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

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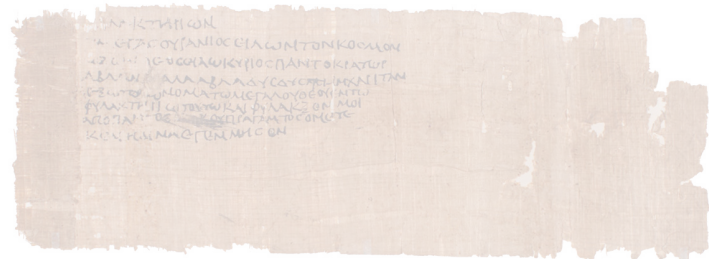
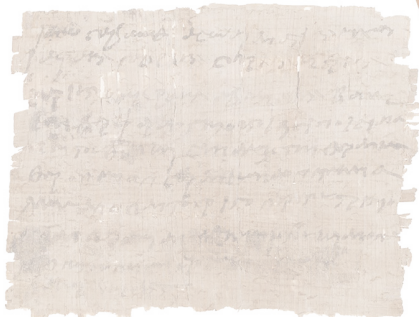
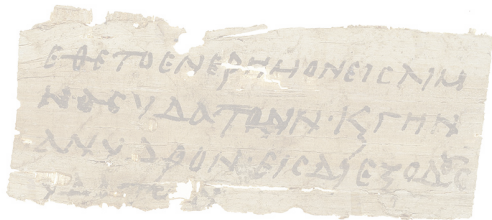
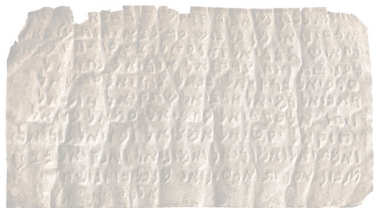
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CHAPTER



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-liii: 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. Momigliano (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 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.

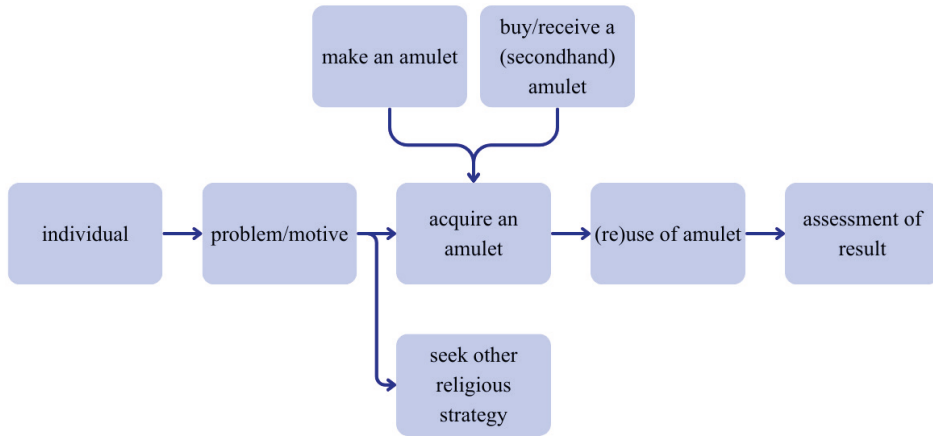


Figure 1. Process of amulet use. Made by author.

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 to 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.