



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

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

Kret, P.M.M.

Citation

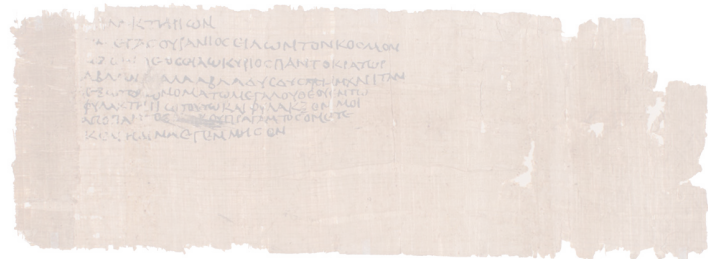
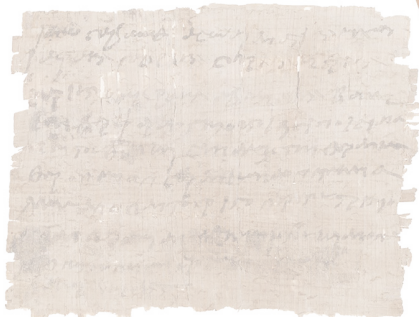
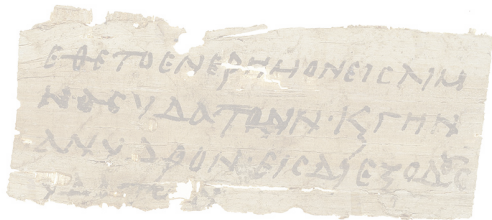
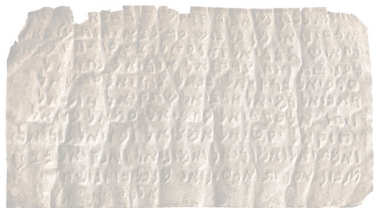
Kret, P. M. M. (2026, September 22). *Amulets, materiality and experience: demarcating space in the Roman world*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4309854>

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4309854>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).





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.