurines were added to the older ones.¹²⁴¹ Textual sources do not explicitly stress the meaning and power of old amulets. Still, Pliny describes how ‘the old Romans’ already assigned power to certain protective practices that he still sees as powerful.¹²⁴² The instructions collected by Pliny in the first century were still copied and valued for their power by the author of the *Medicina Plinii* (third century), by Marcellus of Bordeaux (fifth century) and by Alexander of Tralles (sixth century).¹²⁴³ The fact that an amulet had been in use for centuries may have added to expectations regarding

1235 Stoner, *Cultural Lives of Domestic Objects*, 2-3 and chapter one on heirlooms.

1236 R. Hingley, ‘Esoteric Knowledge? Ancient Bronze Artefacts from Iron Age Contexts’, *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* 75 (2009) 143-165.

1237 Hartmann, ‘Beyond the Bones’.

1238 Stoner, *Cultural Lives of Domestic Objects*, 22-23.

1239 On approaches to historical use of objects and sites see: S. Rutledge, *Ancient Rome as a Museum: Power, Identity, and the Culture of Collecting* (Oxford 2012) 1-30; M. Díaz-Guardamino, L. García Sanjuán, D. Wheatley, ‘The Lives of Prehistoric Monuments in Iron Age, Roman, and Medieval Europe. An Introduction’ in: M. Díaz-Guardamino, L. García Sanjuán, D. Wheatley (eds.), *The Lives of Prehistoric Monuments in Iron Age, Roman, and Medieval Europe* (Oxford 2015) 3-17: especially 9-12.

1240 On the embodied experience of memory see: E.-J. Graham, ‘Memory and Materiality: Re-embodying the Roman Funeral’ in: V.M. Hope, J. Huskinson (eds.), *Memory and Mourning: Studies on Roman Death* (Oxford 2011) 21-39: 25-27.

1241 L.M. Stirling, ‘Pagan Statuettes in Late Antique Corinth: Sculpture from the Panayia Domus’, *Hesperia: The Journal of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens* 77.1 (2008) 89-161.

1242 One example is the power ascribed to wool and wolf’s fat and why brides touch the doorposts with these materials to protect their new house against evil. Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 29.30 (the old Romans) and 28.142 (man of old).

1243 And probably also by other authors. An example of a recipe that was copied, is an amulet made from a white and black stones found inside a swallow (or inside a swallow’s nest). Dioscorides, *Materia Medica* 2.56; Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 30.91-92; *Medicina Plinii* III 21.2 and 21.3; Alexander of Tralles, *Therapeutica* P. 1.561.3-9; Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 8.45. For Marcellus: Zellmann-Rohrer, *Love, Traditions in Transmission*, 68.

its efficacy. Reused old amulets, such as the Abrasax gemstones, were probably seen as extra powerful, because they had proved their worth over time. In other words, the simple fact that the object was old may have added to its value.

The impact of reuse

The addition of texts and imagery in Late Antiquity shows that much older objects were reused, and the passage of time may have added to the perceived efficacy of these objects. Amulets were not necessarily thrown away after use and they may have been purposely stored. Many objects that were used as amulets clearly were reused deliberately. As discussed in chapter three, a variety of motives for reuse could play a role in this. Economic value was most likely of influence in the reuse of coins and gemstones – as precious objects they also represented wealth.¹²⁴⁴ In addition, reusing objects could save money. Furthermore, it was simply practical to use materials and objects that were at hand. Religious value may also have played a role. The fifth-century users were probably still convinced of the power of their old Abrasax gems; codex pages from the Scriptures will also have been seen as efficacious. We also have to be aware of the layers of memories attached to objects. Their historical value may therefore likewise have impacted experience.

The evidence of reuse has implications for understanding processes of continuity and change in the use of amulets. The circular processes in amulet use indicate the slow pace of developments in amulet use. This element, the continuity of practices, may have had meaning in itself and have contributed to the perception that amulets were powerful objects.

H. Amulets or alternatives?

In his *Christianizing the Roman Empire* of 1984 R. MacMullen argued: ‘In one area, the church plainly offered too little: that of outpatient services and household medicine, as we may describe the whole matter of minor illnesses. So, despite its continual warnings, its members clung to non-Christian practices.’¹²⁴⁵ However, as the sermons of Caesarius of Arles show, the church institutions did offer alternatives. Over time, Christian religious practices, such as making the sign of the cross, visiting churches, using holy oils, and venerating relics, gained currency.¹²⁴⁶

Amulets were not chosen because they were the only option. Alternative Christian healing or protective practices did exist. How did amulets compare to these alternatives? What could amulets offer, that these practices could not? Specifically, what are the similarities and differences on the level of the sensory experience of materialities?

1244 Economic value is a relational matter, see: Moser, Smith, ‘Transformations of Value’.

1245 MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire*, 77.

1246 De Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 25; on the efficacy of the cross see: Popa, ‘The Evil Eye and the Cross’, 447-470; for analysis see: Kalleres, ‘Drunken Hags’, 234-235.

Alternatives in Caesarius of Arles

As we have seen, what the bishops saw as accepted religious practice shifted over time. John Chrysostom and Augustine preferred their followers to solely rely on prayers, although they also ascribe power to the materiality of the Scriptures.¹²⁴⁷ About a century later, Caesarius likewise urges the sick to pray, but also to visit a church, to apply oils, and to take part in the Eucharist.¹²⁴⁸ Caesarius allows the use of material religious strategies within the context of church institutions. Unlike the use of amulets, however, the materials involved were ephemeral and could not be ‘taken home’: oil stays on the body for just a few days and the sacramental bread of the Eucharist is consumed. Amulets could be materially present always and everywhere and, as portable objects, would have been more actively present in the lives of their users.

T.S. de Bruyn has analysed the similarities between using an amulet and the ritual of blessing oil. The ritual invoked the power of Christ to be present in the oil to drive away illness or demons and thus to heal. The ritual was performed by priests or monks, and the lay users could apply the oil themselves.¹²⁴⁹ This practice is similar to amulets in the sense that it involves the ‘activation’ of substances through ritual practices performed by authoritative specialists. Since oil is also applied to the body, all in all the experience of using oil is similar to that of using an amulet. De Bruyn mentions one important difference: ‘amulets could be inscribed’.¹²⁵⁰ Although this is doubtlessly significant, the materiality of textual amulets and the permanence of their inscribed message were perhaps even more important. Oil could be applied to a sick body and the power residing in the oil would force evil out. However, once the oil was absorbed by the skin, it could no longer be seen or touched. Although its smell may have lingered for some time, oil did not have the permanence of an amulet. An amulet worn on the body could be seen, kept close, felt and sometimes also heard or smelled. In other words, unlike holy oils, amulets created a permanent sensory experience. Through its material presence the object would be constantly present in the mind of the user, thus contributing to a more permanent feeling of safety.

Saints and martyrs

As argued in the first part of this chapter, Christian religious practices in general became

1247 Stander, ‘Amulets and the Church Fathers’, 62–66. See for example: Augustine in holding the Gospel to your head: Augustine of Hippo, *In Iohannis euangelium tractatus* 7.12 (CCSL 36.73); Chrysostom on Gospel amulets: John Chrysostom, *In Matthaeum (homiliae 1–90)* 72.2 (PG 58.669).

1248 Caesarius, *Sermones* 13.3, 50.1 and 52.2; see also Klingshirn, *Caesarius of Arles*, 233–234.

1249 Prayer 17 of the Euchologion, dated to the mid fourth century and part of the liturgy of the church in Egypt: de Bruyn, ‘Appeals to Jesus’, 76–77.

1250 De Bruyn, ‘Appeals to Jesus’, 79.

more material from the fourth century onwards.¹²⁵¹ J.E. Sanzo describes how in Late Antiquity ‘the extant material record testifies to a proliferation of healing and protective objects, *eulogiai* (e.g., clay tokens and flasks containing oil), and other materials invoking biblical heroes or associated with the cults of martyrs and saints.’¹²⁵² Objects could be taken home from pilgrimages to holy places, for instance various mementos, (contact) relics, and other objects made of materials that had been in contact with the saints and martyrs or containing materials such as dust from a saint’s tomb. These objects were acquired in the hope of mobilising some of the power associated with the places or the saints for healing or protection.¹²⁵³ As Sanzo’s examples show, the idea of keeping powerful portable objects close to human bodies was not foreign to Christianity.¹²⁵⁴

In the fourth century the mortal remains of saints and martyrs became even more important sites of sanctity and religious power.¹²⁵⁵ In his analysis on religious practices regarding saints, P. Brown argued for the importance of ‘presence’ in the experience of religion. Saints were ‘present’ in their remains, in the sites related to them, in all relics taken from their dead bodies, and in all contact relics that had touched their remains. In handling these objects, ancient individuals interacted with the ‘invisible person’ present, who would wield their power.¹²⁵⁶ People felt the need to be near such a presence, to visit it and take fragments of it with them: ‘the physical presence of the holy, whether in the midst of a particular community or in the possession of particular individuals, was the greatest blessing that a late-antique Christian could enjoy.’¹²⁵⁷

By visiting shrines and taking blessed oils, dirt, tokens, and contact relics from these sites, the power and presence of the saints became portable and possessable.¹²⁵⁸ The power of the presence could thus be fragmented, without minimising it. The ‘fragments’ could be used in private or domestic ritual.¹²⁵⁹ In all these cases, the power of memory could add to the experience of the object; memories of rituals, visits, or encounters could be reactivated by handling the fragments of the presence at home.¹²⁶⁰

In my view, these arguments can be fruitfully applied to amulets. Just like (contact) relics, amulets with Christian elements may be seen as expressions of a tendency to fragment

1251 I will discuss some of the change relevant to the present context, but will not go into detail regarding the question why early Christians felt the need to use more material practices.. See for example: Jensen, ‘Art’, 717-718.

1252 Sanzo, ‘Early Christianity’, 233.

1253 Vikan, ‘Art, Medicine, and Magic’.

1254 Although it was also criticised by the authors of the early church, see the analysis of Shenoute’s perspective on relics by Van der Vliet, ‘Roman and Byzantine Egypt’, 252-253.

1255 Harvey, ‘The Senses in Religion’, 97-98.

1256 Brown, *The Cult of the Saints*, 88, 106-113.

1257 Brown, *The Cult of the Saints*, 88.

1258 On divine power residing in religious sites, see for example: Cline, ‘Ritual Efficacy of Christian Symbols’, 362-363.

1259 Bowes, ‘Sixth-Century Individual Rituals’, *passim*, but 78-80 specifically.

1260 Harvey, ‘The Senses in Religion’, 98; Noga-Banai, ‘Early Christian Reliquaries’, 221-223.

Christian institutionalised power, as they encapsulated the powers associated with liturgical ritual or the Scriptures. Like pilgrim tokens, amulets can be seen as objects facilitating or ensuring a religious presence in private contexts, although in the case of amulets the power believed to be ‘present’ more often was God, Jesus, or an archangel rather than a saint.¹²⁶¹ Perhaps most importantly, both pilgrim tokens and amulets could create a permanent sensory experience that would have inspired a feeling of permanent safety.

Relics

Relics, for example of saints and martyrs, need to be further discussed, because they were also used as amulets. A relic consisted of the ‘corporeal remains or other objects connected with people considered to be saints.’¹²⁶² A relic is in essence (part of) a dead body; the deceased was believed to have a special relationship with the supernatural or spiritual and therefore the corpse was ‘a site of religious contact’.¹²⁶³ The use of relics emerged in the fourth century. According to R. Wiśniewski, it ‘exploded rather than developed.’¹²⁶⁴ He demonstrates that this was a fundamentally new practice as it required a change in mentality regarding the handling of dead bodies. The dead had been seen as polluted – now they were sources of power.¹²⁶⁵ Relics were believed to be able to expel demons or illness and thus to heal and protect.¹²⁶⁶ Although the power of relics originated in the figure of the saint, it was believed to be present in the saints’ remains and in contact relics which had touched saints during their lifetime or after their death.¹²⁶⁷

R. Wiśniewski argues that the need to touch relics was prominent in Late Antiquity, because in this way one was able to reach the power within them.¹²⁶⁸ We do not know how relics were handled, but they were probably not often touched, especially not by ordinary people seeking help or healing.¹²⁶⁹ Relics were stored in closed reliquaries (without ‘peepholes’), which meant that the exact nature of the relic was often unknown.¹²⁷⁰ Furthermore, the objects were kept in ecclesiastical buildings, often in a place where they could not be seen by visiting laypeople.¹²⁷¹ In a study of medieval reliquaries, A. Kurtze showed that relics remained largely invisible, even though in later periods reliquaries were equipped with ‘windows’ made of crystal. The reliquaries would only be taken out

1261 Amulets rarely address saints, however, see: *PGM* P2 and P5b.

1262 Wiśniewski, *Cult of Relics*, 2.

1263 Cox Miller, *Corporeal Imagination*, 1.

1264 Wiśniewski, *Cult of Relics*, 1.

1265 Wiśniewski, *Cult of Relics*, 8, see 8-26 for analysis. See also: Cox Miller, *Corporeal Imagination*, 7.

1266 Wiśniewski, *Cult of Relics*, 27-42 for the development from exorcism to healing. See chapter three for the discussion of the use of relics for protection.

1267 Skemer, *Binding Words*, 50.

1268 Wiśniewski, *Cult of Relics*, 130, see 124-130

1269 Wiśniewski, *Cult of Relics*, 131.

1270 Wiśniewski, *Cult of Relics*, 150-151.

1271 Wiśniewski, *Cult of Relics*, 134-137, 144-150.

for processions on specific days; the windows were not there for visibility, but to allow the power of the relic to radiate. Contact relics could be ‘created’ in this way. Even when the relics in their reliquaries could not be seen or touched, their power was believed to be present in medieval churches: the storage rooms were equipped with ‘Wirkungskanäle’.¹²⁷²

Things were different in the case of private relics. One example is the medallion in the possession of Gregory of Tours, which contained ashes of a martyr. The object would protect him against violent individuals and floodings.¹²⁷³ The medallion had earlier belonged to his mother, and before that to his father, which testifies to the family’s belief in its power.¹²⁷⁴ In Late Antiquity, relics consisting of remains of saints were also kept at home, where they could be ‘touched, kissed, or rubbed’.¹²⁷⁵ The bishops, however, preferred all relics to be stored in ecclesiastical buildings, so that they could control the objects and the interaction people had with them.¹²⁷⁶ Relics could be personal and portable like amulets, and initially the church did not look favourably on them. Again we are dealing with tension between developments in relatively institutionalised church practices and the needs of individuals.

In certain respects, the experience of relics was similar to that of amulets. Both responded to a need for material forms of personal religion, a need for religious objects that could be kept close and touched. Touching a relic could have a large impact: it meant feeling the presence of the source of healing and it did not matter if the relic could not be seen. This was something the relic had in common with the texts on a textual amulet or the natural material in the amulet case. The details of the power of the object were not necessarily of importance, the presence of the object definitely was. As regards personal experience, people were probably more acquainted with contact relics than with relics consisting of human remains stored in churches. Contact relics were objects, for instance pieces of fabric, that had touched (remains of) a saint or a saint’s tomb. They were often taken home after a pilgrimage. Through these objects, one could indirectly touch the power of the saint.¹²⁷⁷ Contact relics (and other pilgrimage souvenirs) had much in common with traditional amulets in terms of functioning and use.¹²⁷⁸ Like amulets, personal relics were worn on the body and were believed to have the power to expel danger and disease.

Both amulets and (contact) relics made divine power possessable and portable, not necessarily readable or visible. However, while using amulets involved a large variety of powerful elements regarding material, text, iconography, and rituals, relics had only

1272 A. Kurtze, ‘Transparenz und Unsichtbarkeit: Reliquiare und Architektur im mittelalterlichen Frauenstift Essen’ in: W.E. Keil, *et al.* (eds.), *Zeichentragende Artefakte im sakralen Raum. Zwischen Präsenz und Unsichtbarkeit* (Berlin/Boston 2018) 309-328.

1273 Gregory of Tours, *Liber in gloria martyrum* 83. See Brown, *Rise of Western Christendom*, 159.

1274 Wiśniewski, *Cult of Relics*, 140.

1275 Wiśniewski, *Cult of Relics*, 139-140.

1276 Wiśniewski, *Cult of Relics*, 138-139.

1277 Wiśniewski, *Cult of Relics*, 134-137, see also 153-154.

1278 For an example see: Kotansky, ‘Greek Exorcistic Amulets’, 244.

one very specific source of power: a dead body that was believed to be in contact with the supernatural. The various steps and choices in the process of amulet use made the experience of amulets more personal and thus, one may surmise, more intense and powerful.

If (contact) relics were attached to the boundary location they needed to work for – a contact relic with powers to heal might be attached to the body – they could function as amulets. However, ordinary relics were not normally attached to a demarcated space. They could be stored out of sight in a nearby church building. In the case of amulets, the proximity of their material presence ensured embodied sensory experiences. The ongoing experience amulets could provide through their demarcating agency was something most other Christian alternative practices were unable to furnish. In this way, amulets created personal material Christian experiences that could ‘be taken home’.

With their material presence, amulets contributed to the decentralisation of institutionalised forms of early Christian religion. The proximity of the amulet made it trustworthy; because of their personal, permanent, possessable, and portable nature, amulets could provide something that other religious strategies could not. In the end, the proximity of the amulet’s material presence, the relationship between amulet and space, and the personal use of the object created a permanent and highly impactful embodied sensory experience. It was this experience that made amulets more attractive than other options offered by the early church.

4.4 CONCLUSION: CONTINUITY, INNOVATION, AND CHANGE IN THE ROLE OF AMULETS IN LATE ANTIQUITY

In this chapter I have discussed the experience of amulet users in Late Antiquity. In the changing world of the fourth-to-sixth centuries, amulets remained in use, but also underwent changes; they moved with the flow of larger religious change. Some of these changes were a result of developments within Christianity, but not all.

Many aspects of amulets remained unchanged. Amulets continued to be used by the same people and mostly for the same reasons. The dissemination of Christianity did not change beliefs in the way amulets acted and amulet makers continued to use the same formulae. The sensory experience of the object cannot have changed much, because the look, feel, and use of amulets remained the same. The fact that amulet practices continued in a manner that was similar to that of earlier times may be attributed to several factors: amulets were often created with the help of old handbook instructions; these instructions had been collected by specialists and copied from even older handbooks; the objects that were subsequently created were sometimes used and reused over a considerable period of time. A religious practice such as amulet use developed very slowly, not because change was seen as undesirable, but because of the nature of the practice. The continuation of elements of amulet use may also have had a function: old forms and formulae made amulets recognisable as powerful objects.

The continuation of familiar practices made amulets trustworthy and old amulets may have been seen as more powerful. We must also take into account that, although certain practices continued, their meaning may have changed. Older, more traditional Graeco-Roman religious elements, such as the Abrasax figure, may, although still seen as powerful, have lost their original religious connotations and no longer clashed with new, Christian, beliefs.

Late Antiquity also witnessed some important changes in the use of amulets, but, as I mentioned above, not all of these were related to Christianity. The textuality on amulets increased, but this development had already started before Late Antiquity. Demonology had a big impact on late antique amulets, but this, too, was not exclusively due to the dissemination of Christianity. The emphasis on the natural environment and the demons living in it relates to the rise of textuality: as the texts on amulets became longer, there was more opportunity to elaborate.

Other changes are part of the expansion of Christianity. A new group of amulet makers came into existence; priests, monks, and other members of the clergy formed the new authority. They were able to inscribe amulets with parts of or references to the Scriptures and thus brought Christianity closer to the people. These amulet makers added new Christian elements. Christian innovations can be noticed in both text and iconography, for instance the inclusion of biblical incipits and the iconography of the cross. Over time, in text as well as in iconography, most non-Christian elements were replaced with Christian ones (or received a Christian meaning). The religious underpinnings of amulet use shifted from traditional Graeco-Roman religions to Christianity. The priests and monks making amulets and the people using them did not see amulet use as 'un-Christian'. Within the framework of what an amulet traditionally was believed to do, the use of the objects was made acceptable, which made it possible for the practice to continue within a Christian world.

The authority of the priests and monks and of the sources they used, must have had a large impact on amulet users. The people who created the increasingly Christian amulets of Late Antiquity made relatively institutionalised forms of the 'new' religion, such as the Scriptures or liturgical rituals, accessible to people by fragmentising them and making them tangible and wearable. Users must have felt the impact of wearing parts of the Scriptures on their bodies or placing them on their possessions. The scribes provided authority and inspired trust, thereby ensuring the continuation of amulet use.

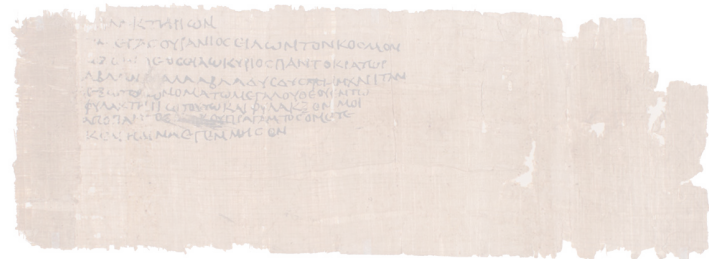
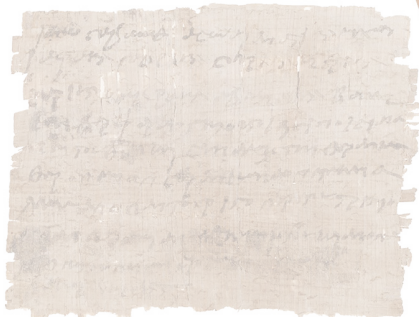
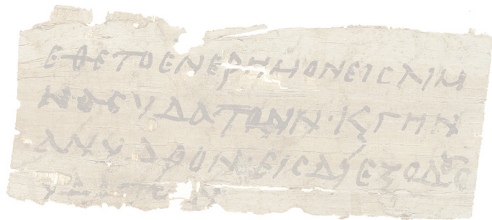
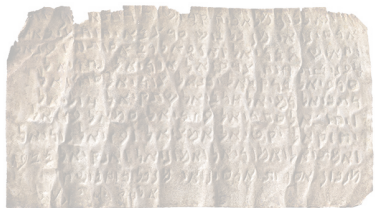
It is likely that the interaction between continuity and change also impacted amulet users. However, from an etic point of view, the impact of new elements can be called into question. The Christian scribes would have been seen as figures of authority, but that was also the case with non-Christian amulet makers. For the users of amulets the details and origins of the new elements used in texts were probably of less importance than the experience of wearing a powerful and performative object around their neck, and that experience, moreover, was not new. It could be argued that the experience of the new elements was very similar to the experience of the existing ones. Nevertheless, in the context of early Christianity, the

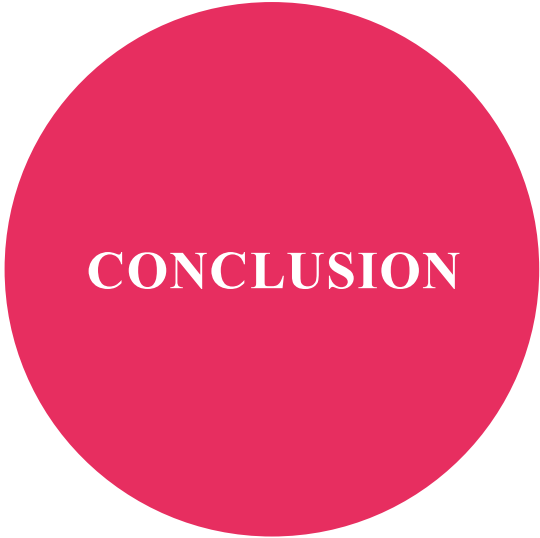
experience of the new Christian elements should be studied against the background of various specifically Christian developments, such as new ideas about the power of the Scriptures.

In Late Antiquity, amulets continued to be used for the proximity and portability facilitated by their materiality: they responded to a need to keep a powerful object close to the location it demarcated. It is remarkable that the relationship between the object and the location in question was increasingly described on the objects themselves. Research into relics has shown that the need to keep an object close and the wish to touch it was part of the wider context of early Christianity. In Late Antiquity, people were also able to gain direct access to the powerful writings of the Bible and other liturgical practices, which therefore were no longer strictly oral. The proximity of amulets carrying such specifically Christian texts facilitated the experience of their material presence. They were visibly and tangibly present in the lives of their users, which was something some other Christian religious practices and strategies were unable to achieve. Through amulets, Christian power could be experienced on human bodies, near front doors or in other locations. Sensing the object reminded the user of its efficacy, its healing or protective power, or the benefits that it would bring. Users experienced the performance of Christian power, of the Scriptures, of archangels, of Christ or whoever was believed to direct the power of the amulet. By creating amulets scribes related to the early Christian institutions made Christianity tangible, private, and portable.

In a way, amulets decentralised Christian power, and this is precisely what several early Church authors found problematic. The makers and users of amulets with Christian elements must have seen it all as acceptable Christian practice. However, the early Church authors did their best to find ways to control the use of amulets, Christian elements notwithstanding. Sermons show, however, that the need for personal forms of religion continued to exist and that amulets offered something that alternative Christian practices could not provide: the personal, portable, possessable, and permanent material presence of the power associated with the Christian supernatural. The early Church authors criticising amulets had problems with private religious practices beyond their control, especially in the context of healing where the Church actually had many alternatives to offer. The very thing that seems to have made amulets attractive, their portability and material character, was the subject of the bishops' criticism.

All in all, in Late Antiquity many aspects of religious life slowly changed under the influence of Christianity, but people did not change their religious views and mentality overnight and old and new practices co-existed for a while. During this transition period amulets also transitioned, but at a slow pace. References to the non-Christian supernatural disappeared as amulets were now made by Christian authorities who furnished them with Christian power, thus making the use of amulets acceptable. The bishops of the fourth-to-sixth centuries did not support this development and tried to persuade their congregations to opt for alternative practices. The main reason for the failure of these attempts seems to have been that these alternative Church practices lacked the very elements that made amulets attractive: permanence, portability, proximity, and the capacity to create reassuring sensory experiences.





CONCLUSION

CONTINUITY THROUGH CHANGE

The historiography of ancient amulets is fragmented: different types of sources and different time periods have mostly been studied separately. Roman amulets from before and after the arrival of Christianity have hardly been studied as a single corpus. The present study shows that there is a large group of ancient objects that can and should be studied together. These objects do not necessarily have the same form and features, but they functioned similarly, as is evident from the significant relationship between an object and the space it demarcated. Although major changes took place as a result of the arrival of a new religious power (Christianity), the objects and their users remained much the same over time. With a new focus on the role these objects played in the lives of their users, this book asks why ancient individuals continued to use amulets for hundreds of years. How was this use impacted by religious changes Christianity brought? To answer these questions, I have analysed amulets, handbooks, and other literary sources from within the borders of the (former) Roman Empire, from the first century BCE to the sixth century CE.

As for a theoretical basis: my search for an answer to these questions has been informed by a relational materiality approach which helps to understand the amulet phenomenon as a conceptual whole. Furthermore, I propose a new definition of amulets: an amulet is an object placed by an individual at a certain location in order to demarcate that space in the hope of warding off evil, expelling existing danger from this place, and/or attracting supernatural benefits to it. This definition focusses, first, on amulets as material presences. Amulets were material, they were used, handled, and experienced. Second, the relationship between an object and the space it demarcated plays a vital role in the understanding of amulets. Amulets would be placed at boundary locations to deal with present or possible evil. It is in this relationship between object and demarcated space that amulets were believed to operate and have efficacy. Third, this definition enabled this study to explore the impact amulets had, or could have, on the bodily and/or emotional well-being of their users. Materiality studies contributed to my integrated study of all aspects of amulets – the objects themselves, their use in space, and their impact on a sensing human body.

Using aspects of materiality studies as a basis, I examined amulet use as a *process*. I incorporated the whole process of amulet use and not only looked at the texts written on amulets (which generally formed the focus of earlier researchers), but also took into account the various stages of creation and use. That process involved the following: the problems and motives which made ancient individuals reach out to amulets; the subsequent acquisition and creation of an amulet, and finally the embodied experience of the object, its believed working and the impact experience and expectations could have on the well-being of the user. Only by grasping the whole process of amulet use, the object and its impact can be fully understood. Amulets were attached to significant boundary locations on the human body or in the user's environment. Amulet use is about interaction – about the 'bond'

between objects, locations, individuals and their emotions, thoughts and beliefs, danger and disease, and time. Perceiving this is fundamental to the questions why ancient individuals would reach out to amulets and why, over time, they continued to do so.

My analysis of the various stages of the process shows that, over time, amulets were always available to people of all genders, ages, and status groups. They used amulets for healing, protecting and/or providing benefits, not just for human bodies, but also for larger spaces such as houses or workshops. The objects could be home-made, received from relatives or bought from religious specialists. Especially the latter could have a large impact on the users. Over time, some changes took place in the process of amulet use; amulets gradually became more textual and the texts became longer, for instance. The spread of Christianity added a new source for texts and iconography as well as a new group of amulet makers – Christian priests and monks brought elements from Scriptures and liturgy to the practices of making and using amulets. Gradually, most references to non-Christian deities or powers disappeared from texts and iconography, although old formulae remained in use – perhaps with a different meaning.

Amulets impacted users at various points in the process of use. This remained the same over time. Through the proximity of their material presence, amulets facilitated embodied sensory experiences. Moreover, amulets had to be installed on significant boundary locations to demarcate, guard, and control an ‘inside area’. The relationship between amulet and location was vital and continuous and had a large impact on the user as is apparent, for instance, from the longer texts on late antique amulets. Expectations about efficacy and the experience of the proximity of the object created a sense of being in a controlled space.

WHAT MADE AMULETS PARTICULARLY ATTRACTIVE?

Why did people continue to use amulets? What made amulets particularly attractive? What made people decide to reach out to an amulet, instead of taking recourse to some other religious strategy? There is a variety of pull factors that may have made amulets especially attractive.

First, amulets were *material presences*; they could be kept, owned, placed on something, and moved. By using the object for a certain amount of time, seeing, feeling, hearing, smelling, or tasting it and experiencing accompanying rituals, users felt its impact. In other words, amulets were experienced by sensing embodied individuals. They were present, both visibly and invisibly (when worn underneath clothes for example) and this will have impacted the experiences of the user. This material presence did not change over time: it is one of the elements that defines an amulet.

Furthermore, amulets are defined by their relation with a certain location. Amulets demarcated space and were present on significant boundary locations. In order to have

an effect on human bodies or larger locations such as houses, the object was always near the area it impacted. Even when the amulet could not be seen, the user was aware of its presence. The *proximity* of the object was thus of great importance for people's belief in its efficacy and their experience of it.

This proximity was dynamic in the sense that amulets were *portable*. Amulets demarcated the location they needed to act in and, being portable, they could be used to demarcate any kind of space. They could keep evil away from houses, fields, workshops, and bodies. When worn, body amulets provided a portable power as the demarcated space moved with the user. In this way they created a permanent sense of safety. The portability of the object also meant that the user was not dependent on the presence of religious specialists, sites, or buildings. Once the object was ready for use, it could be installed on any location and in any situation. Amulets lent flexibility to users' religious practices.

Amulets were often *personalised*. Decisions about their use and placement could be left to the discretion of the user, but they could also be adapted to the user's personal situation and include references to their personal life. Users could put their trust in a personalised object that would help them deal with their particular difficulties.

Amulets could be made of a variety of materials. The argument can be made that amulets were relatively *accessible* in an economic sense. Using some kind of material was essential, but there was a wide range of useable materials. As a result, it was possible to cater to people from all layers of society. To reduce costs, or for other reasons, the involvement of ritual specialists might be dispensed with: amulets were also made at home and in some cases, heirlooms were reused.

Amulets were not just present in people's lives, they were visibly worn or affixed, and recommended or promoted by religious specialists, medical specialists, friends, and relatives. I have shown that their use was *accepted*, normalised, and sustained by social practices. Despite early Christian writers' criticism of amulet use, their use continued and remained acceptable – especially when priests and monks took up the creation of amulets with Christian elements.

The continued use of amulets was facilitated by the combination of all these factors. Some of the pull factors did not change over time. Amulets retained their material presence as well as their proximity to the space that needed attention. The essential elements of amulet use – a user with a motive, a material object, and a location of use – did not change either. All of this meant that elements of amulet use could be modified without fundamentally changing the process itself. Other pull factors, such as the aspect of personalisation and the accessibility of amulets, also facilitated the introduction of new elements. Amulets were not defined by their makers or by a specific religious power, and therefore the practice could be embraced by a new religion – which was willing to do so. I would like to point out, however, that developments in amulet use were slow due to the nature of the practice: instructions for the creation of amulets were collected in old handbooks and these instructions were

subsequently copied for hundreds of years; the practice of reuse, moreover, shows that amulets kept their value over time. This consistency also had a function: it made amulets recognisable and trustworthy, which contributed to their appeal and continued use.

POTENTIAL TO IMPACT EMOTIONAL AND BODILY WELL-BEING

The idea that using amulets could *impact emotional and bodily well-being* provides another perspective on the endurance of amulet use. As argued above, the relative consistency of amulet use created trust and flexibility, and made a personal experience possible. But there is more to it. The various practices of amulet use could help individuals cope with ‘danger’, created psychosomatic effects, and brought about meaningful sensory experiences. In other words, using an amulet could make the user feel better. Amulets provided symptom relief, or a sense of protection, happiness or courage. Users were impacted by their amulets through expectations regarding their efficacy and the experience of their use.

Expectations were an influential factor. Amulets were believed to function in a certain way, especially in relation to the demarcation of space. The object was placed at significant boundary locations and created an ‘inside’ and an ‘outside’. Danger was believed to be an external force, that could be kept from entering (protecting) or be expelled (healing) from the ‘inside’ area. Through its function as ‘guard’, the amulet could also facilitate positive developments and attract supernatural benefits. By demarcating space, the users expected to be safe, secure and/or in control. These expectations took shape before and during amulet use, for example by listening to the experiences of others and/or the arguments of a ritual specialist as well as through cultural knowledge about demarcated religious space. The amulet would control the particular personal situation and location of its user(s) and made sure that their wishes were fulfilled. The belief that the amulet would take care of things gave users hope and made them feel more comfortable.

All these ideas and expectations played a role in the embodied sensory *experience* of amulets. From the very beginning, because acknowledging their fears and deciding to deal with them may already have given users a sense of reassurance. Sensing the amulet during its use, users would be reminded of their expectations and wishes, and their ideas on the functioning of the object. The amulet user could sense the object’s power. As the sizes and shapes of amulets did not undergo any drastic change, the experiences of their material affordances were probably consistent over time. Through touch the users could feel the transmission of healing power; seeing the object would give them confidence. Occasionally, other senses may have been involved: hearing the apotropaic sounds warding off evil as the object rattled, smelling the healing properties of the flowers in the amulet, or tasting the drink that accompanied the healing ritual that came with the use of the amulet. Unlike alternative religious strategies, amulets might add a unique additional experience. Amulets

could not only be sensed, they could be sensed within a space. With the help of amulets as boundary markers, demarcating and guarding a certain area, the user of the amulet could feel safe within this space where the supernatural would work for them. Noticing the object through the senses and in relation to space created a sense of safety and empowerment.

The vital relationship between amulet, location of use, and sensing human bodies was crucial for the impact of amulets. Through their demarcating function amulets were always in the proximity of the designated location; the portable powers of a body amulet would even guarantee a constant presence of the supernatural. The proximity of the object facilitated sensory experiences, creating meaningful encounters with the object's efficacy that made people feel better.

CONTINUITY THROUGH CHANGE IN LATE ANTIQUITY

The interaction between continuity and change in Late Antiquity plays a significant role in both the pull factors that kept amulets attractive and the processes that could impact the bodily or emotional well-being of their users. The continued use of amulets was made possible by adaptation and innovation.

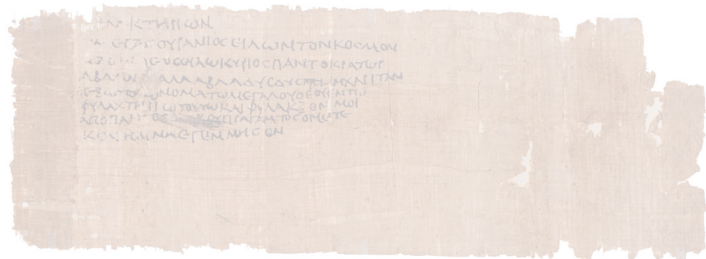
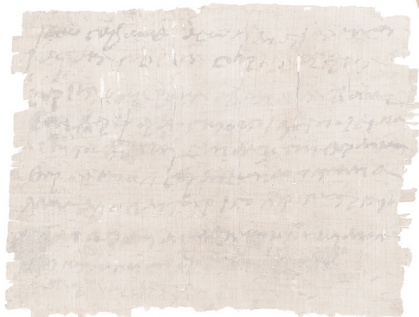
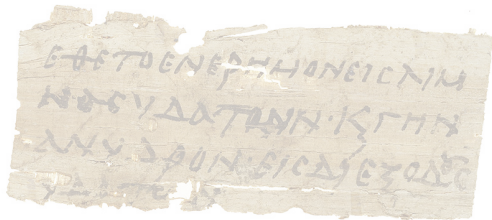
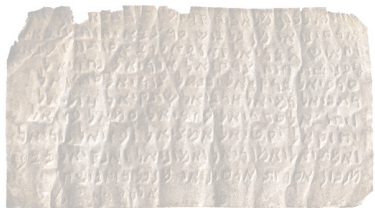
In this period, too, the fundamental aspects of amulet use remained the same: amulets were materially present as they demarcated space in proximity to the users or their possessions. Amulets were talked about and visible. As the longer textual amulets show, expectations regarding their believed effect did not significantly change either. The same holds true for the shapes and sizes of amulets and the related embodied experience. These stable elements – the formulae, materials, ritual practices etc. – made amulets recognisable and trustworthy. General knowledge about amulets and their use would help shape expectations and create meaningful experiences. All of this made amulet use consistent; amulets kept their value, and they remained present and accepted. Nevertheless, this does not mean that amulets did not change over time. They certainly did as the world around them changed and they became part of the various transformational processes, but they remained impactful.

As I mentioned above, amulet use was flexible; it had always been possible to adjust amulets to the personal situation of the user, in this way enhancing expectations. With the dissemination of Christianity, amulets became more Christian. Their flexibility made it possible to continue using them, as long as elements such as the materiality and the relation between object and location remained the same. New, Christian makers of amulets came into play and Christian elements were added to texts and imagery. Gradually, traditional elements of amulet use disappeared or gained new meanings as Christian elements took over. The ancient world did not turn Christian overnight and, since change in amulet use is slow due to the nature of the practice, the 'Christianisation' of amulets was likewise a gradual process.

Amulets had to become more Christian in order to continue to make an impact in a Christian world. Christian priests and monks became involved in the creation of amulets and made objects that met the needs of their users. Users, in their turn, were attracted by these amulets with Christian elements. They could have turned to alternative Christian religious practices, but they chose amulets. The combination of the proximity of the object and the sensory experience of its material presence continued to make amulets attractive. Users not only experienced the object, but also the expectations that came with it; amulets now formed small hotspots of early Christian power.

Christian authorities, such as priests and monks, invested amulets with power. Parts of the Scriptures and liturgical texts and images were added to amulets; texts, imagery, and rituals that people knew, but to which they did not necessarily have personal access. Amulets were portable and personal: a small piece of Christian institutionalised religion that could be taken home. Amulets made Christianity accessible and possessable. Through their proximity, the material presence of early Christian power could now be experienced in people's private lives. Bishops advocated Christian alternatives, such as applying holy oils, visiting a church, and prayer. However, these practices were transitory, whereas the portability and proximity of amulets facilitated the permanent presence of Christian power. In a way, amulets 'fragmentised' institutionalised Christianity and helped to bring Christianity closer to people.

The stability of the essential elements of amulets was crucial for their continued trustworthiness. However, it was change – i.e. the adaptation of amulets to Christian practices – that ensured the continuation of amulet use. These changes added a new experience to the expectations of users regarding the effect of their amulet: the experience of the material presence of Christian power in their personal lives.





BIBLIOGRAPHY

ANCIENT TEXTUAL SOURCES

To make the sources accessible for all types of scholars, decisions have been made in presenting them.

- As little abbreviations as possible were used. In some examples abbreviations were used for conciseness, such as the use of *PGM*. These are listed at the beginning of this thesis and below.
- Below a list can be found of the corpora and sources that were used more than once and the editions of the original languages and translations that have been used.
- The papyri and objects that are not included in these corpora are referenced in the footnotes by their number in papyrological series or museum catalogues.¹²⁷⁹
- Papers on single amulets are listed in the secondary literature list.
- For papyri, when possible GEMF reference numbers were prioritized, followed by *PGM* reference numbers. With the help of databases such as Kyprianos or Trismegistos, the most up-to-date information on the texts can easily be found.¹²⁸⁰
- References to ancient authors that are only mentioned once are included in the footnotes without abbreviations.

Corpora used more than once

- ACM Collection of translations of Coptic ‘magical’ texts. M.W. Meyer, R. Smith (eds.), *Ancient Christian Magic. Coptic Texts of Ritual Power* (Princeton 1994). ACM numbers are only used when the papyri are not in the publications below.
- GEMF ‘Magical’ formularies from Roman Egypt, editions and English translations. C.A. Faraone, S. Torallas Tovar, *Greek and Egyptian Magical Formularies, Vol. I: Text and Translation* (Berkeley 2022). For papyri in GEMF, this reference was prioritized.¹²⁸¹
- GMA Collection of metal textual amulets, editions and English translations. R.D. Kotansky, *Greek Magical Amulets. The Inscribed Gold, Silver, Copper, and Bronze Lamellae* (Opladen 1994).
- GMPT Translations of the *PGM*. H.D. Betz (ed.), *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation, Including the Demotic Spells* (Chicago 1996).

1279 A checklist for the papyrological series can be found here: <https://papyri.info/docs/checklist>

1280 Kyprianos database, part of *Coptic Magical Papyri. Vernacular Religion in Late Roman and Early Islamic Egypt* via <https://www.coptic-magic.phil.uni-wuerzburg.de/index.php/the-database/>, see also www.trismegistos.org

1281 GEMF volume II has not been published yet while finishing this book.

- PCM* 'Magical' formularies in Coptic papyri, editions and English translations. K. Dosoo, M. Preininger, *Papyri Copticae Magicae. Coptic Magical Texts, Volume 1: Formularies* (Berlin/Boston 2024).
- PDM* The Demotic 'magical' papyri that were included in the GMPT, but excluded in the *PGM*. If possible, the GEMF edition and translation were used.
- PGMP* Christian texts added to the *PGM* edition of 1973-1974.
- PGM* The collection of Greek Magical Papyri, editions and German translations. K. Preisendanz, A. Henrichs, *Papyri Graecae Magicae. Die griechischen Zauberpapyri*, 2 Vol., Second Edition (Stuttgart 1973-1974). Where possible a newer edition was used, such as the GEMF edition. The translations of the GEMF edition, or if this was not possible the GMPT, were used.
- SM* 'Magical' papyri with editions and English translations. R.W. Daniel, F. Maltomini, *Supplementum Magicum*, 2 Vol. (Opladen 1990-1992). Papyri are only referenced with SM number when no *GEMF/PGM* number was available.

Ancient authors used more than once

Abbreviations of Christian editions

- CCSL* Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina.
- PG* J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus, series Graeca*, 161 Vol. (Paris 1857-1866).
- PL* J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus, series Latina*, 221 Vol. (Paris 1844-1855).
- PLS* A. Hamman (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus, series Latina: Supplementum*, 5 Vol. (Paris 1958-1974).
- SC* Sources Chrétiennes.
- Aelius Promotus* Edition: M. Wellmann, 'Aelius Promotus: Iatrika physica kai antipathêtika', *Sitz. Der Königlich preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philos-historischen Class* (Berlin 1908) 772-777. See also Faraone, *Transformation*, Appendix H.
- Alexander of Tralles* *De Febribus and Therapeutica*.
Edition and German translation by T. Puschmann, *Alexander von Tralles: Originaltext und Übersetzung nebst einer einleitenden Abhandlung: ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Medicin* (Wien 1878-1879) (Neudruck Amsterdam 1963).

- Augustine of Hippo Editions are mentioned in between brackets.
- In Iohannis euangelium tractatus* (CCSL 36.1-688). Translation: J.W. Rettig, *St. Augustine: Tractates on the Gospel of John 1-10* (Washington 1988).
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- De catechizandis rudibus* (CCSL 46). Translation: S.D.F. Salmond, *On the Catechising of the Uninstructed*. A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Series 1, Vol. 3 (Buffalo 1887).
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- Codex Theodosianus* Edition: T. Mommsen, P.M. Meyer, *Theodosiani libri XVI cum Constitutionibus Sirmondianis et leges Novellae ad Theodosianum pertinentes* (Berlin 1905). Translation: C. Pharr, *The Theodosian Code and Novels, and the Sirmondian Constitutions* (Princeton 1952).
- Dioscorides *Materia Medica*.
- Edition: M. Wellmann, *Pedanii Dioscuridis, De materia medica, libri quinque* (Berlin 1906-1914). Translation: L.Y. Beck, *Pedanius Dioscorides of Anazarbus. De materia medica* (Hildesheim 2005).

Galen

De simplicium medicamentorum

Edition: Kühn XI.379-XII.377. K.G. Kühn, *Claudii Galeni opera omnia*. Vol. 11-12 (Leipzig 1826). This book of Galen is not translated – as far as I am aware. The translations used were available through these papers:

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Gourevitch, D., ‘Popular Medicines and Practices in Galen’ in: W.V. Harris (ed.), *Popular Medicine in Graeco-Roman Antiquity: Explorations* (Leiden 2016) 251-271.

John Chrysostom

Editions are mentioned in between brackets.

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Homiliae de statu ad populum Antiochenum (PG 49.14-122). Translation: W.R.W. Stephens, *The Homilies on the Statues to the People of Antioch*. A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Series 1, Vol. 9 (New York 1889).

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In Matthaëum (homiliae 1-90) (PG 57-58). Translation: G. Prevost, M.B. Riddle, *The Homilies of St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, on the Gospel of St. Matthew*. A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Series 1, Vol. 10 (New York 1888).

In epistulam I ad Corinthios (PG 61.9-610). Translation: T.W. Chambers, *The Homilies of St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians*. A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Series 1, Vol.12 (New York 1889).

- In epistulam ad Colossenses* (PG 62.299-392). Translation: J.A. Broadus, *The Homilies of St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, on the Epistles of St. Paul the Apostle to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*. A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Series 1, Vol. 13 (New York 1889).
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CURRICULUM VITAE

Patricia Kret was born in Leiderdorp (the Netherlands) in 1993. In 2012 she enrolled in the Bachelor History at Leiden University. In 2015 she followed the minor Museum Studies at the University of Amsterdam and did an internship at the PR and Marketing Department of the National Museum of Antiquities (RMO) in Leiden. A year later, in 2016, she obtained a propaedeutic degree in Art History as well as the bachelor's degree in History, with Ancient History as specialisation (*cum laude*). From 2016 to 2018 she pursued the Research Master Ancient History at Leiden University, specialising in Roman religion and museum studies. She received her master's degree (*cum laude*) in 2018; her master's thesis won two thesis prizes: the Fruin Prize of the Leiden University Institute for History and the OIKOS Thesis Award of the National Research School in Classical Studies in the Netherlands (OIKOS). In 2019 she obtained the RMO-KNIR (Royal Netherlands Institute in Rome) Stipendium to outline the possibilities for an exhibition on death in the ancient world. After her return from Rome, she started working at the RMO as an assistant collection manager.

In 2020 Patricia started her PhD research at the Leiden University Institute for History, having obtained an individual scholarship in the annual competition known as 'Promoties in de Geesteswetenschappen' (PhDs in the Humanities) organised by the Dutch Research Council (NWO). During her PhD trajectory she taught Ancient History in the Bachelor History programme, and served as a PhD representative for one year and as a KNIR ambassador for two years. In 2022 she became a 'Face of Science' for the KNAW (Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences) and the journalistic platform NEMO Kennislink, presenting her research known to the general public through blogs, lectures, interviews, and radio performances. During her time as a PhD she completed multiple courses, for example on scientific integrity and on planning a research project. In addition, she obtained the required credits from OIKOS. She also presented her work at conferences, stayed at the KNIR several times in order to pursue her research, and organised lectures as well as an international workshop on her thesis.

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NEDERLANDSE SAMENVATTING

In de Romeinse tijd bestond er een grote variatie aan amuletten: van opgerolde stukjes papyrus met lange teksten tot (fragmenten van) allerlei soorten dieren, planten en (bewerkte) stenen. In de eerste eeuw van onze jaartelling beschreef de Romein Plinius de Oudere hoe men een amulet kon maken dat een krachtige bescherming zou bieden tegen inbrekers én tegen nachtelijke angsten: men moest een pootje van een kameleon in een zakje van hyenahuid doen en dat zakje vastbinden aan de linkerarm (Plinius, *Naturalis Historia* 28.115). Dit voorbeeld illustreert het principe dat een amulet moest worden verbonden met de locatie waar het werkzaam diende te zijn. Amuletten werden met name gebruikt in moeilijke tijden van, bijvoorbeeld, ziekte, geweld of barre weersomstandigheden.

Het onderzoek naar amuletten is gefragmenteerd: verschillende soorten bronnen en bronnen uit verschillende tijdspannen werden meestal afzonderlijk bestudeerd. Er werd en wordt veel onderzoek gedaan naar amuletten van vóór of juist ná de komst van het christendom, maar er wordt zelden gekeken naar de overeenkomsten en verschillen tussen amuletten uit deze perioden. Amuletten zijn tussen de eerste eeuw v. Chr. en de zesde eeuw n. Chr. namelijk altijd in gebruik gebleven, zowel in hun ‘oude’ vorm als met ‘nieuwe’ christelijke toevoegingen. Priesters en monniken verbonden aan christelijke instituten maakten amuletten en voorzagen die van passages uit de Bijbel, ondanks de felle kritiek van een aantal bisschoppen op dergelijke praktijken. Hoewel tijdens en na de opkomst van het christendom cruciale veranderingen optraden, bleven amuletten en het gebruik daarvan in functioneel opzicht vrij consistent. In dit boek staan vooral de ervaringen van de gebruikers centraal.

In lijn met ontwikkelingen in de studie van de materialiteit van religie heeft dit onderzoek gekeken naar het gebruik van amuletten, de relatie tussen object en ruimte en de impact van de ervaringen van de gebruikers. Door de schijnwerper te richten op de rol die amuletten in het leven van hun gebruikers speelde, probeert dit proefschrift nieuw licht te werpen op de vraag waarom amuletten honderden jaren in gebruik bleven en op de, hiermee samenhangende, vraag hoe het gebruik van amuletten werd beïnvloed door de religieuze veranderingen die het christendom met zich meebracht. Om deze vragen te kunnen beantwoorden werden amuletten, handboekinstructies voor het maken van amuletten en literaire bronnen bestudeerd. Het geografische kader is het complete Romeinse rijk en het bestudeerde tijdvak loopt van de eerste eeuw v. Chr. tot en met de zesde eeuw n. Chr.

In het eerste hoofdstuk wordt een antropologisch-functionele (‘etic’) definitie voor amuletten gegeven: een amulet is een object dat door een individu op een bepaalde locatie geplaatst werd in de hoop daar kwaad af te weren, gevaar weg te jagen en/of bovennatuurlijke gunsten aan te trekken. Deze definitie richt zich op amuletten als tastbare objecten en op de relatie tussen het object en de ruimte die het markeerde. Amuletten werden geplaatst op locaties waar gevaar dreigde en bakenden met hun aanwezigheid de

ruimte af waar zij werkzaam moesten zijn. Op deze manier werd een relatie gecreëerd tussen gebruiker, amulet en ruimte. De impact van amuletten op het welbevinden van de gebruiker staat hierin centraal. Wanneer de bovenstaande definitie als uitgangspunt wordt genomen, kan een grote groep bronnen als één samenhangend corpus bestudeerd worden. Hoewel amuletten zeer verschillende uiterlijke vormen konden hebben, was er overeenstemming over de veronderstelde werking ervan.

De andere hoofdstukken presenteren analyses van alle mogelijke stappen in het verkrijgen en gebruiken van een amulet om zo de volledige ervaring van amuletgebruik te kunnen begrijpen, van het ontstaan van de behoefte aan een amulet tot het wegdoen na gebruik. Binnen al deze stappen werden ook ontwikkelingen door de tijd heen geanalyseerd, met een focus op de Late Oudheid en de komst van het christendom. Uit het onderzoek komt naar voren dat amuletten gedurende de gehele onderzochte periode gebruikt werden door mensen met zeer verschillende achtergronden – mannen, vrouwen en kinderen uit alle sociale lagen. Ze gebruikten een amulet met het oog op genezing, voor bescherming en/of met het doel om bovennatuurlijke gunsten (zoals een positieve afloop van een rechtszaak of een betere sociale positie met wat extra charisma) te ontvangen, niet alleen voor menselijke lichamen, maar ook voor grotere locaties zoals huizen en werkplaatsen. Mensen die behoefte hadden aan een amulet, konden dit zelf maken, ze konden ook een erfstuk hergebruiken. Veel amuletten werden echter gekocht bij specialisten. Die laatste groep kon een grote impact hebben op de ervaringen van amuletgebruikers.

Vanwege hun relatie met specifieke locaties waren amuletten altijd nabij en daarmee maakten ze een scala aan zintuigelijke ervaringen mogelijk. De ervaring van ruimte was hierin cruciaal: amuletten werden geplaatst op specifieke locaties om een ruimte af te bakenen en te controleren. Ze zorgden dat het kwaad die ruimte zou verlaten en/of er niet binnen zou dringen. Deze ervaring van een gecontroleerde ruimte had een grote impact op de gebruiker.

Tussen de eerste eeuw v. Chr. en de zesde eeuw n. Chr. vond in het maakproces van amuletten een aantal veranderingen plaats. Zo kwamen er meer amuletten met teksten erop en werden de teksten zelf langer. Met de verspreiding van het christendom kwam er ook een nieuwe bron voor afbeeldingen en teksten en gingen nieuwe makers van amuletten een rol spelen. Priesters en monniken namen (elementen uit) Bijbelteksten en christelijk-liturgische formules op in teksten op amuletten. Langzaamaan verdwenen de verwijzingen naar niet-christelijke goden of krachten. Tegelijkertijd bleven veel bestaande formuleringen in gebruik.

Uit het uitgevoerde onderzoek blijkt dat verscheidene factoren van belang waren voor de aantrekkelijkheid van amuletten. Amuletten waren materiële objecten en dus fysiek aanwezig. Ze konden worden ervaren met de zintuigen: zicht, tast, gehoor, reuk en smaak speelden – in verschillende mate – een rol in het gebruik van een amulet en/of in de hiermee samenhangende rituelen. Amuletten waren zichtbaar aanwezig in de maatschappij en het

gebruik van deze objecten was een sociaal diep verankerde praktijk. Daarnaast zorgde de voor amuletten karakteristieke relatie tussen object en ruimte per definitie voor een permanente aanwezigheid. Lichaamsamuletten waren zonder uitzondering draagbaar, met als gevolg dat zij een constante, verplaatsbare beschermde ruimte om de drager heen creëerden. Ook was er een grote mate van personalisatie mogelijk. Door de flexibiliteit van materiaal en maakproces waren amuletten ook toegankelijk voor mensen met beperkte financiële middelen.

Al deze factoren tonen de verschillende kanten van amuletten: enerzijds is het gebruik ervan zeer statisch, anderzijds bijzonder flexibel. Zolang de essentiële elementen aanwezig waren, was er veel variatie mogelijk op het gebied van personalisering en toegankelijkheid. Een bepaalde religieuze grondslag was geen vereiste, zodat in religieuze elementen veel variatie mogelijk was. Dit betekende onder meer dat er geen belemmeringen waren voor het gebruik van amuletten binnen een nieuwe religie. Bij dit alles moet wel worden opgemerkt dat er sprak was van trage veranderingsprocessen: instructies voor het maken werden verzameld in handboeken die vervolgens honderden jaren lang steeds weer werden gekopieerd. Bovendien konden gemaakte amuletten weer hergebruikt worden.

De vraag waarom amuletten eeuwenlang in gebruik bleven, kan ook nog op een ander niveau beantwoord worden: amuletten maakten dat mensen zich beter voelden. Het gebruik van een amulet schiep verwachtingen, die ook deels werden gevormd in gesprekken met familie en vrienden, in het contact met de religieuze specialisten en binnen de context van breed gedeelde ideeën over het gebruik van religieuze ruimte in de oudheid. Deze verwachtingen werden vervolgens meegenomen in de daadwerkelijke zintuiglijke ervaring van amuletten. Door het aanraken van het amulet kon de gebruiker herinnerd worden aan de aanwezige helende kracht en het horen rinkelen van sommige amuletten bevestigde de activering van de werking. De zintuigen namen waar dat het object ‘aan het werk’ was. De relatie tussen object en ruimte faciliteerde zo niet alleen de ervaring van het object zelf, maar ook de ervaring van een veilige, door het object beschermde ruimte. De combinatie van verwachtingen en ervaringen maakte dat gebruikers zich daadwerkelijk beter voelden, zowel in lichamelijk als in geestelijk opzicht.

Toch is dit nog niet het volledige antwoord. Het onderzoek wijst ook uit dat juist veranderingen en aanpassingen een rol hebben gespeeld in de bestendigheid van het gebruik van amuletten. In de late oudheid bleven de essentiële elementen van amuletgebruik hetzelfde: het waren nog steeds materieel aanwezige objecten, ze bakenden nog altijd een ruimte af en ze bevonden zich nog altijd in de directe nabijheid van de gebruikers of hun bezittingen, zodat ze zintuiglijk konden worden ervaren. Ook veranderde er nauwelijks iets in de diverse amulettypen en dus bleef de zintuiglijke ervaring min of meer hetzelfde. De continuïteit van deze elementen maakte amuletten herkenbaar en betrouwbaar. Dit waren belangrijke factoren in het creëren van betekenisvolle ervaringen. Aan de andere kant was amuletgebruik, zoals gezegd, bijzonder flexibel. Toen de wereld langzaam christelijk

werd, werden amuletten dat ook. Zolang het amulet in essentie hetzelfde bleef, waren er veel mogelijkheden om nieuwe christelijke elementen toe te voegen.

In de steeds christelijker wordende wereld waren veel nieuwe christelijke religieuze objecten te vinden. Toch bleven veel mensen voor amuletten kiezen. De nabijheid van amuletten en daarmee de mogelijkheid tot betekenisvolle zintuigelijke ervaring bleef deze objecten aantrekkelijk maken. Tegelijkertijd maakten amuletten een geïnstitutionaliseerde vorm van christendom toegankelijk en tastbaar. Priesters en monniken gaven hun autoriteit aan de amuletten die ze maakten. Deze persoonlijke objecten vol christelijke kracht konden vervolgens geplaatst worden op iedere locatie die hulp nodig had, van lichamen tot huizen en wijngaarden. Daarmee werd de christelijke religie tastbaar, verplaatsbaar en persoonlijk. Christelijke alternatieven, zoals het gebruik van heilige oliën of het gebed, waren vluchtig. Amuletten daarentegen konden permanent aanwezig zijn en ervaren worden in het persoonlijke leven van de gebruikers.

De essentiële elementen van amuletgebruik bleven ook na de komst van het christendom bestaan. Deze continuïteit speelde een belangrijke rol in het voortbestaan ervan. Daarnaast zorgde de christelijke autoriteit van de nieuwe makers en hun bronnen voor veranderingen die het christendom dichter bij mensen brachten op een manier die zij herkenden. Aan de lijst met verwachtingen werd nu die van een persoonlijke, tastbare, christelijke ervaring toegevoegd en de nabijheid van amuletten maakte een persoonlijke, zintuigelijke ervaring van christelijke religie mogelijk.