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

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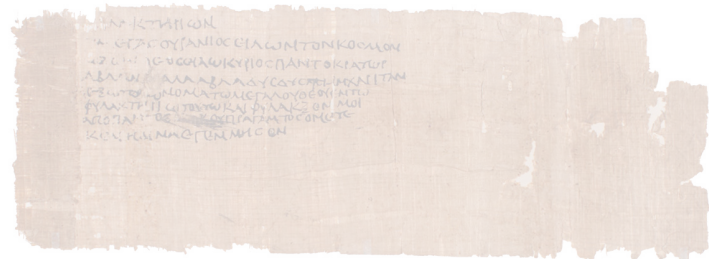
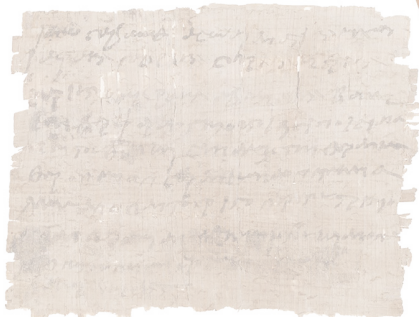
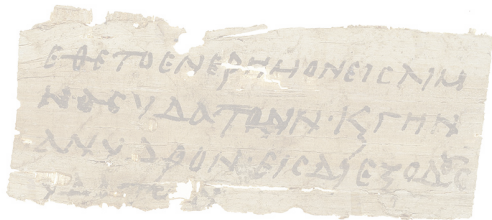
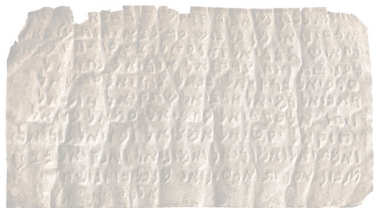
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CHAPTER



3

**EXPERIENCING THE IMPACT
OF AMULETS**

EXPERIENCING THE IMPACT OF AMULETS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

557 Soranus, *Gynaecia* 3.42.

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

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

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

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

3.2 THE IMPACT OF EXPECTATIONS BEFORE USE

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

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

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

⁵⁶¹ Graham, *Reassembling Religion*, 40.

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

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

⁵⁶⁴ Graham, *Reassembling Religion*, 201.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

578 Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 15.108.

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

580 Grons, ‘Coptic Pharmacological Prescriptions’, 136.

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

3.3 EMBODIED SENSORY EXPERIENCES OF AMULET USE

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

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

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

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

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

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

585 For a grave see for example GMA 12.

3.3.1 Experience of visibility

Wearing (in)visible amulets

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

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

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

587 *PGM* XXXVI. 35-68.

588 Wolters, ‘Faden und Knoten’.

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

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

591 Dioscorides, *Materia Medica* 2.47.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

598 *Medicina Plinii* I 1.4. Translation by Hunt, *Medicina Plinii*, 17. Based on Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 24.170. In the IV-V CE handbook of Marcellus a similar instruction can be found; in this one the grass can be worn both with and without a (red-coloured) container. Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 1.43, almost the same instruction in 2.20. See also: *Medicina Plinii* III 15.5.

599 *Medicina Plinii* I 1.6. Translation by Hunt, *The Medicina*, 17. In Pliny, in a similar instruction, the head needs to be worn in a container: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 29.114. See also: Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 1.85.

600 For example, the Thetford treasure gold amulet case with sulphur. British Museum, London, registration number 1981.0201.30.

601 Gold: Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 8.45, 8.50, 26.43, 28.52, 29.13, 29.26, 29.51. Silver: 15.52.

602 Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 29.26, see also 29.51.

linen, wool, or metal, will have looked differently.⁶⁰³ In addition, some instructions mention a specific colour for the thread or the container itself. The example from the *Medicina Plinii* mentioned above stipulates a red thread to tie the headache amulet to the body.⁶⁰⁴ Galen mentions a purple thread.⁶⁰⁵ The colours mentioned most often for the container are red,⁶⁰⁶ purple,⁶⁰⁷ grey, and black.⁶⁰⁸ Pliny also mentions materials that are ‘natural’ and ‘undyed’.⁶⁰⁹ One handbook from Roman Egypt prescribes the use of a multicoloured linen bandage to attach a scarab amulet for protection during the performance of a ritual. The bandage had to be woven with a specific number of threads in four different colours: white, green, blue, and red.⁶¹⁰ In general, however, there does not seem to be a relation between the colours and the types of amulets.

One aspect of visibility needs special attention: the texts and images on rolled-up or folded textual amulets. Many metal textual amulets have been found in graves, folded or rolled up in amulet capsules.⁶¹¹ Some of the papyrus textual amulets which have been found had no capsules, but had been rolled up and tied with a piece of string.⁶¹² Apart from raising the question whether ancient users would have been able to read the amulets’ texts – a matter of literacy – we might ask ourselves whether ancient users ever opened the containers to read the amulets. To understand the motives for using amulets, texts and images are of great importance. What, though, did the concealment of the texts mean for the experiences of the user?

As argued by Faraone, from the imperial period onwards formerly spoken texts were added to amulets in written form.⁶¹³ This development not only included the coherent written word, but all forms and shapes of text and imagery.⁶¹⁴ It is unlikely that users of folded and rolled up amulets carrying texts unrolled or unfolded them.⁶¹⁵ This suggests that the texts were created for the supernatural force that was supposed to take care of

603 In the *Medicina Plinii* for example: leather in III 1.1, textile in I 1.4, wool in I 13.10.

604 Red threads: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 24.170 and 30.98. The first is copied in: *Medicina Plinii* I 1.4; Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 1.43 and 2.20.

605 Galen, *De simplicium medicamentorum* Kühn 11.860.

606 Too many to mention, see for example: Dioscorides, *Materia medica* 4.43; Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 21.166, 29.64, 30.99.

607 Dioscorides, *Materia Medica* 3.91; *PGM* IV. 2622-2707.

608 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 20.225, 28.114-115; ash-coloured in *Medicina Plinii* III 15.5.

609 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 20.29, 32.74.

610 GEMF 16.90-92.

611 See for example: GMA 4, 8, 17, 18, 31, 36, 37, 39, 52, 58.

612 *PGM* XVIIIb. 1-7; *PGM* P5b; P.Oxy. LXIV 4406; *PGM* P9.

613 Faraone, *Transformation*.

614 On the power of writing see: Frankfurter, ‘Magic of Writing’; Frankfurter, ‘Magic of Writing in Mediterranean Antiquity’.

615 Metal tablets would be particularly difficult to unroll and there is no indication in the source material that this happened. *PGM* P15b still included plant remains that were folded with the object, suggesting the object stayed enclosed and the plants were kept in place.

the issue at hand.⁶¹⁶ As a parallel, only the writer of amulets used by members of modern Bedouin tribes knows (the meaning of) the texts. After the object has been folded and put in a container, it would be unwise to open the container and read the text: the object will lose its power and the reader will be (supernaturally) punished.⁶¹⁷ In the ancient world the power of the amulet resided in the complete object, including the container; the object in the container did not need to be seen to be understood as powerful. It is possible that the text on the amulet was spoken aloud when the object was created and that the user knew its content.⁶¹⁸ Still, the experience of hearing the words on one particular occasion is different from recurring perception.⁶¹⁹ Some papyrus amulets show signs of having been folded while the ink was still wet, but even in these cases we cannot rule out the possibility that the user of the amulet had been able to see the texts and images before the object was folded.⁶²⁰ Despite such uncertainties it seems reasonable to conclude that the user of the amulet did not always know all the details of its text.

The same argument can be made for images. GEMF 16.1098-1104 from the late second century concerns an instruction for a ritual against the evil eye. The final part refers to the amulet that had to be made with a specific drawing. The image in question is a depiction of an eye and fits into the group of apotropaic evil eye averters. In this case the eye should be drawn on papyrus: ‘also write this on a new papyrus; and make it into a papyrus roll on his body. “You are this eye of heaven.” The writings: “eye.” [drawing of an eye].’⁶²¹ Even though visibility is a common feature of apotropaic evil eye iconography, this amulet would have been worn rolled-up, and the eye would not have been visible. Other rolled-up or folded amulets have been found with drawings of scorpions to prevent scorpion stings.⁶²² These drawings would likewise have been hidden from view.⁶²³

All of this does not necessarily mean that the text and images on these folded amulets did not play a role in the experience of the object. Users knew that the text was there. Every time the amulet came to mind – for example because it was noticed through the senses – users probably also remembered its text and/or imagery.⁶²⁴ In addition, the simple fact that the text was *there*, gave the object power. The maker’s inscription had endowed it with efficacy. Once the amulet had been created, the power of the text remained present

616 See the discussion in section 2.3. Gordon argues for example that the texts in handbooks and the products coming from these handbooks were indeed not meant to be read by the customers. Gordon, ‘Shaping the text’, 97 specifically, also 76 and 107.

617 The object also loses its powers when it gets wet. A. Abu-Rabia, ‘The Evil Eye and Cultural Beliefs among the Bedouin Tribes of the Negev, Middle East’, *Folklore* 116.3 (2005) 241-254: 249.

618 See the discussion on sound in in 3.3.4 *Experiencing sound*.

619 See for example the amulets in Faraone, *Vanishing Acts*.

620 SM 18, with thanks to dr. Joanne Stolk for inspecting the object with me.

621 GEMF 16.1098-1104. Translation by J. Dieleman, *et al.* in GEMF.

622 *PGM* CXIII.

623 Dosoo, ‘Heathen Serpents and Wingless Angels?’, 129: from the fifth century and onwards.

624 Frankfurter, ‘Magic of writing’, 190-196.

and perpetuated the rituals performed when the object was made or installed. The fact that these texts and images were not visible must mean that neither the object's efficacy nor the experience of it depended on visibility. To know that the text which invested the object with performative power was there, was enough and could bring comfort to the user.

It follows from this discussion that visibility played a role on different levels. The complete object, including the container, could be visible but also hidden underneath clothes; materials, texts, and iconography could be kept in amulet cases or be visibly worn for their apotropaic working. It is highly likely that this layered (in)visibility influenced users' experiences.

Seeing (or not seeing) amulets for larger locations

Amulets could also be placed in larger locations where they could be visible or invisible. Many instructions stipulate that the amulet should be buried and would thus not be seen. Amulets would be buried in significant places: near a threshold or under it, at the corners or in the centre of a field.⁶²⁵ When objects were not visible, they could still be present in the mind of the owner. They may have remembered the ritual act of burying when passing the locations which marked the boundaries of the influence sphere of the amulet. Knowing about the amulets' presence and proximity may have been more important than visual perception.

Other amulets had to be visible.⁶²⁶ In the case of apotropaic amuletic protection, for instance the motif of the All-Suffering Eye in mosaics, visibility generally was a precondition for efficacy – for example at the Basilica Hilariana in Rome, where an apotropaic mosaic protected the entrance of the building.⁶²⁷ Other amulets for larger locations were likewise visibly attached to the designated location. For example, GMA 11A, an amulet used to protect a vineyard against damage from hail and snow, consisted of a bronze tablet with a hole in the middle. As R.D. Kotansky argued, the object may have been placed in the centre, at a corner or at the entrance of the vineyard.⁶²⁸ In this way, it would have been perfectly visible.

625 Threshold in: GEMF 15.145-155; Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 29.67, 29.82-83, 30.82. Corners of field in: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 18.160, and middle of field: 18.158, 18.294.

626 One example of a highly visible amuletic situation was the eye-level inscription placed on the outside wall of a theatre in fourth- to fifth-century Miletos. The inscription at the bottom reads: 'Archangels! Protect (φυλάσσω) the city of the Milesians and all the inhabitants!' SEG 4.440. Cline, 'Archangels, Magical Amulets', 57-62. Another example is the letter from Jesus to Abgar in which Jesus promises protection for the places where the letter is displayed: de Bruyn, *Making amulets Christian*, 153-154. A third example are the sixth-century Christian inscriptions in Syria to protect houses: Wilburn, 'Building Ritual Agency', 587-589 and W.K. Prentice, 'Magical Formulae on Lintels in the Christian Period in Syria', *American Journal of Archaeology, second series, Journal of the Archaeological Institute of America* X.2 (1906) 137-150. Prentice describes a sixth-century lintel inscription from Syria: 'Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son, the World of God, dwells here: let no evil enter.' This text resembles the amulet PGM P2a.

627 Object in Capitoline museums, Antiquarium AC 4951. For apotropaic mosaics at entrances see also: Wilburn, 'Archaeology of Ritual'.

628 Kotansky, GMA 11, 46-53.

Visible amulets, however, were not necessarily recognised as such. Pliny describes how laurel was attached to the openings of houses: ‘there it hangs alone, adorning the mansions and keeping sentry-guard before the thresholds.’⁶²⁹ Protective powers were similarly attributed to many other plants, flowers and trees. Elsewhere Pliny writes: ‘Squills too, hung in a doorway, are said by Pythagoras to have power to keep off evil enchantments.’⁶³⁰ Several business-enhancing spells in the Greek and Demotic ‘magical’ papyri from Egypt prescribe that a statue be made. When the statues were installed a sacrifice had to be made, but the relevant request was written down and stored inside the objects.⁶³¹ They would thus look like statues of a god, but at the same time they were amulets.⁶³²

Visibility could be of importance for the experience of the user. It provided actual awareness of the object’s presence and in this way a sense of reassurance of its power. Some amulets were invisibly worn (under clothes), others had to be visible (when apotropaic strategies were at play), and frequently only the amulet container was visible – it all had a different impact. People would notice visible amulets for larger locations in passing by and the users would be aware of their presence. As A. Wilburn observes, ‘Through use, the viewer or resident continually activated architectural features. Reading an inscription above a lintel repeated the protective spell.’⁶³³ Because of the layers of (in)visibility involved, the impact will have been varied, but it seems safe to say that seeing the amulet reminded the user of its power and the impact it could have on their lives.

3.3.2 Experience of touch

In a religious context, touch could have a significant influence on people’s experiences.⁶³⁴ Wearing an amulet was a way of securing the proximity of the supernatural during daily activities.⁶³⁵ In her work on personal experience, K.A. Rask draws attention to the importance of the tactile experience and the feeling of comfort the closeness of the supernatural provided: ‘through physical contact with the wearer, they [amulets] materially articulated the relationship between the supernatural beings and people, a strategy for keeping the gods operating in one’s life.’⁶³⁶ How, then did touch affect the experiences of amulets?

629 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 15.127. Translation by H. Rackham, *Pliny. Natural History*. Books 12–16. Vol. IV (London 1968) 374–375.

630 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 20.101. Translation by Jones, *Pliny, Books 20–23*, 60–61. For another object that functions as an amulet and is placed in the field, see: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 19.180.

631 *PGM* IV. 2359–72; *PGM* IV. 2373–2440; *PGM* IV. 3125–71; *PGM* VIII. 1–63.

632 See: C.A. Faraone, ‘The Convergence of Guardian Statues in the Ancient World: Top-Down or Bottom-Up?’ in: S. Blakely, B.J. Collins (eds.), *Religious Convergence in the Ancient Mediterranean* (Atlanta 2019) 269–294 and Faraone, ‘Protective Statues’.

633 Wilburn, ‘Building Ritual Agency’, 599.

634 Rask, *Personal Experience*, 26–28.

635 Rask, *Personal Experience*, 112, see 112–114, 121, 138.

636 Rask, *Personal Experience*, 138, see also 121.

Wearing amulets on the human body

What did it feel like to wear an amulet? Instructions for making amulets often described where the amulet should be worn. In relation to bodily health, objects often had to be placed on the problem areas, or in the words of Pliny: ‘tied around the affected parts’.⁶³⁷ The objects are frequently described as being tied on with threads or ribbons.⁶³⁸ An amulet attached to the hair, ears, neck, upper or lower arm may have felt familiar because it was similar to wearing jewellery. Over time, users likely got used to the amulet’s presence and no longer noticed it. However, depending on the location and other circumstances, the experience of wearing an amulet could be active and impactful.

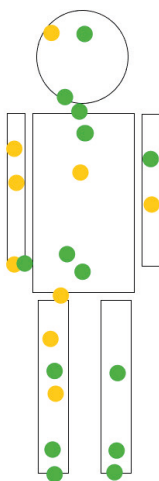


Figure 3. Impression of the locations where amulets could be worn on a human body according to the instructions found in Pliny the Elder.⁶³⁹

637 The instruction refers to gout. Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.41. Translation by Jones, *Pliny, Books 28-32*, 30-31.

638 Bélyácz, Nagy, ‘Periammata’.

639 Green = more specific: hung from the neck: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 11.97; worn around the ankles: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 23.28; applied to the left upper arm: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 24.170; to the girdle: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 27.36; tying together several toes or several fingers (of right hand): Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.42; attached above the pubes: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.42; applied to the knees, Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.138; worn under the chin (but could just mean around the neck) Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 30.98; worn on the forehead, Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 30.140; on the jaw, Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 32.81; on the navel, Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 32.133-134.

Orange = less specific: attached to the arm, for example: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 20.227; attached to the upper arm, not mentioning which one, Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 23.137-138; attached to the left arm: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.91; attached to the head: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 25.143; tied to varicose veins, Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 26.100; applied to the area affected with gout, Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.41; attached to the groin area: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.48; attached to the chest, Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.98; to the thigh, Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.217.

As may be seen in figure 3, the amulets discussed by Pliny the Elder could be worn on all sorts of places on the body.⁶⁴⁰ Wearers will have actively experienced their amulet tied to the upper arm or thigh. The weight of the object and the tightness of the cord, thread or knot would have played a role in the awareness of the object. The loosening of a string might make the object slip down, something the wearer would probably have noticed. The position of the amulet may have restricted movement or caused discomfort. Examples include amulets attached to the eye, restricting sight,⁶⁴¹ or amulets requiring the joining of fingers or toes,⁶⁴² wearing the object in one's sandal or attached to the foot.⁶⁴³ Often there was a connection between the problem or ailment and the place where the amulet had to be worn, but in the case of protective amulets or amulets for benefits a specific location was not always prescribed. N. Crummy established that the amulets discovered in the graves examined in her study were found on the left side of the body.⁶⁴⁴ It is unclear why one side of the body would be preferred over the other, but a similar tendency can be found in the instructions for making amulets. There the left side is mentioned more frequently than the right, but the difference is small and most texts do not mention any particular side.⁶⁴⁵

Whether the object would be worn directly on the body or over clothes would make a difference in the wearer's experience. Some objects would have felt warm or cold to the touch. Metals and stones might feel cold in cold weather; some objects might get hot when warmed by the sun.⁶⁴⁶ Pliny describes a warm sheep's lung to be attached to the head to cure brain fever.⁶⁴⁷ Amulets made of perishable materials may have felt moist and metal touching the skin probably got sweaty. In fact, it appears from the written sources that some amulets had to be kept dry in order to remain effective. Alexander of Tralles describes an amulet made from wolf dung that would lose its efficacy if it touched the ground or the bath.⁶⁴⁸ Users will have experienced the material properties of the amulet containers if these were worn directly on the skin: sharp or smooth edges of cold or warmed-up metal capsules; the soft or rough and itchy textures of woven cloth, leather, or wool; and rough or soft threads and ribbons tied loosely or firmly. The experience will have differed from object to object and from person to person.

640 Sometimes the location is mentioned on activated amulets, such as the arm in P. Oxy. LXXXII 5308.

641 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 21.171.

642 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.42.

643 PGM VII. 919-924; Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 29.26.

644 N. Crummy, 'Bears and Coins. The Iconography of Protection in Late Roman Infant Burials', *Britannia* 41 (2010) 37-93: 69.

645 Left (often the arm): Pliny, *Naturalis Historia* 24.170, 28.91, 29.64, 30.91, 30.100; GEMF 34.23, *Medicina Plinii* III 16.4, PGM IV. 52-85; PGM IV. 2891-2942; Alexander of Tralles, *De Febribus* P. 1.407.8-10; Alexander of Tralles, *Therapeutica* P. 2.319.17-19.
Right: *Medicina Plinii* III 15.7; PGM IV. 475-829; Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 22.41; PGM CXXIII. a; Alexander of Tralles, *Therapeutica* P. 2.375.26-30.

646 Thoughts on the experience of metal by Sanzo, *Ritual Boundaries*, 79.

647 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 30.95 and 97.

648 Alexander of Tralles, *Therapeutica*, P.2.375.20-25. See also: PGM VII. 206-207; Alexander of Tralles, *Therapeutica*, P. 2.585.5-19.

Sometimes the initial touch of amulets will have made less impact. An amulet loosely tied around the neck could be worn over one's clothes, as is often shown on paintings and in sculptures featuring amulets like the *bulla*. The fact that such objects were not in direct contact with the skin does not imply that they would not be noticed – the use of objects is dynamic. The object's weight could make the string cut the skin of the neck. The amulet could also move during daily activities, shifting and twisting the thread or getting stuck in the pleats of the wearer's clothes.⁶⁴⁹ Even if certain amulets were not felt while worn, they had to be attached to the body and this was a powerful tangible experience. Wearers might themselves tie the knots that fastened the object and thus the supernatural power ascribed to it.⁶⁵⁰ Although tying a knot would have been a familiar kind of movement, in the case of amulets it was a deeply meaningful act.⁶⁵¹

Amulets not just touched the body parts they were attached to, they could also be actively touched by their users. Body amulets worn in containers or attached to a string, will, in general, have been relatively small – small enough to fit into a hand. Once they were attached to the body, these small objects may have invited their users to touch them, move their fingers over the object, let it pass through their fingers, play with it. In relation to tiny votive objects, Jessica Hughes argues that their scale 'invited the viewer to touch the object – or to want to touch,' and this touching would have 'intensified the relationship between object and owner'.⁶⁵² In the context of amulet use touch could be mnemonic, making the user remember the object, the text on it and the rituals performed when it was installed.⁶⁵³ Some amulets will have been smooth; fingertips would glide over the surface of stone or metal objects. Others may have been a little rough or sharp, creating a different sensation in the fingers exploring the surface. All these tactile experiences enhanced the effect the amulet on its user.⁶⁵⁴

Sometimes, especially in the case of amulets used to heal, the amulet touched an area that was painful.⁶⁵⁵ Galen describes his testing a jasper amulet, making sure the thread was

649 On the experience and movement of amulet necklaces, see for example: Whitmore, 'Fascinating Fascina'.

650 A spell where a customer needs to tie the knots: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 22.61.

651 S. McKie, 'The Legs, Hands, Head and Arms Race: The Human Body as a Magical Weapon in the Roman World' in: A. Parker, S. McKie (eds.), *Material Approaches to Roman Magic. Occult Objects and Supernatural Substances* (Oxford 2018) 115-125.

652 J. Hughes, 'Tiny and Fragmented Votive Offerings from Classical Antiquity' in: S.R. Martin, S.M. Langin-Hooper (eds.), *The Tiny and the Fragmented. Miniature, Broken, or Otherwise Incomplete Objects in the Ancient World* (Oxford 2018) 48-71: 64-65. On touching small objects see also: D. Bailey, 'Touch and the Cheirotic Apprehension of Prehistoric Figurines' in: P. Dent (ed.), *Sculpture and Touch* (Farnham 1975) 27-44: especially 29 on empowerment by miniature objects.

653 Bonnell Freidin, *Birthing Romans*, 193; Dasen, 'Healing Images', 186-188.

654 Hughes, 'Tiny and Fragmented', 49, 63-64; S.R. Martin, S.M. Langin-Hooper, 'In/Complete. An Introduction to the Theories of Miniaturization and Fragmentation' in: S.R. Martin, S.M. Langin-Hooper (eds.), *The Tiny and the Fragmented. Miniature, Broken, or Otherwise Incomplete Objects in the Ancient World* (Oxford 2018) 1-23: 3-6; Graham, *Reassembling Religion*, 96.

655 Dasen, Nagy, 'Gems', 435.

long enough for it to touch the designated area (near the ‘mouth of the belly’).⁶⁵⁶ In *PGM* VII. 193-196, a scorpion sting would be healed by using an amulet made according to the following instructions: ‘On a clean piece of papyrus, write the characters and place it on the part which has the sting; wrap the papyrus around it, and the sting will lose its pain immediately.’⁶⁵⁷ In ancient healing rituals, touch, especially the touch of the divine, was of great importance.⁶⁵⁸ With limited possibilities for pain relief, pain itself was an active physical experience: having an object attached to the painful body part may have increased the awareness of pain, but also have created a feeling of being ‘treated’,⁶⁵⁹ and thus a sense of being in control of the situation; the user may have felt that the object contained and expelled the ailment.⁶⁶⁰

The tactile experience of amulets for larger locations

As numerous references to the urge to touch cult statues demonstrate, the need to touch religious objects goes beyond small objects attached to the body.⁶⁶¹ Touch could be impactful in the use of amulets for larger locations as well. Touch could renew the sense of the object’s power in the mind of the user. In relation to the amuletic iconography of a floor mosaic, A. Wilburn suggests that ‘These tactile experiences may have been understood as animating or activating the image.’⁶⁶² Touch likewise plays a large role in some instructions for making objects that functioned as amulets. Pliny the Elder 30.52 features an instruction that reappears in third- and fifth-century medical handbooks and we can therefore assume it kept its meaning over a long period: ‘Another remedy is a live green-lizard, hung up in a pot before the door of the bedroom of the patient, that he may touch it with his hand on going out and coming in.’⁶⁶³ In the fifth century, Marcellus of Bordeaux adds that the pot with the lizard had to be touched with the left hand. The ritual was intended for healing the spleen. Every time the patient entered or left the bedroom, they would have been aware of the object. Their touch would make the pot move or swing. With every touch, the supernatural power of the object was renewed and made present in the user’s mind.

Touch created awareness of the object and its supernatural power. The experience created a sense of control; users, as it were, touched the power of the supernatural world that was working for them.

656 Galen, *De simplicium medicamentorum* Kühn XII.207.

657 *PGM* VII. 193-196. Translation by J. Scarborough in GMPT.

658 In the cult of Asklepios, see Hughes in relation to touching tiny votive objects: Hughes, ‘Tiny and Fragmented’, 65-66; Rask, *Personal Experience*, 26-28.

659 On the experience of ailments: King, Toner, ‘Medicine and the Senses’.

660 Inspired by Hughes’ ideas on anatomical votives: Hughes, ‘Tiny and Fragmented’, 55-56.

661 P. Weddle, *Touching the Gods: Physical Interaction with Cult Statues in the Roman World* (PhD Thesis Durham University 2010); A. Purves (ed.), *Touch and the Ancient Senses* (Oxon/New York 2018).

662 Wilburn, ‘Archaeology of Ritual’, 111.

663 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 30.52. Translation by Jones, *Pliny, Books 28-32*, 310-311. *Medicina Plinii* II 13.7; Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 23.50.

3.3.3 Experiencing scent

In general the smellscape of the ancient world was varied and its experience very different from that of our modern world. However, smell is not a recurring element of amulets mentioned in the ancient sources – neither in the instructions for making them, nor in texts criticising their use.⁶⁶⁴ This does not mean that amulets did not produce any smells, nor that it is impossible to study this experience. Amulets, especially those made of natural materials, must have had a wide variety of smells that may have influenced the experience of the objects as well as individuals' experience of their own body.

Some of the plants used for making amulets produced strong smells. Pliny the Elder, for example, describes a fever amulet consisting of a dog tooth filled with frankincense. The object was worn on the body and would be smelled.⁶⁶⁵ Marcellus of Bordeaux describes an amulet made with resin.⁶⁶⁶ This could have produced a pine scent. G. Davis describes how amber can also produce a pine scent, especially when warmed up and rubbed between the fingers. Ancient authors also write about the smell of amber.⁶⁶⁷ As human fingers reached out amulets (as discussed above), they might release the scent, thus adding to the objects' efficacy by enhancing their experience. When touching amulets not worn in containers, the smell of the object would spread to the fingers and clothes.

Smell could be an active part of the supposed power of the object; some substances were (believed to be) inhaled. Galen, for instance, describes the efficacy of an amulet against epilepsy, consisting of the root of a peony and worn on the neck by a boy suffering from the disorder. According to Galen, 'It was therefore logical to consider either that certain particles of the root, falling off and then being breathed in, were having a therapeutic effect on the affected parts; or that the air itself was transformed and altered by the root.'⁶⁶⁸ In a medical instruction to cure insomnia, Pliny describes how plant material, in this case anise, might be attached to the pillow; its smell would induce sleep.⁶⁶⁹

Many amulets were composed of natural materials such as plants and animal parts. Because they could be worn for a longer period of time, the materials might go through various stages of decay that could produce certain smells. Many amulets contained animal dung. Some of these

664 For the role and importance of smell in other rituals, see for example: H. Bowden, 'A Cognitive Approach to Ancient Greek Animal Sacrifice' in: E. Eidinow, A.W. Geertz, J. North (eds.), *Cognitive Approaches to Ancient Religious Experience* (Cambridge 2022) 19-43: 37-39; E. Eidinow, 'Ancient Greek Smells and Divine Fragrances. Anthropomorphizing the Gods in Ancient Greek Culture' in: E. Eidinow, A.W. Geertz, J. North (eds.), *Cognitive Approaches to Ancient Religious Experience* (Cambridge 2022) 69-95.

665 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.107.

666 Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 8.26.

667 Davis, 'Rubbing and Rolling', 73-75.

668 Galen, *De simplicium medicamentorum* Kühn XI.859-861. Translation by Gourevitch, 'Popular Medicines', 268. The root of peonies actually contains active substances against spasms – when consumed: Gourevitch, 'Popular Medicines', 268-269.

669 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 20.186. Although it is debatable whether this is technically an amulet.

had to be worn in a container around the neck.⁶⁷⁰ In the introduction to book X of his treatise *On Simple Drugs* Galen writes about the use of (human) excrement for medical purposes and argues against it – it would pollute the user's body. Nevertheless, he refers to the use of dung in his instructions, for example wolf dung worn in an amulet.⁶⁷¹ C. Petit has analysed both Galen's aversion to dung and his use of it. According to Galen, the biggest problem with using dung is pollution of the mouth caused by eating it. That problem does not occur, however, when using dung to create an amulet.⁶⁷² Furthermore, dried or naturally odourless dung could be used; these would not have bothered the wearer of the amulet very much. According to a passage from Marcellus of Bordeaux, horse dung had to be dried in an oven before being attached as an amulet.⁶⁷³ Amulet makers and users were probably aware of the specific dung related smells and would have worked around this by using dried materials.

Experiencing a specific smell would have reminded people of the presence of the object, which would in this way have kept or regained a central place in their minds.

3.3.4 Experiencing sound

Sound could be an aspect of amulet use, and although it was not an essential element, it could certainly add to its experience. For example, John Chrysostom describes bells worn by children, despite the fact that there was the protection of the cross to reach out to: 'What shall we say about the amulets and the bells which are hung upon the hand'.⁶⁷⁴ Bells were used to scare away danger, for instance in the form of demons. Bronze or copper was most often used for bells; the sound of these materials was understood as apotropaic.⁶⁷⁵ In addition, children were often given rattles. Both bells and rattles could have several purposes. A. Parker explains that, upon hearing the rattle activated by the child, parents would know that the child was present and in good health. At the same time, the sound might chase off imminent danger (dangerous animals or supernatural beings) and would calm or distract a crying child.⁶⁷⁶ In general, bells could be used for all sorts of locations, for example in the form of wind charms.⁶⁷⁷ Roman *tintinnabula* may be seen as amulets: they combined the use of bells with that of phallic apotropaic imagery to avert the evil eye

670 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.259, 30.26, 30.135, 30.137, 37.145; *Medicina Plinii* I 13.10; Alexander of Tralles, *Therapeutica* P. 2.375.20-25; Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 14.53, 16.11, 28.52.

671 Galen, *De simplicium medicamentorum* Kühn XII.295.

672 Petit, 'Galen, Pharmacology and the Boundaries of Medicine', 69.

673 Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 14.53 and see 16.11 for the use of dried dung.

674 John Chrysostom, *In epistulam I ad Corinthios* 12.13 (PG 61.105-106). Translation T.W. Chambers, *The Homilies of St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, on the epistles of Paul to the Corinthians*. A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Series 1, Vol. 12 (New York 1889) homily XII on 64-73.

675 Faraone, *Transformation*, 85-87.

676 Parker, 'Approaching Tintinnabula', 60-61; see also: Dasen, 'Probaskania', 189.

677 Parker, 'Approaching Tintinnabula'; Toner, 'Sensing the Ancient Past', 10.

and prevent evil from entering the locations they were attached to.⁶⁷⁸

In the case of other amulets, sound may have been less intentional. Amulets composed of multiple materials could produce a rattling sound. GMA 20 contains a folded metal tablet that was found in a metal *bullā*, which possibly produced a sound when handled.⁶⁷⁹ Some instructions mention a living lizard to be put in a vessel and worn on the body or installed at a certain location.⁶⁸⁰ Pliny, for example, suggest that ‘A green lizard too may be tried, attached (*adalligata*) alive, in a vessel just large enough to contain it.’⁶⁸¹ Although we do not know how long the lizard would have survived its ordeal, it must have moved in its container and thereby made noises that heightened the user’s awareness.

Sound could also be made by human bodies in the rituals accompanying amulet use. Speech acts could be used to attract or avert supernatural powers.⁶⁸² Such acts were believed to have the power to create a difference in the world.⁶⁸³ The words could be spoken by the ritual specialist performing rituals accompanying amulet use.⁶⁸⁴ Speech acts might be performed at different stages of the amulet’s creation, for example when it was attached to the wearer.⁶⁸⁵ PGM IV. 475-829 concerns an amulet to protect a ritual specialist during the performance of a certain ritual. The papyrus gives the following instructions: ‘Look intently, and make a long bellowing sound, like a horn, releasing all your breath and straining your sides; and kiss the phylacteries and say, first toward the right: “Protect me, PROSYMÈRE.”’⁶⁸⁶ As previously discussed, the texts written on amulets may have been read aloud as well. For example, Marcellus of Bordeaux gives an instruction for making an inscribed silver tablet for stomach pain prescribing a text that had to be written as well as spoken.⁶⁸⁷ In this way the user of the amulet would have been made aware of its text written on the amulet.⁶⁸⁸ If the users were reading the texts aloud and making the sounds themselves, the experience of hearing the sounds was combined with that of producing them.

All in all, it may be stated that sound enhanced the experience of the amulet’s power and contributed to the user’s awareness of its presence.

678 Parker, ‘Approaching Tintinnabula’.

679 GMA 20.

680 Not always clear if the animal needed to be alive: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 29.129; *Medicina Plinii* III 16.5. See also an example with bugs: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 29.64

681 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 30.104. Translation by Jones, *Pliny, Books 28-32*, 344-345. The parallel in *Medicina Plinii* is III 17.3.

682 Toner, ‘Sensing the Ancient Past’, 10.

683 Frankfurter, ‘Spell and Speech Act’.

684 Examples of speech acts: Marcellus of Bordeaux, *De Medicamentis* 14.68-69, 22.41, 29.35, 31.33, 32.21; Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 22.61, 24.133, 24.180-181, 26.116; Alexander of Tralles, *Therapeutica* P. 2.585.5-19.

685 Marcellus of Bordeaux, *De Medicamentis* 14.26 and PGM VII. 370-373.

686 PGM IV. 475-829. Translation by M.W. Meyer in GMPT.

687 And an additional text had to be spoken as well. Marcellus of Bordeaux, *De Medicamentis* 20.66.

688 See also the discussion on the visibility of the texts and imagery on textual amulets in 3.3.1 on the experience of visibility.

3.3.5 Experiencing taste

In general, taste did not play a large role in the experience of amulet use.⁶⁸⁹ According to the definition used in this thesis, amulets were attached to their sphere of influence and therefore not consumed. This does not mean that in the ritual processes surrounding the use of amulets, the experience of taste did not play any part at all.

Using amulets could be combined with other rituals, carried out by, or in accordance with prescriptions given by, professionals such as a religious or medical specialist. In some instructions for making amulets, a drink, pill, or other substance had to be consumed in combination with the use of the amulet. In one passage, for instance, Alexander of Tralles prescribes a combination of an amulet and the swallowing of pills to cure epilepsy.⁶⁹⁰ Marcellus of Bordeaux describes the attachment of wolf dung to the patient accompanied by the drinking of a little dung mixed with warm water – without the patient knowing there was dung in the drink.⁶⁹¹ Gemstone amulets could be altered (chipped, broken, powdered), added to a drink and consumed.⁶⁹² Another ritual act, often combined with powerful writing, is licking words. *PGM XIII. 1040-1055* describes a ritual with an amulet to ‘put down fear or anger’; the words written on the amulet had to be licked off.⁶⁹³ An additional experience of amulet use relating to the sensation of taste was refraining from consuming certain products. Some instructions stipulate that the ritual specialist had to be fasting while performing the ritual. Pliny gives an instruction for curing sores and abscesses, which, apart from the creation of an amulet, required a speech act to be performed by the specialist declaring that the patient was fasting as well: ‘Fasting I give a cure to a fasting patient’.⁶⁹⁴ Fasting (similar to being ‘pure’ or ‘chaste’) while using an amulet would also make users more aware of their amulet.⁶⁹⁵

Although taste might not be part of the experience of the amulet itself, it could certainly

689 Taste is therefore not fully explored in this thesis, for more information see: Z. Kamash, ‘The Taste of Religion in the Roman World’ in: G. Harvey, J. Hughes (eds.), *Sensual Religion: Religion and the Five Senses* (Sheffield 2018) 63-83.

690 Alexander of Tralles, *Therapeutica*, P. 1.571.16-19.

691 Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 28.52, for a drink see also: 28.20.

692 Á.M. Nagy, ‘*Daktylios pharmakites*. Magical Healing Gems and Rings in the Graeco-Roman World’ in: I. Csepregi, C. Burnett (eds.), *Ritual Healing. Magic, Ritual and Medical Therapy from Antiquity Until the Early Modern Period* (Florence 2012) 71-106: 81.

693 *PGM XIII. 734-1077* (1040-1055). Another example of words being ‘consumed’ is the drinking of water that was poured over a Harpocrates stele: A.T. Wilburn, ‘Figurines, Images, and Representations Used in Ritual Practices’ in: D. Frankfurter (ed.), *Guide to the Study of Ancient Magic* (Leiden 2019) 456-506: 470-472 and 472n.43.

694 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 24.180-181. Translation by Jones, *Pliny, Books 24-27*, 126-129. See also: Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 8.58-9.

695 *PGM VII. 215-218*; *GEMF 26.8-22*; *PGM X. 24-35*; Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 8.59-60 (8.57-8 for the ritual specialist to be pure). On deviation from daily practices and experience see: L.H. Martin, ‘Identifying Symptoms of Religious Experience from Ancient Material Culture. The Example of Cults of the Roman Mithras’ in: E. Eidinow, A.W. Geertz, J. North (eds.), *Cognitive Approaches to Ancient Religious Experience* (Cambridge 2022) 218-242: 221.

be part of the ritual experience of using an amulet, particularly in relation to healing.

3.3.6 Experiencing the efficacy of amulets through the senses

The attachment of an amulet to its designated location brought about a wide variety of sensory experiences. First, the visual perception of an amulet was in all probability of great importance for its believed effect. However, we find that there was a certain tension between visibility and invisibility. Amulets could be worn visibly or hidden under clothes. Written texts were rolled up and tied with a string or worn in an amulet container. The texts themselves may have been invisible to users or third parties, but they were present. While the element of secrecy may have enhanced the experience of amulet use, the fact that someone wore an amulet was usually not a secret. Amulets were visibly attached to larger locations and people would be aware of the presence of buried amulets.

Secondly, amulets were touched by users wearing them on their bodies. Wearers would feel the contact the object made with their skin and be directly aware of its material affordances. Users might reach out to the small amulets they were wearing; amulets attached to larger locations would also have been touched in passing. In this way, users could ‘access’ the supernatural powers at play. Through touch these powers would work for them.

Thirdly, scent, sound, and taste could also contribute to the amulet users’ awareness of the objects they had surrounded themselves with and thus of the powers involved. People could smell the objects attached to their necks, hear the wind play with objects attached to doors and windows or taste substances used in the rituals that came with amulet use.

The sensory experience of amulets enhanced users’ awareness and activated the amulet in their minds. In addition, it reminded users of the power of the object that was believed to be present. Touch was probably an important element in experiencing the healing properties of an amulet. Evil-averting imagery and sound made users aware of the apotropaic powers of the objects, thus providing feelings of safety. These sensory experiences may have been more intense if they were somehow unusual, for instance when amulets were made from materials or producing sounds and smells that people would not normally encounter.⁶⁹⁶ Sensory experiences confirmed the users’ sense of ‘being treated’, of knowing that the amulet acted for them.⁶⁹⁷ Through the senses, they perceived the protection, healing and/or the benefits they wanted to receive.

By giving their users the experience of ‘being treated’ amulets may also have affected the users’ psychological state. In a discussion of the possibilities of the placebo in Coptic ‘magical’ texts, K. Dosoo uses the idea of *somatic focus*.⁶⁹⁸ Paying attention to the symptoms and their changes played an important role in experiencing disease and treatment. Through

696 J. Toner, *Popular Culture in Ancient Rome* (Cambridge 2009) 125, 142-143.

697 For ideas on experiencing treatment through object use see: Chronopoulou, ‘Placebo is Magic’, 29.

698 Dosoo, ‘Healing Traditions’, 82.

sensory awareness of an amulet, especially if it was attached to the part of the body that needed protection or treatment, and a focus on the expected outcome, the user may have felt better, or at least safe and in control.

There can be no doubt that sensory experiences were a crucial aspect of amulet use. All of these experiences were powerful because of the one thing they had in common: their impact on feelings of safety and control.

3.4 EXCURSUS: THE EXPERIENCE OF MATERIALITY IN THE CHOICE BETWEEN JUDICIAL AMULETS AND CURSES

In order to highlight the importance of materiality in amulet use and its relationship with the location of use, I would like to compare amulet use with another religious practice: cursing in the context of law.⁶⁹⁹ There is a small corpus of amulets that overlaps with specific types of curses dealing with lawsuits. Excavations have yielded a sizeable corpus of judicial binding curses (excluding prayers for justice), but only a small corpus of judicial amulets.⁷⁰⁰ These two types of objects have never been the subject of comparative study, even though they had the same goal: to win a court case. Amulets and curses represent two different strategies: a curse would harm the opponent – an amulet would empower the user.⁷⁰¹ Why would some people choose a curse and others an amulet to deal with a lawsuit?⁷⁰² By comparing these two options and the motives for using them, we can gain insight into the role materiality and its potential played in choosing amulets.

3.4.1 Using a curse

A binding curse, κατάδεσμος in Greek or *defixio* in Latin, consists of a lead tablet, inscribed with a text that expresses a wish to harm a rival, opponent or enemy. After inscribing

699 This was part of a paper I wrote for the conference *Ancient Law: Outside the Norms* in Edinburgh 7-8 July 2023. I would like to thank the organisers and participants for their feedback.

700 In 1992 a total of 67 Greek and 46 Latin judicial binding curses had been found. These numbers can only have increased. Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 117. I have excluded judicial prayers; in most examples judicial prayers do not refer to the involvement of actual legal procedures, since the matter is in the hands of the gods. See E. Eidinow, 'Binding Spells on Tablets and Papyri' in: D. Frankfurter (ed.), *Guide to the Study of Ancient Magic* (Leiden 2019) 351-387; 351-352 for a quick overview of the debate on prayers for justice; Papakonstantinou, *Cursing for Justice*, 37.

701 For more on judicial curses see for example: Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 116-150; W. Riess, *Performing Interpersonal Violence. Court, Curse, and Comedy in Fourth-Century BCE Athens* (Berlin 2012); Z. Papakonstantinou, *Cursing for Justice. Magic, Disputes, and the Lawcourts in Classical Athens* (Stuttgart 2021). One of the few papers that includes judicial amulets is F. Maltomini, 'Libanio, il camaleonte, un papiro e altri testi', *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 147 (2004) 147-153.

702 I will not discuss formal aspects of legal history, because it falls outside the scope of the present research. In the words of John Gager, I would like to 'focus instead on one particular aspect of the legal process, namely, how prospective litigants prepared to defend themselves against their accusers': Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 116.

the tablet, it was folded, pierced, and deposited in a place with a connection with the underworld, such as a grave or a spring. Curses often intended to harm a competitor in sports, love, business or law.⁷⁰³ ‘Judicial’ curses are datable between the sixth century BCE and the sixth century CE and have been found all over the Greek and Roman world.⁷⁰⁴ They were made by and for every social group.⁷⁰⁵ The considerable number of excavated ‘judicial’ curse tablets demonstrates that cursing in a legal context was common. Written sources show that ancient individuals feared losing the ability to speak because of supernatural harm caused by opponents.⁷⁰⁶ When preparing for a trial, cursing one’s opponent was one of the available religious strategies, as were amulets and votives.⁷⁰⁷ Here, I will present only one example of a judicial curse, but its length allows the discussion of several issues related to judicial curses.

Daimones under the earth and *daimones* whoever you may be; fathers of fathers and mothers (who are a) match (for men), whether male or female, *daimones* whoever you may be and who lie here (...) take over the voice(s) of my opponents, (I) Alexandros also called Makedonios, to whom Matidia gave birth, namely, Theodôros the governor (*hêgemôn*) and Timôn to whom Markia gave birth NÊTHIMAZ ... MASÔLABEÔ MAMAXÔMAXÔ ENKOPTÔDIT ... ENOUOUMAR AKNEU MELOPTHÊLAR AKN ... ruler of *daimones* beneath the earth. ... And give a muzzle to Theodôros the governor (*hêgemôn*) ... of Cyprus and to Timôn, so that they will be unable to do anything against me, Alexandros MAZO ... also called Makedonios. But just as you are ... wordless and speechless (...) so also let my opponents be speechless and voiceless. Theodôros the governor (*hêgemôn*) and Timôn . . . ⁷⁰⁸

This was written on a lead tablet found in a grave on Cyprus; the object has been dated to

703 H.S. Versnel, ‘Defixio’, *Brill’s New Pauly Online*, last accessed September 2025.

704 Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 122. Most of the Greek sources come from fourth-century BCE Athens: Riess, *Performing Interpersonal Violence*, 171.

705 Curse tablets involved materials and scribes and were therefore not free. In other words, they will not have been available to all. For a long time scholars saw them as a strategy used by the ‘lower classes’, but especially the fourth-century BCE Athenian tablets show that the social and political elite was also involved in the creation and receiving of curse tablets: Papakonstantinou, *Cursing for Justice*, 18-19; Z. Papakonstantinou, ‘Some Observations on Litigants and Their Supporters in Athenian Judiciary Defixiones’ in: Á. Martínez Fernández, *et al.* (eds.), *Ágalma: ofrenda desde la Filología Clásica a Manuel García Teijeiro* (Valladolid 2014) 1027-1035: 1029.

706 For example, Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 120; Eidinow, ‘Binding Spells’, 360. Cicero for example described how a lawyer forgot his text and attributed the effect to being poisoned and cursed: Cicero, *Brutus* 217. See also Libanius, *Oratio* 1.43.

707 Curses as part of preparations for trial: Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 117. A votive: R.D. Kotansky, ‘A Silver Votive Plaque with a Judicial Prayer Against Slander’, *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 60.1 (2020) 139-157.

708 Gager, *Curse Tablets*, nr. 46.

the second or third century CE.⁷⁰⁹ It was created by Alexandros.⁷¹⁰ He is identified by his mother's name, which is common in curses as well as in amulets.⁷¹¹ The curse was made to harm Theodôros, the Roman governor of Cyprus, and one Timôn by affecting their voice.⁷¹² Timôn may have been the governor's assistant. In this specific case, all parties are men, but other tablets also mention women.⁷¹³ The tablet provides no information on the subject of the trial.⁷¹⁴ The requests presented in judicial curses focus on performance at the trial and not on retribution. This suggests that judicial curses were made before the trial took place. They reflect the anxiety of those involved and their decision to deal with these fears and reduce the risks.⁷¹⁵

The tablet engages the supernatural to aid the user. Curse tablets often addressed the dead to act for the user and perform the curse.⁷¹⁶ In this example the addressees were the individuals buried in the grave, who were approached with *voces magicae* whose meaning remains unknown to modern scholars.⁷¹⁷ The supernatural seems to assume the role of a secret accomplice, deployed to assist in attracting victory.⁷¹⁸ Alexandros requests that Theodôros and Timôn be robbed of the capacity to speak.⁷¹⁹ This is a common request in judicial curse tablets: just as the dead can no longer speak, the opponents of the curser must be voiceless and in this way be unable to perform in court.⁷²⁰

In a legal context, curse tablets can be seen as a form of 'dispute management'.⁷²¹

709 Gager, *Curse Tablets*, nr. 46.

710 The name Alexandros also shows up on two other curse tablets found at the same location: Gager, *Curse Tablets*, nr. 46.

711 Although not that common in this specific curse hoard: Gager, *Curse Tablets*, nr. 46. See: J.B. Curbera, 'Maternal Lineage in Greek Magical Texts' in: D.R. Jordan, H. Montgomery, E. Thomassen (eds.), *The World of Ancient Magic. Papers from the first International Samson Eitrem Seminar at the Norwegian Institute at Athens, 4-8 May 1997* (Bergen 1999) 195-203.

712 Gager, *Curse tablets*, nr. 46n.66. The curse tablets show that legal actions often involved more than two people: Eidinow, 'Binding Spells', 362, 382.

713 Z. Papakonstantinou states that 'it is safe to say that in the eyes of the persons who commissioned legal curses Athenian women had, through their involvement in formal or informal aspects of litigation, as much power in influencing the outcome of a trial as men.' Citation from: Papakonstantinou, 'Some Observations on Litigants', 1033, see 1031-1033.

714 See Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 117. For an example with information on the trial see: Gager, *Curse Tablets*, nr 47 and 54.

715 Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 117-118; Papakonstantinou, *Cursing for Justice*, 33-34.

716 The dead could act as mediators between the supplicant and the gods or as performers of the wishes of the gods. For the discussion, see for example: Riess, *Performing Interpersonal Violence*, 211-212.

717 Gager, *Curse Tablets*, nr. 45.

718 On the role of the supernatural in prayers for justice, see for example: A. Chaniotis, 'Von Ehre, Schande und kleinen Verbrechen unter Nachbarn: Konfliktbewältigung und Götterjustiz in Gemeinden des antiken Anatolien' in: F.R. Pfefsch (ed.), *Konflikt* (Heidelberg 2004) 233-254: 253.

719 Gager, *Curse Tablets*, nr. 46.

720 C.A. Faraone, 'The Agonistic Context of Early Greek Binding Spells' in: C.A. Faraone, D. Ogden (eds.), *Magika Hiera. Ancient Greek Magic and Religion* (Oxford 1997) 3-32: 15.

721 Faraone, 'Agonistic Context', 3-32; Papakonstantinou, *Cursing for Justice*, 18; Riess *Performing Interpersonal Violence*, 164 (on conflict resolution).

Litigants used curse tablets to improve their position and influence the outcome of the case.⁷²² This had an effect on a psychological level; a curse could provide the party in question with a sense of power in a situation that could have a negative impact on their lives. Curses gave their users agency – or the idea of agency.⁷²³ In this way, they helped to cope with the emotions surrounding an upcoming trial.⁷²⁴ At the same time, literary sources make it clear that the fear of being cursed was also widely present. This fear, nourished by gossip and amplified rumours, could actually result in a poor performance.⁷²⁵

3.4.2 Using an amulet

Two specific aspects make using a curse different from using an amulet. According to my definition, an amulet was supposed to have an effect on the location it was attached to. An amulet tied to the upper arm of the user demarcated the user as the amulet's action space. 'Judicial' amulets belong to the category of amulets used to secure benefits. Unlike 'judicial' curses, which were deposited with the aim of harming the opponent, 'judicial' amulets were used to empower the user and help them win the lawsuit. A 'judicial' amulet worn by one of the litigants was thus actively present in court.⁷²⁶ An amulet of the first century BCE or first century CE has the following request: 'Let no more harm appear! Drive away, drive away the lawsuit (ὀπόθεσις) from Rufina! And if anyone shall injure me (ἁδικέω) henceforth, turn (him) away! And may no poison harm me.'⁷²⁷ The amulet was most probably created before the lawsuit in which Rufina was one of the parties took place.⁷²⁸ As the editor R. Kotansky stressed, the verb ἁδικέω suggests that this woman felt she needed protection against any kind of injury related to judicial proceedings.⁷²⁹ Rufina believed that the object would create a 'shield' around her that would ward off harm, injuries, and poison – perhaps even prevent the lawsuit from taking place. The harm she feared could be the result of an opponent's curse or poisoning.⁷³⁰

As I indicated above, unlike curses, amulets positively influence the user, instead of negatively influencing the opponent. *PGM IV*, a handbook from Roman Egypt written in Greek

⁷²² Papakonstantinou, *Cursing for Justice*, 28-29.

⁷²³ Papakonstantinou, *Cursing for Justice*, 28-29, 118-146.

⁷²⁴ Or the risks in the words of: Eidinow, 'Binding Spells', 382.

⁷²⁵ For a discussion of the psychosomatic effects of curse tablets see: Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 22; Tomlin, 'The Curse Tablets', 101-104. For new arguments see: McKie, *Living and Cursing in the Roman West*; E. Eidinow, 'Magic and Social Tension' in: D. Frankfurter (ed.), *Guide to the Study of Ancient Magic* (Leiden 2019) 746-774.

⁷²⁶ For another example of the use of an amulet in a judicial context, see S. Shaked, R. Elitzur-Leiman, 'An Aramaic Amulet for Winning a Case in a Court of Law', *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 26 (2019) 1-16 (this amulet in certain respects resembles GMA 58, but it is in Aramaic and dates from the sixth to seventh century.); also Kotansky, 'Silver Votive Plaque', although this concerns a votive, not an amulet.

⁷²⁷ Translation by Kotansky, GMA 36.

⁷²⁸ Kotansky, GMA 36, 182. The last sentence is probably a reference to poison as one of Pontus' kings was known to be invulnerable to poison.

⁷²⁹ Kotansky, GMA 36, 189.

⁷³⁰ Kotansky, GMA 36, 190, 198-199.

and dated to the fourth century, contains an instruction for making an amulet that would bring victory to its user.⁷³¹ Three Homeric verses had to be inscribed on an iron tablet (*lamella*); the act of inscription had to be accompanied by a speech act and a consecration ritual. The object would be efficacious in a variety of situations. The instruction claims that ‘A contestant with the tablet stays undefeated, just as also a charioteer who carries the tablet along with a lodestone; and the same is true in court (δικαστήριον); also, these are things for a gladiator to carry.’⁷³² The amulet, in brief, guaranteed all sorts of victories. Multiple examples of curse tablets for these specific areas of life have been found, but few amulets, which makes this amulet quite special.⁷³³ *PGM XXXVI. 35-68* provides instructions for creating a ‘charm to restrain anger and to secure favor and an excellent charm for attracting victory in the courts (it works even against kings; no charm is greater).’⁷³⁴ This amulet had to be worn under the garments to provide victory for the wearer.⁷³⁵

A tablet made for Proclus in the fourth century carries a text that seems both maledictive and amuletic. It includes the following: ‘give favor, glory, victory to Proclus whom Salvina bore, before Diogenianus the dux of Bostra in Arabia (...) in order that he might be justifiably or unjustifiably victorious in any judgment before any judge, before a magister, before all who observe him and who hear him and his words.’⁷³⁶ Proclus was involved in a dispute with Salvina and her children. As Salvina was Proclus’s mother, we are dealing with a family dispute.⁷³⁷ Diogenianus the dux of Bostra apparently was the military governor of Arabia around this time.⁷³⁸ As in the case of curse tablets, a larger group of people is included: all opponents, judges and all who are watching and listening.⁷³⁹

731 On the possible Egyptian influence on these types of formulations see: Quack, ‘From Ritual to Magic’. Other instructions for the creation of objects in relation to victory in court see: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 29.67, 29.53-54, also: 24.165 a plant for ‘its use to gain the highest position at Court’ (it is unclear how this would work); 9.79, ‘a spell to hinder litigation in the courts’ (this would act more like a curse); 28.114, ‘controls the results of cases in the courts’ (in relation to other sources, this should perhaps be seen as harming others – see the argumentation of Maltomini, ‘Libanio, il camaleonte’ and also: GEMF 40.44-45. Finally, Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 37.169, ‘the ‘haematitis,’ allows it to interfere in lawsuits and trials’.

732 *PGM IV. 2160-2164*. Translation by H. Martin jr. in GMPT.

733 Gager, *Curse Tablets*, chapter one and chapter three.

734 *PGM XXXVI. 35-68*. Translation by R.F. Hock in GMPT.

735 One could wonder who in the legal process was intended to wear this object as ‘gladiator’ and ‘charioteer’ seem to point to use in a professional context. Was the intended wearer a ‘lawyer’? I would like to thank dr. Renske Janssen for this suggestion.

736 Translation by Kotansky, GMA 58, 333.

737 Kotansky, GMA 58, 341. Because of the family relation, it has been argued that the lawsuit may have concerned property. Kotansky, GMA 58, 337.

738 For an analysis of the names see Kotansky, GMA 58, 330, 336, 338.

739 Kotansky, GMA 58, 340-343. For more on people watching, see for example: A. Chaniotis, ‘Watching a Lawsuit: A New Curse Tablet from Southern Russia’, *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 33.1 (1992) 69-73. While in theory body amulets were only used by individuals, a ‘judicial’ amulet for a group of people has been found, which suggests that in a judicial context curses and amulets were used in a similar manner: GMA 7. For another possible amulet (or prayer?) for a group of people see *PGM P6c*.

Furthermore, Proclus is described as wearing the supernatural's 'holy and unconquerable power'.⁷⁴⁰ He thus carries the power of the object with him. Most of the text focusses on Proclus, urging the supernatural to make him win the lawsuit. However, the tablet also presents requests similar to those found on curse tablets, such as the request to 'Silence, subjugate, and enslave' the people involved, and the text ends by saying: 'And may no one act in opposition, or speak in opposition, or deliberate in opposition.'⁷⁴¹ As R.D. Kotansky points out, the use of this type of curse-language is unique in amulets.⁷⁴² It could thus be argued that the tablet combines two strategies to enhance the position of Proclus and weaken that of his opponents – and everyone involved. Still, the object must be considered an amulet, since Proclus wore it on his body.

3.4.3 Amulet or curse?

People involved in lawsuits might use amulets or curses because they feared a negative outcome of the trial and/or counteractions of the opposite party. To deal with these fears they could call on supernatural power to help them by arranging a positive outcome for themselves (amulet) or a negative outcome for their opponent(s) (curse). For practical reasons, people usually opted for one or the other. For example, an amulet could in theory only be worn by one individual – although at least one Latin/Greek 'judicial' amulet for a group has been identified.⁷⁴³ If several people decided to reach out to supernatural aid, a curse might be more suitable. In addition, the choice for a certain type of object may have been influenced by the specialist consulted.⁷⁴⁴ It is often assumed that amulets were made by religious specialists, but because of the considerable amount of legal knowledge and titles referred to in the case of Proclus' amulet, it has been suggested that the person who wrote this text may have had a legal background – perhaps a court-clerk with access to instructions.⁷⁴⁵ When a religious specialist was consulted, it is likely that they had some specific formularies and knowledge at hand, as many amulets were created with the help of handbooks.⁷⁴⁶ Religious strategies to provide help in a judicial context are also described in the 'magical' handbooks from Roman Egypt. They show that specialists had the knowledge

740 Carrying the power of the object: Kotansky, GMA 58, 345.

741 Translation by Kotansky, GMA 58, 330.

742 Kotansky, GMA 58, 342. I would argue that it was not common, however, after the publication of Kotansky's arguments a sixth-to-seventh-century Aramaic amulet has been published that requests the binding of the tongues of the opponents: Shaked, Elitzur-Leiman, 'Amulet for Winning a Case'.

743 See GMA 7.

744 See chapter two of this book for amulets, for curses see: Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 118-119.

745 As suggested by Kotansky, GMA 58, 331.

746 See chapter two on amulets, on curses see: Riess, *Performing Interpersonal Violence*, 174.

to perform and create a wide variety of rituals and objects in relation to ancient law.⁷⁴⁷ Some fall within the categories of amulets or curses, others fall in between.

Concerning the functioning of curses and amulets, the main difference lies in proximity. Amulets were worn to enhance their users' positions, while curse tablets were installed at a location associated with the underworld to harm an opponent. While in many examples these two practices were separated, the amulet for Proclus shows that the boundaries between amulets and curses could be crossed.⁷⁴⁸ Even when the aim was to harm others, there could be a preference for the proximity of an amulet. Two handbooks from Roman Egypt refer to the creation of spells intended to silence opponents, similar to those in deposited curses, but the objects on which these spells were written, had to be kept close: according to GEMF 40.44-45 the object had to be worn and touched and *PGM* VII. 925-39 prescribes a lead tablet to be worn under the client's foot. Having an object close to the body or touching an object was an important aspect of its efficacy and the transferability of its powers.

In the emotional and psychological impact the proximity of the material object must have played a crucial role. With a curse ancient individuals could direct their anger or frustration at their opponents. Depositing a curse tablet may therefore have created a sense of relief.⁷⁴⁹ The proximity of the amulet would have produced a different psychological effect. The mere presence of the object would have given the users hope and probably removed some of their anxiety, which may have given them the courage to perform better at the trial. As the medical author Soranus pointed out, amulets could give their wearers hope.⁷⁵⁰ On this basis, I argue that the proximity of amulets, their material presence and their potential for sensory experiences were important factors in the decision to use an amulet instead of a deposited curse.

⁷⁴⁷ For example, collected in *PGM* and *GEMF*: *GEMF* 15.353; *GEMF* 21.28-30; *GEMF* 35.26-32; *GEMF* 40.44-45; *PGM* XIII. 805-804; *PGM* VII. 925-39; *PGM* IV. 2160-2164; *PGM* XXXVI. 35-68. See also: *PGM* LI. 1-27; this is not an instruction, but an activated object with a necromantic request from Neilammon concerning his legal opponents, including his son.

⁷⁴⁸ See Faraone, *Transformation*, 192 and 378n.123.

⁷⁴⁹ Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 22-23, based on Tomlin, 'The Curse Tablets', 101.

⁷⁵⁰ Soranus, *Gynaecia* 3.42.

3.5 THE EXPERIENCE OF CONTROLLED AMULET SPACE

As discussed in chapter two, space or location was a crucial factor in the presumed functioning of amulets.⁷⁵¹ Amulets demarcated the space they were supposed to act in. They were placed on the openings between an inside space and the outside world, such as architectural foundations, walls, roofs and especially doors, windows and gates.⁷⁵² *PGM* P10, a sixth-century amulet, provides us with an idea of where the supernatural could hide: ‘Do not hide down here in the ground; do not lurk under a bed, nor under a window, nor under a door, nor under beams, nor under utensils, nor below a pit.’⁷⁵³ As we have seen, there were three locations at play: the outside, the permeable boundary on which the amulet was located, and the inside area demarcated by the amulet. By placing an amulet on significant boundary locations or surrounding a certain area with amulets one could create a closed-off zone of protection. Danger would have to pass the amulet(s) when trying to move from outside into inside – and would be stopped. Conversely, an amulet could force evil out of the inside area and prevent it from re-entering.

As objects that were used to demarcate, amulets fit into the ancient understanding of religious space. Location was an important aspect of ancient religious practices and ritual could be performed wherever it was needed.⁷⁵⁴ Many religious strategies focused on boundary locations to set an inside area apart and attract a supernatural presence. In a paper on ancient religious territoriality F.G. Naerebout argued that in ancient religion, religious space was always marked.⁷⁵⁵ The space set apart for a temple complex, the *temenos*, is an obvious example. This space marked for religious activities would always be demarcated by a border. Both visible and invisible borders served to set the inside area apart, and restricted

751 Part of this research was presented at the Penn-Leiden Colloquium on the Sacred. In the conference paper I compared the use of space in amulets with the use of sacred space. I am convinced that comparing sacred space and the amuletic use of space is a very fruitful way to acquire insight into the different modes of operation of religiously marked space and to deepen our understanding of how both uses of space are situated in a bigger framework. My presentation resulted in interesting discussions for which I am very grateful, and I want to thank the organisers and participants. However, comparing sacred space and amulet space did, in the end, not lead to a better understanding of amulet space itself, so for the purpose of this book I do not include the discussion on the sacred space.

752 Willburn, ‘Building Ritual Agency’; Van Opstall, ‘General Introduction’; D.A. Frese, *The City Gate in Ancient Israel and her Neighbours* (Leiden 2019) 237-255; Johnston, ‘Crossroads’.

753 *PGM* P10. Translation by M.W. Meyer in ACM, nr. 20.

754 Such as ‘portable religion’ for ships or military camps: S. Muir, ‘Religion on the Road in Ancient Greece and Rome’ in: P.A. Harland (ed.), *Travel and Religion in Antiquity* (Canada 2011) 29-47. For using space for ‘magical’ rituals see: Edmonds, *Drawing Down the Moon*, 167-168; Wilburn, ‘Building Ritual Agency’, 600. One distinction that could be made is the idea of religion for here (domestic), there (civic) and anywhere (such as ‘magic’). Amulets fall in all three categories, because they could be installed in locations of every kind and be used in private. Amuletic strategies were also applied to larger constructions such as city walls. J.Z. Smith, ‘Here, There, and Anywhere’ in: J.Z. Smith (ed.), *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago/London 2004) 323-338.

755 Naerebout, ‘Territorialität und griechische Religion’.

and controlled entrance to the space.⁷⁵⁶ This does not mean that all rituals demarcating religious space were similar. Body amulets created a portable religious space, whereas the demarcation of a temple complex was set in the environment. Still, expectations regarding the efficacy of amulets were rooted in, and should be contextualised in, general expectations about the functioning and experience of religious space.⁷⁵⁷

Amulets were experienced with the senses within the space they were used in and both elements impacted the overall experience of amulet users.⁷⁵⁸ Users of amulets on boundary locations not only experienced the demarcated space, but also the transition from unmarked to marked space. Entrance into a space marked for religious activity could be an impactful experience.⁷⁵⁹ Passing boundary locations, such as doors and gates, reminded ancient individuals of the danger that could enter through these openings, but also made them feel protected by the sensory experience of the amulets and the demarcated space as well as by memories of earlier sensory experiences. The experience of demarcated spaces not only occurred when moving through the space, but also when feeling the presence of an amulet on the body. Some instructions state that the user of the amulet should be pure or should fast while being in the marked space.⁷⁶⁰ So, apart from noticing and experiencing amulets on boundary locations, being within the demarcated space may have been associated with specific behaviour which also enhanced the religious experience. In the case of amulets attached to human bodies, the demarcated space was portable, which was of influence for

756 See the work of Naerebout above and of Guettel Cole on the understanding of space in a temple complex: S. Guettel Cole, *Landscapes, Gender, and Ritual Space: The Ancient Greek Experience* (Berkeley 2004) 39-52. On the experience of space in relation to temple complexes see also: Miles, 'Birds Around the Temple'; Von Ehrenheim, 'Placebo Factors at Healing Sanctuaries'.

757 Research into the relationships between space, religion and psychology demonstrates that geographical location can be an important agent in the processes of meaning making. In these processes embodied experiences, combined with other factors such as culturally conditioned knowledge, play an important role. V. Counted, F. Watts, 'An Introduction to the Psychology of Religion and Place' in: V. Counted, F. Watts (eds.), *The Psychology of Religion and Place* (Cham 2019) 1-12; K. Knott, 'Spatial Theory and the Study of Religion', *Religion Compass* 2.6 (2008) 1102-1116; K. Knott, 'Religion, Space, and Place. The Spatial Turn in Research on Religion', *Religion and Society* 1.1 (2010) 29-43. For the application of this type or research, see for example: A. Maddrell, 'Mapping the Visible and Invisible Topographies of Place and Landscape Through Sacred Mobilities' in: V. Counted, F. Watts (eds.), *The Psychology of Religion and Place* (Cham 2019) 131-144.

758 Graham, *Reassembling Religion*, 47-49, 95. See also: M.M. Miles, 'Birds Around the Temple: Constructing a Sacred Environment' in: J. McInerney, I. Sluiter (eds.), *Valuing Landscape in Classical Antiquity: Natural Environment and Cultural Imagination* (Leiden 2016) 151-195.

759 See for example the discussion on the experiences surrounding doors to sanctuaries in: Van Opstall, 'General Introduction', 1-10.

760 Purity: *PGM* VII. 215-218; *GEMF* 26; *PGM* X. 24-35; Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 8.59-60. Fasting: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 24.180-181; Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 8.58-59. On how being pure and fasting can add to the experience of religious space, see for example: Edmons, *Drawing Down the Moon*, 167-168; I. Csepregi, 'Bonus Intra, Melior Exi! "Inside" and "Outside" at Greek Incubation Sanctuaries' in: E.M. van Opstall (ed.), *Sacred Thresholds: The Door to the Sanctuary in Late Antiquity* (Leiden 2018) 110-135: 116-117; Guettel Cole, *Landscapes, Gender, and Ritual Space*, 40.

the experience of that space.⁷⁶¹ The experience of portability is especially evident in the textual amulets of Late Antiquity and will be further discussed in chapter four.

The area in need of help was controlled by the amulet and thus by the supernatural. The supernatural was expected to be present in the demarcated space through the agency of the amulet. A sixth-century amulet for door protection presents several different ‘responsible’ entities: ‘The might of our God prevailed, and the Lord lighted upon the entrance and didn’t permit to the malicious one to come into. Abraham dwells here; Christ’s blood, cease the evil!’⁷⁶² The supernatural would prevent malevolent influence from entering. The supernatural was believed to be super active in the demarcated space, more active than elsewhere in everyday life.⁷⁶³ The experience of the presence of amulets as well as that of being in a marked, encircled, closed-off and controlled space, users were aware of protective watchfulness of the supernatural. The space in question would have been experienced as a safe space and those using it would have felt more confident. The experience of space the amulet(s) facilitated, had a genuine impact on their users.⁷⁶⁴

3.6 THE EXPERIENCE OF TIME

The use of amulets is dynamic. Amulets were used within different timeframes and some of them may have had an effect for specific amounts of time. They could be used for longer periods, acquire new meanings over time, and even be reused. An amulet could also be discarded when it was no longer necessary. All of this must have influenced the experience of the user and should therefore be considered if our aim is to understand why individuals continued to reach out to amulets. In what follows, I will discuss various layers in the experience of time, starting with the installation of the amulet. I will also address practices of reuse.

3.6.1 A moment in time

The exact moment of first use, with or without accompanying rituals, could influence the experience of amulets. This experience will have been different depending on the time

761 Rask, *Personal Experience*, 112; see also Bonnell Freidin, *Birthing Romans*, 190-191. On the similar perception of body amulets and house amulets see: Faraone, ‘Confronting Evil at the Boundaries’, 9.

762 *PGM P2a*, many thanks to dr. Efstathia Dionysopoulou for the English translation.

763 Comparable to the experience of the supernatural in temple complexes: Miles, ‘Birds Around the Temple’, 188.

764 In line with the argumentation of J. Gruneau Brulin, ‘God and Place as Attachment “Figures”: A Critical Examination’ in: V. Counted, F. Watts (eds.), *The Psychology of Religion and Place* (Cham 2019) 183-200: 193-195. See also: V. Counted, ‘Religious and Place Attachment: A Cascade of Parallel Processes’ in: V. Counted, F. Watts (eds.), *The Psychology of Religion and Place* (Cham 2019) 167-182; Maddrell, ‘Mapping the Visible and Invisible’, 136.

of day and also on the season – especially in relation to availability of natural resources to create amulets. Some instructions for the creation of amulets, specify a time period for the installation of the object. In many instances, the amulet had to be attached before sunrise.⁷⁶⁵ This implies that the amulet was installed or attached at night under the power of the moon.⁷⁶⁶ Visiting a ritual specialist and performing the ritual by moonlight and/or the light of a lamp must have added to the sensory experience of receiving an amulet. In other instructions, the installation of the amulet had to take place at a specific astronomical moment. *PGM XXXVI. 320-32*, an instruction for making an anticonception amulet, states ‘attach it as an amulet (περίαψον) during the waning of the moon [which is] in a female sign of the zodiac on a day of Kronos or Hermes.’⁷⁶⁷ Other instructions mention the seventh day after a new moon,⁷⁶⁸ the day of Jupiter,⁷⁶⁹ when the moon is in Aquarius,⁷⁷⁰ or when the moon is in Leo.⁷⁷¹ Choosing the right time to perform specific rituals was probably the task of the ritual specialist. Still, performing a ritual at a specific time could enhance the feeling of power created by the amulet and underline all aspects belonging to its use. Events of this kind fitted into larger astrological, astrobotanical and astrolithical traditions.⁷⁷² Time thus already played a role in the experiences of amulet users at the moment of attachment and these would have been remembered while the amulets were used.

3.6.2 Duration of use

The duration of amulet use will have varied. Some medical and ‘magical’ handbooks mention specific timeslots. In general, however, it was believed that an amulet functioned for as long as it was attached to the designated location. A body amulet would stop having an effect as soon as it was taken off.⁷⁷³ It could therefore be argued that amulets not only demarcated a space but also a time period, during which they were experienced and expected to function.

Amulets could be worn for specific amounts of time, varying from one hour, to nine

⁷⁶⁵ Scribonius Largus, *Compositiones* 163; Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 29.85, 32.115-116, 23.130; *Medicina Plinii* III 6.1; Alexander of Tralles, *De Febris* P. 1.407.4-7; Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 8.27-28.

⁷⁶⁶ Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 14.53 specifically mentions that the amulet had to be attached during the night.

⁷⁶⁷ *PGM XXXVI. 320-32*. Translation by J. Scarborough in GMPT.

⁷⁶⁸ Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 14.30.

⁷⁶⁹ Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 14.68-69.

⁷⁷⁰ Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 34.82.

⁷⁷¹ GEMF 16.1003-1014. Other examples are: Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 29.26, 31.33; Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 32.74.

⁷⁷² Gordon, ‘Substances to Texts’, 150.

⁷⁷³ Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 10.81.

days, thirty days, a year or forever.⁷⁷⁴ Many of the amulets described in the Greek and Demotic ‘magical’ papyri were made to be used during a specific ritual only.⁷⁷⁵ There could be particular reasons for removing an amulet. In Pliny 30.60 we read that an amulet made in relation to digestive problems was believed to be harmful when worn for a longer period of time. According to Pliny, ‘it must not be so used continuously, for it makes the body thin.’⁷⁷⁶ An amulet may no longer have been effective after a set period of time, but it was assumed that, by then, the problem had been solved or disappeared. When perishable materials were used, an amulet could decay before the end of the intended period of use; in one case referred to by Pliny a new amulet could be made to replace the old one.⁷⁷⁷ Instructions regarding a specific amount of time may have heightened the user’s awareness of the amulet and the problem it had to deal with. Pliny, for example, describes a fever amulet made of a dog tooth. To ensure its efficacy, the patient had to avoid the person who had attached the amulet (the specialist for example) for five days. Aware of the situation, the patient might have felt better after this specific amount of time.⁷⁷⁸ In general, the duration of the problem will have determined the duration of use.

Some instructions prescribe wearing the amulet when needed, but not a second longer. Amulets worn during childbirth, to make things easier, were believed to be so powerful, that they had to be removed immediately after the birth of the child.⁷⁷⁹ Pliny describes an amulet of this kind, that had to be tied to the loins. After delivery, the object not only had to be loosened, but also ‘hastily carried out of the house’.⁷⁸⁰ Its power was considered so strong as to extend to the whole house. Similarly, amulets to prevent miscarriage had to be removed at the right time. Otherwise, they would prevent birth.⁷⁸¹ In other situations there was no pressing need to remove the amulet; it was taken off when no longer needed. Pliny describes a specific amulet that had to be untied when the wearer was no longer suffering from fever.⁷⁸² Alexander of Tralles mentions that an amulet can be taken off when the user was cured, of gout in this case, but may be re-attached when the pain reoccurs.⁷⁸³ An

774 One hour: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 25.134; nine days: Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 14.25; thirty days: Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 8.130 and Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 30.36; 45 days: Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 8.152-153; 360 days Alexander of Tralles, *Therapeutica*, P. 2.585.5-19; a year: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 29.85 and Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 8.27-28; forever: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 30.91-92.

775 PGM IV. 154-285; PGM IV. 930-1114; PGM IV. 2441-2621; GEMF 31.263-276; PGM VII. 478-90; PGM VII. 800-828; PGM VII. 846-61; PGM III. 1-164; PGM IV. 475-829; PGM IV. 1331-1389; PGM IV. 2622-2707; PGM IV. 2891-2942; PGM IV. 3007-86.

776 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 30.60. Translation by Jones, *Pliny, Books 28-32*, 16-17.

777 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 30.36. The LOEB translation does not recognise the use of Latin to indicate a time period.

778 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.107.

779 Dioscorides, *Materia Medica* 3.150.2; Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 27.30, 30.129.

780 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 20.6. Translation by Jones, *Pliny, Books 20-23*, 6-7.

781 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 30.125, 36.151.

782 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 22.61.

783 Alexander of Tralles, *Therapeutica*, P. 2.579.20-31.

instruction for a fever amulet referred to by Pliny stipulates that the amulet must be hidden by the ritual specialist after taking it off.⁷⁸⁴ We may conclude that in many cases amulets were only worn when they were needed. In this sense, the object demarcated a specific time period. All in all, some experiences of the object could be short, but intense; a period during which the user would have been highly aware of it. In other situations, the amulet could be used for a very long time, even an entire lifetime, and the experience would have been very different.

Some amulets were used permanently. Healing amulets, for instance, could in theory be worn after the cure to prevent a relapse.⁷⁸⁵ Pliny 26.24 describes an amulet for healing skin-related problems and gives a different reason for not discarding the amulet: ‘the healed patients must guard it, lest herbalists wickedly plant it again, as I have said in certain places, and bring about a relapse.’⁷⁸⁶ Especially in the case of recurring diseases, such as migraines or malaria fever, one might continue to use one’s amulet to prevent another episode.⁷⁸⁷ Marcellus of Bordeaux describes an amulet against tonsillitis that could be worn permanently to prevent relapses.⁷⁸⁸ As I explained in chapter two, these amulets were believed to act as gatekeepers, expelling disease from the body and preventing new disease from entering.⁷⁸⁹

During its use, the ‘meaning’ of an amulet might change in the sense that it became part of the user’s identity. When using an object for an extended period of time, the initial experience of being healed, protected or endowed with benefits might fade, but the object could still feel special. As many amulets were worn into the grave, they must have been special for the deceased. There are some examples of amulets acquiring a new function in relation to their owners’ death. GMA 28, a victory amulet found on the Vigna Codini in Rome, was found in the mouth of a skull in a cinerary urn. In relation to the rituals surrounding death and burial, the object could be explained as a *Totenpass*. Like a coin in the mouth or an Orphic tablet on the chest, it may have been believed to help the owner on their journey to the netherworld.⁷⁹⁰ Over time, the owner of an amulet, whether wearing it on the body or perceiving it in their environment, may have come to view the object in a different manner. We modern scholars can therefore not always understand the specific

784 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 30.100-101.

785 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.228-229.

786 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 26.24. Translation by Jones, *Pliny, Books 24-27*, 282-283.

787 It is of course possible that the object was buried as a grave good and not have been worn by the deceased during their life.

788 Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 15.67; see also 32.19 for an object that can be worn both to heal and prevent. An earlier version of this instruction can be found in *Medicina Plinii* I 7.5, but the preventative function of the object is not mentioned here. For the continued use of an object to prevent disease from returning see also: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 26.24, 28.228-229.

789 See the discussion on the believed efficacy of amulets in chapter two.

790 Kotansky, GMA 28, 114; D.R. Jordan, ‘The Inscribed Gold Tablet from the Vigna Codini’, *American Journal of Archaeology* 89 (1985) 162-167: 166.

motives of amulet owners.⁷⁹¹ We know something about the motives for making amulets from the texts they carry, but the motives for holding on to an amulet may not have been the same as those for making or acquiring it – new layers of meaning may have been added to the object.

Apart from the impact of using amulets at specific astrological times or for specific time periods, time also had psychosomatic influence, because users made an effort and took time to deal with their problems. Speaking of grief, we often use the saying ‘time heals all wounds’. In relation to ancient healing sanctuaries, H. von Ehrenheim argued that a sojourn at a sanctuary may have resulted in actual health improvement. By going to a healing sanctuary, the patient acknowledged the situation, expected that the visit would help, decided to take the necessary time and take rest to deal with the ailment. This combination of expectations, attention, and rest may have resulted in healing or in a relief of symptoms.⁷⁹² Although it is not known whether amulet users would generally also have taken time to rest, they did decide to spend time to deal with their problem and reach out to an amulet. So, although the experience of a healing sanctuary would have been different from the experience of using an amulet, taking time to use the object could also have had an impact on the amulet user.

All in all, the experience of amulet use was not limited to the single moment of the amulet’s installation, but continued during its use. Use could be short, intense and impactful, or long and habitual. During use, especially longer use, the beliefs attached to the object could change and the object might acquire a different meaning. For all these reasons, amulet use was dynamic.

3.6.3 De-installation and assessment

In general, there probably was no formal moment of assessment at which the amulet would be de-installed. We do not know how amulet users assessed the efficacy of their personal amulets.⁷⁹³ As the foregoing discussion shows, amulets could be used for a variety of time periods and their meaning could change over time. Some amulets had to be removed after a certain period. They could then be stored, for example, for future use.⁷⁹⁴ Amulet(s) could be buried along with the deceased user as (a) personal object(s) or for a new function in the afterlife. We cannot rule out the possibility that amulets were discarded, thrown away, melted, or simply got lost.⁷⁹⁵ As will be discussed below, amulets could also be reused as

791 J.F. Quack, *Altägyptische Amulette und ihre Handhabung* (Tübingen 2022) 40–41.

792 Von Ehrenheim, ‘Placebo Factors at Healing Sanctuaries’, 108, 113.

793 See for example how Galen discusses and rationalises the effects of amulets and other practices, as discussed by Petit, ‘Galen, Pharmacology and the Boundaries of Medicine’.

794 *Bulla* found in House of the Menander (I, 10,4); J. Ward-Perkins, A. Claridge, *Pompeii AD 79, Exhibition Catalogue, Boston, Museum of Fine Arts* (Boston 1978) I 31, colour plate, no. 40; II 132, no. 40.

795 GMA 7 is an example of an amulet that was probably lost as it was found in a bathhouse. See also: de Bruyn and Dijkstra, ‘A Checklist’, 47; and see P.Mich. 18.768.

votives. In that case they were purposely discarded and their functions changed.⁷⁹⁶

3.7 EXPERIENCING CIRCULARITY: THE IMPACT OF REUSING AMULETS

The process of amulet use shows aspects of circularity. Some amulets may have been stored to be used again by the same individual or by someone else. In this section, I will discuss several forms of reuse: the use of second-hand material to make amulets, the reuse of amulets as amulets, and the reuse of amulets as something else. I will subsequently explore the motives for and impact of reuse in order to understand why reuse took place and how it influenced the experience of using amulets.

So far, circularity has not been an element of the study of amulets, because it is often impossible to tell if they were reused, especially when the archaeological context is unknown or when the object does not carry a text.⁷⁹⁷ However, new approaches in research enable us to study a small corpus of amulet circularity.

3.7.1 Circular processes in amulet use

Under the influence of research into ‘the cultural biography of things’, we have come to recognise that objects can go through different life stages – which can be studied.⁷⁹⁸ An object can have multiple meanings during its life cycle, from being a practical tool to being a social commodity. Reuse was often studied as something associated with Late Antiquity, reflecting a period of crisis, and as a phenomenon belonging to art and architecture (*spolia*).⁷⁹⁹ Recently, the reuse of ancient objects in a wider sense has attracted new scholarly attention

796 For amulets found in the context of a temple/religious complex see for example: GMA 3, 44, 35, 64. Mastrocinque, ‘Phylacteries’, 141.

797 On the text bias in amulets see: Faraone, *Transformation*: texts make objects recognisable as amulets for modern scholars, but that does not mean that objects without texts were not used as amulets or reused in later times.

798 Kopytoff, ‘The Cultural Biography of Things’, 64–68. Kopytoff stresses that the meaning of objects can not only change over time, but can also be viewed differently by different people at the same time. See also the discussion in section 1.2.1 on object agency.

799 C.N. Duckworth, A. Wilson, ‘Introduction: Recycling and Reuse in the Roman economy’ in: C.N. Duckworth, A. Wilson (eds.), *Recycling and Reuse in the Roman Economy* (Oxford 2020) 1–8: 2, 6; D.Y. Ng, M. Swetnam-Burland, ‘Introduction: Reuse, Renovation, Reiteration’ in: D.Y. Ng, M. Swetnam-Burland (eds.), *Reuse and Renovation in Roman Material Culture. Functions, Aesthetics, Interpretations* (Cambridge 2018) 1–23: 2–4.

and research shows that reuse and recycling were common practice.⁸⁰⁰ Bavuso et al. have shown that the notion of circular dynamics can be applied to the research of many types of ancient objects.⁸⁰¹ In a linear process an object would be discarded after its initial use, but objects could also be reclaimed: ‘the object is removed from its original context and used again with or without a change in use.’⁸⁰² The publication in question utilises ‘reuse’ as an umbrella term for all the possible processes an object might go through, including: curation, maintenance, remanufacturing, lateral cycling, secondary use, and recycling.⁸⁰³ Several of these processes can also be applied to the biographies of amulets. ‘Reuse’ may refer to the use of second-hand materials to create amulets, to amulets being used again as amulets, and to amulets being given a new function, for example as a votive. Examples of these three categories will be analysed below.

Using second-hand materials to create an amulet

Amulets could be made of or with materials that had in some way formed part of objects with a different function (both religious and non-religious). This is a form of recycling: from one (religious) object into the next.

In some cases, the recycled material added power to the amulet.⁸⁰⁴ In an instruction from Roman Egypt, we read that a piece of linen cloth should be used as an amulet during the performance of a specific ritual; not just any piece of linen, but a piece of the clothing of a cult statue of Harpokrates.⁸⁰⁵ A very special second-hand material concerns an Orphic tablet found in an amulet case.⁸⁰⁶ The handwriting on this golden tablet has been dated to the third or second century BCE. At a certain point in the object’s life, the tablet was cropped,

800 This is one of the aims of Ng, Swetnam-Burland, ‘Introduction’, 4, 6-8. However, apart from votives, ancient religious objects are not often studied with a focus on reuse. See for example: J. Hughes, ‘“Souvenirs of the Self” Personal Belongings as Votive Offerings in Ancient Religion’, *Religion in the Roman Empire* 3.2 (2017) 181-201. Votives are used as an example to describe the possibilities of reuse in: Ng, Swetnam-Burland, ‘Introduction’, 5. For the role of personal objects gifted as votives in the sanctuary see: A. Hartmann, ‘Beyond the Bones: Relics in Greek Temples’ in: H.P. Hahn, A. Klöckner, D. Wicke (eds.), *Values and Revaluations. The Transformation and Genesis of ‘Values in Things’ from Archaeological and Anthropological Perspectives* (Oxford 2022) 175-192.

801 I. Bavuso, et al., ‘Circular Economy in the Roman Period and the Early Middle Ages – Methods of Analysis for a Future Agenda’, *Open Archaeology* 9 (2023) 1-18.

802 Bavuso et al., ‘Circular Economy’, 2.

803 All from Bavuso et al., ‘Circular Economy’, 3-4. On recycling in the ancient world see: J.T. Peña, ‘Recycling in the Roman World. Concepts, Questions, Materials, and Organization’ in: C.N. Duckworth, A. Wilson (eds.), *Recycling and Reuse in the Roman Economy* (Oxford 2020) 9-58.

804 Pliny the Elder gives several instructions for amulet-like objects that include the use of ‘a piece of a nail taken from a cross’ and ‘a cord taken from a crucifixion’ to heal fever, ‘the rope used by a suicide’ for headaches, ‘nails that have been extracted from a tomb’ to create a fence against nightmares. Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.46 (included in *Medicina Plinii* III 15.1), 28.49 and 34.151.

805 PGM IV. 930-1114 (lines 1055-1085). P.Oxy. LXXXII 5308 requires the use of ‘a holy thread’ from a garment, presumably some ritual garment.

806 On the question whether Orphic tablets are actually amulets see McClay, *The Bacchic Gold Tablets*, 107-135. (The short answer is no, see 113).

possibly to make it fit into the container it was found in, a golden tubular capsule, attached to a necklace. The capsule is dated to the second or third century CE. This means that the tablet could have been in use for a very long period before it was put into the capsule. As this is a typical amulet capsule, the Orphic tablet is believed to have been used as an amulet from that point.⁸⁰⁷

In other cases, using second-hand materials, for instance a potsherd to write on⁸⁰⁸ or a piece of cloth from an old garment to wrap something, was probably just practical.⁸⁰⁹ Excavations have yielded a variety of amulets made of papyrus that had already been inscribed with other (documentary) texts. The uninscribed reverse of papyrus sheets could be recut or older texts could be erased and over-written.⁸¹⁰ Reusing papyrus was common in the ancient world, obviously for practical reasons. It would have been cheaper than new papyrus and was readily available.⁸¹¹ For amulets, too, this seems to have been just practical use of resources; using second-hand materials was necessarily enhancing the efficacy of the object.

On the other hand, one might raise the question if reuse of materials was seen as detrimental to the efficacy of the amulet. Some Greek-Egyptian handbook instructions specify that ‘new’ papyrus be used – which, supports the notion that it was quite common to use second-hand papyrus.⁸¹² Emphasis on the use of new and clean papyrus may imply that an amulet made of this material was considered more powerful than one made of second-hand papyrus – unlike amulets made of religious textiles, where the second-hand material added power.

Reusing an amulet as an amulet

A small group of amulets shows signs of having been reused as amulets. For many centuries, gems in general were often reused, recycled, and upcycled. They were expensive and therefore kept, stored or set in new mounts.⁸¹³ Gemstones were of course used for personal adornment, but added inscriptions and imagery make it clear that some of the gems which have been found, were used as amulets. Most examples of reuse of gemstone amulets date

807 British Museum, London, registration number 1843,0724.3.

808 PGM CXXIII. a.; Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 16.40 describes the use of a piece of a sieve found alongside the road; see also: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 24.171.

809 Similar recipes in *Medicina Plinii* I 1.4; Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 24.106, 170; Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 1.43.

810 Reused papyrus can, for instance, be found in: SM 34 (on the back), PGM P15a (erased), PGM P6c (on the back).

811 E. Salmenkivi, ‘Reuse and Recycling of Papyrus’ in: C.N. Duckworth, A. Wilson (eds.), *Recycling and Reuse in the Roman Economy* (Oxford 2020) 89-103.

812 GEMF 16.1098-1104 and PGM XXIIa. 11-14.

813 Dasen, Nagy, ‘Gems’, 423; J. Spier, *Late Antique and Early Christian Gems* (Wiesbaden 2007) 82. It is difficult to draw a clear line between traditional and Christian practices where these objects are concerned.

to Late Antiquity and will be discussed in the next chapter. One extraordinary example, however, dates from the second or third century. This gem carries an Abrasax figure with inscriptions on the front and a request on the back. The text inscribed on the back requests favour for Ptolemaios before all people. The name Ptolemaios was inscribed after an earlier line had been cut away. Although we may be dealing here with a scribal error that was immediately corrected, it seems more likely that the name of an earlier user was removed and replaced with Ptolemaios's.⁸¹⁴ In general, there is little evidence for the adaption of names on gemstone amulets, because most of these do not carry names. M.S. Nutzman argued that amulets without names were reused more easily and that the practice was more common than is evident from the sources. Her research, focussing on Roman Palestine, notes that more amulet tablets than gemstone amulets were found in graves. Textual amulets, whether metal tablets or papyrus, contain much more personal information than gemstone amulets as the latter have very little space for text. As a result, people would have been more inclined to reuse gemstone amulets; amuletic tablets and papyri were deposited with the deceased.⁸¹⁵

An example of a reused metal tablet comes from ancient Carnuntum, in modern Austria. The find concerns an individual buried with four small, rolled-up thin metal tablets.⁸¹⁶ Three tablets were made of silver and one of gold. They were inscribed with Greek texts and/or *charaktêres* – an untranslated (or untranslatable) script. One of the silver tablets carries an intelligible text and is considered an amulet to heal migraines.⁸¹⁷ The context of the grave has been dated to the third century CE, but on the basis of the handwriting, the editor, R.D. Kotansky, dated the silver migraine amulet to the first or second century.⁸¹⁸ The amulet is thus older than the grave context; it was probably not created for the deceased, but had been in use for a long time, something that would have remained unnoticed if the context of the grave was not known.

Because of the reuse and because migraine is a hereditary disease, Kotansky argued that the object may have passed from generation to generation as an heirloom.⁸¹⁹ It is indeed possible that amulets were passed on to family members; the creation and use of amulets was frequently a family matter, as we have seen in chapter two. Both amulet instructions and amulets were, for example, found in a house context in Kellis, Egypt.

814 C.A. Faraone, 'Notes on Some Greek Magical Gems in New England', *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 53 (2013) 326-349: 332-334.

815 M.S. Nutzman, *Contested Cures. Identity and Ritual Healing in Roman and Late Antique Palestine* (Edinburgh 2022) 23-24.

816 See: GMA 13-16 and A.A. Barb, 'Griechische Zaubertexte vom Gräberfelde westlich des Lagers', *Der Römische Limes in Österreich* 16 (1926) 52-67. More recent information is not available.

817 See GMA 13.

818 See GMA 13.

819 GMA 13, page 59.

One of the amulets carries the name of a member of the family.⁸²⁰ GEMF 26, a small amulet handbook, contains the following restriction: ‘and you shall not share it except with legitimate offspring’.⁸²¹ Childhood amulets, such as the *bullae*, were possibly also passed on within families. It is often argued that they were sacrificed to the household gods when their wearer reached adulthood.⁸²² A. Olivier, however, argues that pieces of jewellery, including *lunulae*, could become heirlooms and were reused.⁸²³ Childhood amulets have been found, stored in jewellery boxes in Pompeii, which suggests they were keepsakes or objects waiting for a new owner.⁸²⁴

In the early fifth century, a woman living in ancient Vindonissa, in modern day Switzerland, was buried with two amulet tablets, namely a golden tablet rolled up within a silver one.⁸²⁵ The tablets were inserted together in an amulet case. The texts on the tablets request protection and benefits. They need more research and the current edition is being debated. However, the editor argued that the tablets could be dated to the late second century.⁸²⁶ The objects may have been used by multiple generations before it was taken into the grave in the fifth century.⁸²⁷

Although in specific cases uncertainties remain and sources are scarce, there can be no doubt that some amulets remained in use for long periods of time and knew several owners, retaining their function as amulets. It is probable that some amulets were reused in a family context. It should be kept in mind that the perceived functioning of the objects may have changed over time. Layers of meaning and layers of memories probably added to their character and value.

Reusing an amulet as something else

Amulets may at some point have lost their meaning or been used for another amuletic purpose; they could in theory also have been used as something else. As I have shown above, after their owner’s demise, amulets sometimes assumed a new function in the

820 Brand, *Religion and Everyday Life of Manichaeans*, 104. Handbook: P.Kellis I Gr. 85ab, amulet: P.Kellis I Gr. 87.

821 GEMF 26.8-22. Translation by M. Zellmann-Rohrer in GEMF.

822 For a collection of primary sources see: Szilágyi, ‘Late Roman Bullae’, 20n.55.

823 A. Oliver, ‘Jewelry for the Unmarried’ in: D.E. Kleiner, S.B. Matheson (eds.), *I Claudia II. Women in Roman Art and Society* (Austin 2000) 115-124; C. Ward, ‘Ornamenta Muliebria: Jewellery and Identity in the Roman Period’ in: A.J. Batten, K. Olson (eds.), *Dress in Mediterranean Antiquity. Greeks, Romans, Jews, Christians* (London 2021) 95-108: 106. For examples see: A. Bedini (ed.), *Mistero di una fanciulla. Ori e gioielli della Roma di Marco Aurelio da una nuova scoperta archeologica* (Rome 1995).

824 *Bulla* found in House of the Menander (I, 10,4): Ward-Perkins, Claridge, *Pompeii AD 79*, I 31, colour plate, no. 40; II 132, no. 40. Necklace: Faraone, *Transformation*, 59-60.

825 W. Kosack, ‘Zwei altkoptische Talismane aus dem römischen Gräberfeld von Windisch-Oberburg’, *Pro Vindonissa* (2003) 11-15.

826 For criticism, for example concerning the assessment of the language, see: K. Dosoo, E.O.D. Love, M. Preininger (eds.), ‘KYP M937’ in *Kyprianos Database of Ancient Ritual Texts and Objects*, last accessed September 2025.

827 The scribe who created the object perhaps also copied the exact handwriting when copying the text for the amulet from an older handbook. See Kosack, ‘Zwei altkoptische Talismane’, 13.

deceased's afterlife.⁸²⁸ Amulets were also reused as votives.⁸²⁹ In ancient Pannonia a typical golden amulet capsule was found with a votive inscription on it. It was given as a votive to Silvanus Viator, a local god, perhaps because it had done its job: its user had been cured, had felt protected in a specific situation or had been given some extra luck. The amulet was reused to thank the god.⁸³⁰ As I mentioned above, ancient sources refer to childhood amulets being sacrificed to the household gods when their wearers entered adulthood.⁸³¹ They were no longer necessary and acquired a new function.

3.7.2 Motives for the reuse of amulets

As noted above, some amulets show signs of continued use over quite extensive periods of time. As amulets were also made of old or reused materials, it can be argued that the element of time played a role in the value ascribed to amulets. In a paper on the reuse of Roman bracelets, Swift argues that we should consider the perceived value of the object when discussing motivations for reuse.⁸³² In this context, she mentions use value, economic value, and historical value.⁸³³ In the eyes of the users, the original object had a certain value, for example use value: it was practical. Over time the same object might acquire a different value. A heirloom, for example, had sentimental and/or historical value. The value an individual ascribes to an object is thus personal and can change over time.⁸³⁴ We can also apply the notion of these three types of value to the reuse of amulets.

Economic value often played a role in reuse and should therefore also be considered for reuse in the context of amulets.⁸³⁵ Reusing material saves money; reusing papyrus instead of buying new sheets is a case in point. Gemstones had a high monetary value and were therefore less likely to be discarded. In her study on the reuse of votives, Hughes analyses the differences between the experience of offering a ready-made votive and that of bringing a reused votive.⁸³⁶ Some of her observations can be applied to amulets as well. For example, when reusing an existing object as a votive – reusing an amulet, for instance – it was

828 See GMA 28.

829 For amulets found in relation to a temple/religious complex see for example: GMA 3, 44, 35, 64.

830 E. Tóth, 'Silvanus Viator', *Alba Regia* 13 (1980) 91-103: 93.

831 For a collection of primary sources see: Szilágyi, 'Late Roman Bullae', 20n.55. On amulets found on children who died before reaching adulthood see: C. Ward, 'Ornamenta Muliebria', 106.

832 E. Swift, 'Reuse of Roman Artefacts in Late Antiquity and the Early Medieval West. A Case Study from Britain of Bracelets and Belt Fittings' in: C.N. Duckworth, A. Wilson (eds.), *Recycling and Reuse in the Roman Economy* (Oxford 2020) 425-446.

833 Swift, 'Reuse of Roman Artefacts', 426.

834 Swift, 'Reuse of Roman Artefacts', 426. On the value of objects see also: H.P. Hahn, A. Klöckner, D. Wicke (eds.), *Values and Revaluations. The Transformation and Genesis of 'Values in Things' from Archaeological and Anthropological Perspectives* (Oxford 2022).

835 It plays the most important role in Swift's 'Reuse of Roman Artefacts', 440; C. Moser, C. Smith, 'Transformations of Value: Lived Religion and the Economy', *Religion in the Roman Empire* 5 (2019) 3-22.

836 Hughes, 'Souvenirs of the Self'. On the functioning of non-purpose made votives in temples see also: Hartmann, 'Beyond the Bones', 175-192.

unnecessary to engage a craftsman or ritual specialist.⁸³⁷ When an amulet was reused as an amulet without changing the object, it would have cost less or nothing. The object would have been available and could perhaps be applied immediately, which would have been important in acute health situations.⁸³⁸

Secondly, the believed efficacy of the object or the material – the religious use value – could play a role in reuse. An existing migraine amulet could be reused simply because it was still believed to be powerful. Furthermore, as I have mentioned above, the use of certain second-hand materials was believed to enhance an amulet's agency. Examples are the reuse of fabrics produced for and/or used in a religious context and the reuse of an Orphic tablet.

Thirdly, there is the aspect of time. Memories, experiences and emotions attached to objects made them special in the eyes of the users. The 'biographies' of the objects and those of their previous owners played an important role in reuse. Hughes makes a similar point for reused votives: a reused votive would be joined by layers of memories or associations that added value and meaning to the object. This contributed to the personal experience of using it.⁸³⁹ Using an amulet that had been handed down within the family would add another layer of meaning and emotion to its believed power. These elements would have influenced the emotional impact of using and wearing it.

The impact of reuse

Unfortunately, scholars can only study amulets in the state they were found in. Without information on the archaeological context or the presence of visible alterations, such as the change of a name or the addition of a votive inscription, it remains unclear how many people used the object. Despite the limitations imposed by the surviving evidence, there can be no doubt that some amulets were reused, for economic, historical or emotional reasons. Reusing amulets must have changed the user's experiences in at least some cases, for instance because there was no ritual specialist involved. In addition, the reuse of religious objects could add meaning and in this way may have provided an increased sense of power and agency. In the case of amulets that had been in use as heirlooms, emotions, experiences and memories influenced this sense of agency. Examples of reuse indicate that in the eyes of ancient individuals, amulets could retain their efficacy over long periods of time. Reuse likely had more impact on the experiences of amulet users than would perhaps initially appear.

837 Hughes, 'Souvenirs of the Self', 181.

838 Hughes, 'Souvenirs of the Self', 194-195.

839 Hughes, 'Souvenirs of the Self', 187, 194-195.

3.8 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have explored the experiences of amulet use. I have argued that religious strategies involving objects could have a large impact on the emotional and physical well-being of their users. Amulets impacted their users through expectations and experiences; psychosomatic processes could make users feel better. Expectations formed throughout the process of creation and use and the sensory aspects of the use itself shaped the experiences of the object in place and time.

Even before the installation or actual use of the amulet, several factors probably already influenced experiences and outcomes. Expectations as to what the amulet would do and how it would do it at least partly shaped the actual experience of its use. Ideas about the believed effect of the object and the contact with the specialist also had an impact. While they were worn, amulets were seen, felt, smelt, and even heard, and in accompanying rituals materials were sometimes tasted. By sensing the amulet, amulet users would have been aware of the object 'at work' and feel its healing or protective power. Sensory awareness reminded the user of the object's power, of the accompanying rituals and of the expectations they had. Noticing the amulet would reactivate the relationship between user and object. Sensory experience made the user perceive the power of the supernatural, which enhanced their feeling of safety, control and/or healing. These sensory experiences were not necessary to make the object effective. Its material presence and proximity to the designated location, however, definitely was.

Expectations embedded in general ideas regarding religious space shaped the experience of the amulet and of the area it demarcated. Amulets as boundary markers created an 'inside area' separate from the outside world. Amulet users experienced these boundaries and the shift from protected to un-protected space. Within this demarcated space, the amulet user could feel safe, secure, and in control of the situation. This may have been a reason why amulets were often preferred to alternative religious strategies.

By choosing to use amulets, ancient individuals decided to spend time and resources to deal with their issues. This probably already contributed to the experience of well-being. Some amulets were used for a short time, with the object demarcating a specific time period. Other amulets were used for longer periods of time, with the experience of the object changing over time. For instance, an amulet used for healing could acquire a protective function, preventing the return of the ailment. This does not mean that the object became less valuable. As the aspect of reuse shows, certain amulets were believed to retain their power, agency and dynamism for long periods of time.

Most textual sources relating to amulets concern the creation of the object, or the moment of installation, but not the (experience of) actual use. Therefore, studying the impact of amulets involves a certain amount of speculation. However, using a materiality approach to the process of amulet use reveals a wide variety of plausible amulet experiences.

Amulets must have had an effect on their users, something that made people come back to them. Expectations and the experiences which developed during the process of amulet use had an impact on the users. The proximity of the object, the sensory experience of its efficacy, and the experience of being in a demarcated safe space may have made the user feel better. From an etic point of view amulets are incapable of healing or bringing victory in court. However they could bring about a sense of emotional and/or physical well-being, relieving symptoms and enhancing feelings of safety and control. In this way, amulet use certainly had an effect, which may be why, for centuries, people were strongly motivated to come back to amulets.