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

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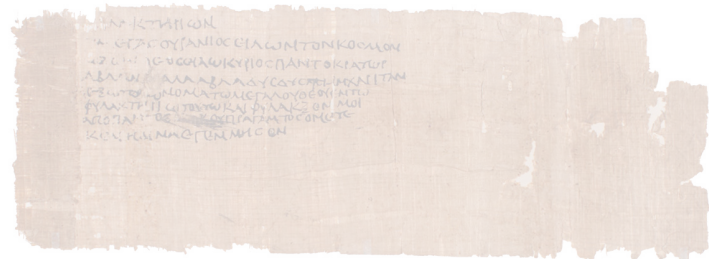
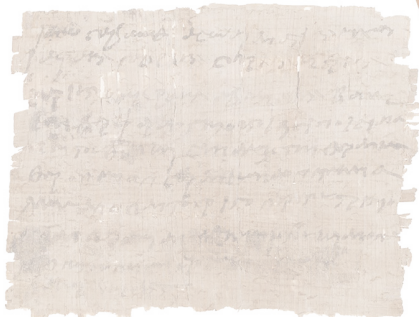
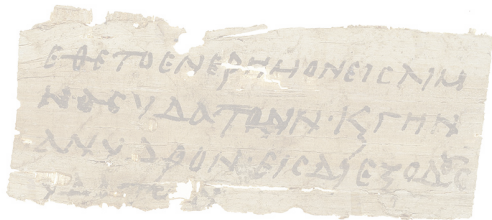
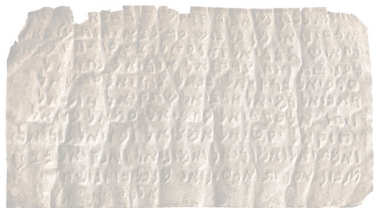
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CHAPTER

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REACHING OUT TO AMULETS

REACHING OUT TO AMULETS

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

2.1 HUMAN INDIVIDUALS USING AMULETS

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

2.1.1 Human bodies

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

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

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

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

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

271 See for example also: SM 31.

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

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

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

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

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

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

276 Dasen, ‘Probaskania’, 178.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

286 Dasen, Nagy, ‘Gems’, 434.

287 Kotansky, ‘Textual Amulets’, 540.

288 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 33.10.

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

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

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

2.1.2 Houses and other possessions

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

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

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

292 LiDonnici, ‘Recipe Ingredients’, 91.

293 *Medicina Plinii*, Prologue.

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

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

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

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

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

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

2.2 PROBLEMS AND MOTIVES: WHY WERE AMULETS USED?

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

2.2.1 Motives, fear and hope

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

305 Gordon, ‘Desire, Gossip’, 70.

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

307 Betz, ‘Introduction’, xlviii.

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

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

310 GEMF 26; GMA 52; PCM I 11.

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

312 *Codex Theodosianus* 9.16.3.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2.2.2 Sphere of influence

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

Healing amulets

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

324 Kotansky, 'Incantations and Prayers', 116.

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

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

327 Kotansky, 'Incantations and Prayers', 116.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Protective amulets

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

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

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

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

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

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

341 *PGM* P2.

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

343 *Codex Theodosianus* 9.16.3.

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

345 See Chapter 1.

346 GMA 52.

347 GMA 36.

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

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

Amulets for attracting benefits

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

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

348 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 20.101.

349 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 33.8.

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

351 GMA 41. Translation by Kotansky, GMA 41.

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

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

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

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

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

Variations and combinations: amulets in context

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

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

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

358 GMA 45. Translation by Kotansky, GMA 45.

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

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

361 See for example: GMA 10 and GMA 12.

362 GMA 13-16.

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

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

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

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

2.3 HOW TO ACQUIRE AN AMULET

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

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

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

367 GMA 58.

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

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

370 *PGM* IV. 475-829.

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

2.3.1 How to make an amulet

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

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

372 Faraone, *Transformation*, 48-49.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

380 Faraone, *Transformation*, 1.

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

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

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

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

383 Dosoo, ‘Magical Names’, 126-127.

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

2.3.2 Who made amulets

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

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

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

392 Gordon, ‘Substances to Text’, 139.

393 Frankfurter, ‘Forces of Materiality’, 659.

394 McKie, Parker, ‘Introduction’, 5.

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

396 *Medicina Plinii*, Prologue.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Religious authority?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

415 *Medicina Plinii*, Prologue.

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

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

Handbooks as a source of knowledge

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

423 For example: Shenoute of Atripe, *Acephalous work 114* par. 255-262 (Orlandi 18-20); Caesarius of Arles, *Sermones* 50.1. Dickie, *Magic and Magicians*, 274-281.

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

2.3.3 Personal contact with a specialist

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ready-made or custom-made

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Personal ritual contact

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

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

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

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

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

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

441 GMA 58. Translation by Kotansky, GMA 58.

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

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

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

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

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

The use of handbooks: authority and marketing

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

458 Translation by P. Sarischouli in GEMF.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2.4.1 Amulets and locations

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

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

471 Edmonds, ‘Rhetoric of Authority’, 42.

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

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

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

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

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

2.4.2 Marking religious space

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

490 Versnel, ‘Sacrificium Lustrale’, 101.

491 Versnel, ‘Sacrificium Lustrale’, 103.

492 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 18.160.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2.4.3 Amulets marking the boundary between inside and outside

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

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

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

504 Faraone, *Transformation*, 244.

505 Korsvoll, ‘Using Placebo Research’, 9.

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

507 Korsvoll, ‘Using Placebo Research’, 9.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

515 Heliodorus, *Æthiopica* 3.7.

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

517 Mihálykó, ‘Christ and Charon’, 199.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

524 Faraone, *Transformation*, 54-78.

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

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

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

528 Kotansky, *GMA* 57, 327.

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

530 Marcellus, *De Medicamentis*, 15.67.

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

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

533 See part 4.3C.

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

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

2.5 CONCLUSION

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

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

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

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

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

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