



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

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

Kret, P.M.M.

Citation

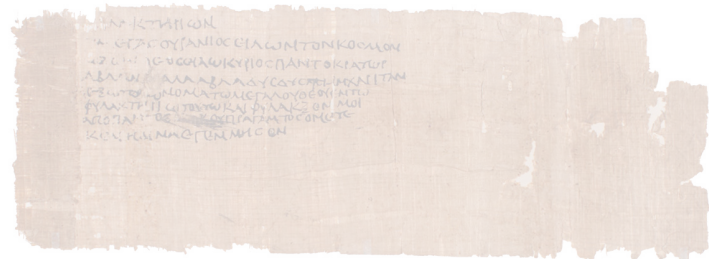
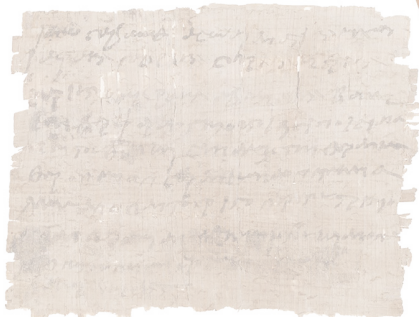
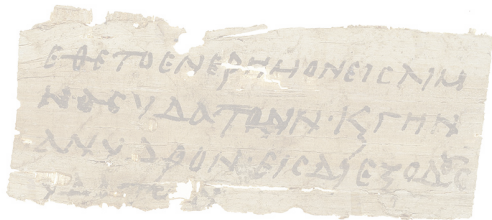
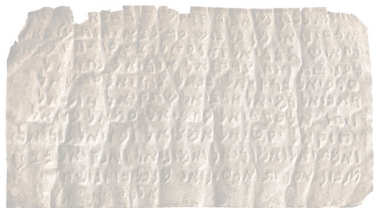
Kret, P. M. M. (2026, September 22). *Amulets, materiality and experience: demarcating space in the Roman world*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4309854>

Version: Publisher's Version

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

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

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



CHAPTER



4

**CONTINUITY AND CHANGE
IN LATE ANTIQUITY**

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN LATE ANTIQUITY

Amulets were used for a very long period of time during which they remained omnipresent as a means to help people deal with daily issues. However, although amulets stayed in use, they did not stay the same. In this chapter, I will address the developments amulets underwent (or not) in Late Antiquity. In this period the rapid dissemination of Christianity had its influence on amulets. Over time, the perception of the supernatural power believed to direct the agency of amulets changed from traditional Graeco-Roman to Christian. This chapter explores the impact of both change and continuity in order to elucidate why amulets continued to be used.

This chapter is divided into three parts. First, I will discuss contexts of change. Second, I will provide a critical analysis of a new group of sources on amulets – the sermons of bishops. These sources, written by a small elite of early Christian authoritative figures, give insight into several relevant religious developments in Late Antiquity. Finally, I will discuss changes and continuities in the actual processes of amulet use to shed light on how the introduction of new elements and the continued use of old practices impacted amulet users.

4.1 CHANGE AND AMULETS

Despite the stability of certain aspects, amulet use was never static and changes were already visible before the influence of Christianity. C.A. Faraone convincingly argues that in the first century, in the context of the wider ‘epigraphic turn’ and against the background of the introduction of new writing techniques, important textual changes took place in amulets. Oral expressions, such as ritual speech acts, now often took a written form on amulets such as *lamellae* and gems.⁸⁴⁰ In the second and third centuries, the number of amulets with text increased even further and the texts became more elaborate. New textual forms, like the ‘vanishing acts’ or *charaktères*, were introduced.⁸⁴¹ Similarly, the iconography of amulets became more elaborate over time.⁸⁴² In addition, it was in

840 Faraone, *Transformation*; see also: Kotansky, *Greek Magical Amulets*, xviii; Kotansky, ‘Textual Amulets’, 547; Dasen, Nagy, ‘Gems’, 433-434. Similarly, curse tablets also go through a variety of textual developments in the Roman period: Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 5-12.

841 Faraone, *Transformation*, 240-242; Faraone, *Vanishing Act*, 6-7; Kotansky, *Greek Magical Amulets*, xviii. See also: Kotansky, ‘Textual Amulets’, 544; Dasen, Nagy, ‘Gems’, 433. On *charaktères*: R. Gordon, ‘Charaktères Between Antiquity and Renaissance: Transmission and Re-invention’ in: V. Dasen, J.M. Spieser (eds.), *Les savoirs magiques et leur transmission de l’Antiquité à la Renaissance* (Florence 2014) 253-300: 299; Gordon, ‘Performative Images’, 107-108.

842 Where at first one single image was enough to avert evil – for instance a single eye to avert the evil eye – more elements were now deemed necessary. The main image would be surrounded by attacking animals, weapons etc. to control the dangerous image of the eye. Faraone, *Transformation*, 1-4, 240-242; Faraone, *Talismans and Trojan Horses*, 74; Dasen, ‘Probaskania’, 182.

the third to fourth century that the large ritual handbooks combining local Demotic and Greek traditions, such as PGM IV and VII, were compiled in Egypt. These handbooks contain many instructions for making amulets.⁸⁴³ In Late Antiquity the use of amuletic inscriptions on everyday objects increased even further.⁸⁴⁴ Due to these developments in text and iconography, late antique amulets are more recognisable as such for scholars than those of earlier times, and the texts provide us with more information on the perceived functioning of these objects.

Christian elements are found on amulets from the third century onwards, and during the fourth century the number of amulets with such elements increased.⁸⁴⁵ T.S. de Bruyn and J.H.F. Dijkstra describe the Christianisation of amulets as ‘the endpoint of a gradual process which becomes most visible in the papyri from the second half of the fifth century onwards’.⁸⁴⁶ K. Dosoo shows how, in the fourth and fifth centuries, references to Greek and Egyptian deities on amulets from Egypt are gradually replaced by references to Jesus and archangels.⁸⁴⁷ In this period Christianity became the main religion in Egypt: the ‘number of individuals for whom a Christian identity may be imputed climbs substantially in the fourth century before reaching a peak in the fifth.’⁸⁴⁸ It is especially from the fifth century onwards that non-Christian elements in texts written on amulets are supplanted by biblical or liturgical passages.⁸⁴⁹ Christian amulets would often solely consist of passages from the Bible, which means they are sometimes less recognisable for researchers. The fifth century saw the gradual decline of the ‘traditional’ metal tablet and gemstone amulets.⁸⁵⁰ This does not mean that amulets in general disappeared; gemstones amulets continued to be (re)used and the number of papyrus and parchment amulets found in Egypt shows a distinct peak in the fifth century.⁸⁵¹

843 Dieleman, ‘Greco-Egyptian Magical Papyri’, 316-320; Kotansky, *Greek Magical Amulets*, xix; Kotansky, ‘Textual Amulets’, 547.

844 Faraone, *Transformation*, 1-4, 177-179; Faraone, *Vanishing Acts*, 78; Kotansky, ‘Incantations and Prayers’, 107-108; A. van den Hoek, E. Feissel, J.J. Herrmann jr., ‘More Lucky Wearers: The Magic of Portable Inscriptions’ in: D. Boschung, J.N. Bremmer (eds.), *The Materiality of Magic* (Paderborn 2015) 309-356.

845 De Bruyn, Dijkstra, ‘A checklist’, 174.

846 De Bruyn, Dijkstra, ‘A checklist’, 174.

847 Note that Jewish and ‘magical’ elements continue to exist: Dosoo, ‘Magical Names’, 128-130.

848 Dosoo, ‘Magical Names’, *passim*, but specifically 111-113. Dosoo explains why we should be very critical of his approach, but his research with a focus on ‘magical’ texts confirms research into documentary texts.

849 Focussing on the names of the supernatural in question: Dosoo, ‘Magical Names’, 128-132.

850 For a ‘chronology’ see for example: Kotansky, *Greek Magical Amulets*, xviii; Dasen, Nagy, ‘Gems’, 433-434. For a decline in the sixth century see also: Kotansky, ‘Textual Amulets’, 544. Faraone described the decline of gemstone amulets, but simultaneously noticed a rise in the application of imagery associated with round gemstones to flat papyrus strips or metal tablets, in other words a shift in the material that was used. Faraone, ‘Circular Gem-Designs’.

851 Gems will be discussed in section 4.3G of this chapter. Papyrus amulets peaked again in the tenth century: Dosoo, ‘Magical Names’, 90.

4.1.1 Material expressions of late antique religions

The developments in relation to amulets did not take place in a vacuum. Some traditional Graeco-Roman religious practices discontinued in Late Antiquity – lead curse tablets are a case in point. They gradually fell into disuse. J.G. Gager argues that these lead tablets are not found after the eighth century and K. Dosoo sees a decline in applied aggressive religious practices, such as curses, in Egypt from the fourth to the twelfth century.⁸⁵² J. van der Vliet noticed a decline in the references to divination and dream visitations in the large handbooks from Roman Egypt.⁸⁵³ Traditional types of sacrifice likewise fell into disuse. While there is discussion on traces of traditional sacrifice in early Christian religious practices, there can be no doubt that the practice of plant and animal sacrifice slowly disappeared.⁸⁵⁴

On the other hand, Christian material practices gained ground, especially from the fourth century onwards. As R. Wiśniewski argues ‘The fact of having seen, touched, and heard is essential for the credibility of the Christian message. However, Christian culture of the second and third centuries was more a culture of reading, or listening, than seeing or touching.’⁸⁵⁵ Especially from the fourth century onwards more practices that were material in character came into use.⁸⁵⁶ Actual written copies of the Scriptures, relics, holy oils, pilgrimage mementos and the experience of sacred places were now valued for their materiality.⁸⁵⁷ These material presences were understood as powerful, for example in relation to healing and exorcism.⁸⁵⁸ Something that may be defined as early Christian art emerged during the third century. It took time for Christianity to develop a recognisable visual vocabulary with clear Christian elements.⁸⁵⁹ Non-Christian motifs were used in Christian settings and interpreted as Christian. Only at later stages these would be perceived as Christian.⁸⁶⁰ From the fourth century onwards, early Christian material

852 Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 27-30. The practice of cursing others is prescribed in later formularies, but not with textual objects. This explains the decline in textual applied objects. Dosoo, ‘Magical Names’, 90-92.

853 Van der Vliet, ‘Christian Spells’, 329.

854 D.C. Ullucci, ‘Sacrifice’ in: *Brill Encyclopedia of Early Christianity Online*, last accessed September 2025. For a more in-depth analysis see: D.C. Ullucci, *The Christian Rejection of Animal Sacrifice* (Oxford 2011).

855 Wiśniewski, *Cult of Relics*, 144.

856 R. Wiśniewski, ‘Relics’ in: *Brill Encyclopedia of Early Christianity Online*, last accessed September 2025.

857 See for example: G. Vikan, ‘Art, Medicine, and Magic in the Early Byzantium’, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 38 (1984) 65-86 and the discussion on ‘Christian alternatives’ in section 4.3H of this chapter.

858 For the Scriptures as powerful: J.N. Bremmer, ‘From Books with Magic to Magical Books in Ancient Greece and Rome’ in: D. Boschung, J.N. Bremmer (eds.), *The Materiality of Magic* (Paderborn 2015) 241-270: 265-266. For relics see: Wiśniewski, *Cult of Relics*, 1.

859 R.M. Jensen, ‘Art’ in: P. Esler (ed.), *The Early Christian World* (London 2017) 717-744: 717-718.

860 R.M. Jensen, ‘Towards a Christian Material Culture’ in: M.M. Mitchell, F.M. Young (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Christianity. Volume 1: Origins to Constantine* (Cambridge 2006) 568-585: 572-574. See also: Bowes, ‘Early Christian Archaeology’.

expression increased significantly. P. Cox Miller describes this as the ‘material turn’ of the fourth century, in which the Christian religion began to include the material world.⁸⁶¹ Scholars relate this development to the conversion of Constantine and the legitimisation of Christianity, which allowed Christian expression to move into the public sphere.⁸⁶²

While material expressions of Christianity became more prominent for practical reasons, people also became susceptible to the material in religious settings.⁸⁶³ As the political context grew less hostile towards Christianity, its material world became more accepted.⁸⁶⁴ The human body was an important element of early Christian materiality. As S. Ashbrook Harvey observes: ‘Christian teachings on the incarnation and physical resurrection of Christ set the body into high relief. Physicality itself became significant.’⁸⁶⁵ Relics consisting of human remains and contact relics played a crucial role in saint and martyr cults. In addition, the bodily experience of the material through the senses became more important. Through the senses, people could encounter the holy.⁸⁶⁶ The impact of the sensory experience of Christian material practices will be further studied below.

All of these observations make it clear that changes in amulet use and the increasing popularity of amulets in the fifth century must be examined and analysed within the general context of changes in early Christian material practices.

4.1.2 Studying change

This chapter will study both change and continuity in the different stages of the process of amulet use. As I have shown in chapter one, amulet use embraces humans, objects, and places. The relationships between these elements are never static – when one element changes (for instance, ideas regarding the objects’ supernatural power), the relations change as well. This means that amulets continuously change and evolve.⁸⁶⁷ Building on findings from the previous chapter, this chapter examines how the introduction of new elements impacted the relationships and stages of the process of amulet use, with special attention to experiences of the material presence of amulets through the senses and the spatial and temporal aspects of these experiences. Studying amulet use as a process enables us to pursue a more in-depth analysis of both continuity and change.

Amulet use was dynamic and changed and developed in a world that changed as well. Many scholars have studied the Graeco-Roman world’s transition towards Christianity and recognised that certain religious elements remained the same as new ones were introduced.

861 P. Cox Miller, *The Corporeal Imagination. Signifying the Holy in Late Ancient Christianity* (Philadelphia 2009) 3-4.

862 Jensen, ‘Art’, 720.

863 For the discussion regarding these developments, see Jensen, ‘Art’, 717-718.

864 Cox Miller, *Corporeal Imagination*, 3-4.

865 Harvey, ‘The Senses in Religion’, 97-98.

866 Harvey, ‘The Senses in Religion’, 97-98; Toner, ‘Sensing the Ancient Past’, 19-20.

867 On the work of Crellin as a basis for my approach, see chapter one section 1.4.

In relation to ‘magical’ religious practices in Late Antiquity, A.A. Barb asserts that ‘There are few human activities in the history of which an unbroken chain of tradition from the remotest antiquity to our days can be traced more clearly and conclusively than in the Magic Arts.’⁸⁶⁸ Writing about early Christian Roman Egypt, J. Dieleman observes that ‘from a more pragmatic perspective, there was little that truly changed’; temple structures were replaced by churches and monasteries, local deities by local saints and objects like amulets were still produced.⁸⁶⁹ Similarly, in an article on Byzantine amuletic bracelets G. Vikan concludes that, over time, there was very little change in the general perception of how these objects functioned.⁸⁷⁰ Continuity and change cannot be understood separately. We are not dealing with a clear dichotomy between Christian elements and ‘pagan survivals’.⁸⁷¹ Certain features, functions and beliefs certainly endured, but within a world that was slowly becoming increasingly Christian. This also holds true for the stable elements in amulet use.

Religious developments in Late Antiquity were dynamic and took place on various levels. Sometimes continuity and change were simultaneous and interacted. The key question, therefore, is what this interaction looked like. In relation to the study of amulet use, the idea of an interaction between tradition and innovation has proven fruitful.⁸⁷² In a publication dealing with objects like amulets, K. Dosoo writes about ‘the interaction between the tradition to which they belong, and the moment in time in which they are written.’⁸⁷³ Traditions continue, but they are not rigid and innovations are often anchored in traditions.⁸⁷⁴

In what follows, I will look at the impact of both change and continuity on the experience of amulet users, building on findings from previous chapters. I will examine changes in the external features or material affordances of amulets as well as continuities and discontinuities in beliefs and expectations relating to their functioning. New elements were added, but they sometimes only changed the objects’ external features, while beliefs regarding their functioning remained the same. At the same time, traditional elements may have been experienced in a different way, because they were now experienced within a Christian frame of reference.⁸⁷⁵

868 Barb, ‘Survival of Magic Arts’, 125.

869 Dieleman, ‘Coping with a Difficult Life’, 342.

870 Vikan, ‘Art, Medicine, and Magic’, 76-77.

871 For further discussion, see for example: P. Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, AD 200-1000*, Second Edition (Oxford 2003) 153; Frankfurter, *Christianizing Egypt*, 2, 7-15. For a similar idea see: Van der Vliet, ‘Christian Spells’, 348; D. Frankfurter, ‘Syncretism and the Holy Man in Late Antique Egypt’, *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 11 (2003) 339-385: 339-344.

872 Dasen, Nagy, ‘Gems’, 424.

873 Dosoo, ‘Magical Names’, 133.

874 See also: Strathern, *Unearthly Powers*, 81-87; Sluiter, ‘Anchoring Innovation’.

875 Van der Vliet, ‘Christian Spells’, 329-330.

4.2 A NEW SOURCE: EARLY CHRISTIAN BISHOPS DISCUSSING AMULETS

The sermons criticising the use of amulets and other Christian texts dealing with practices related to amulets are a good starting point for an examination of the dynamic between change and continuity. These sources present a variety of aspects of both the traditional Graeco-Roman and the new early Christian religious strategies.

The fierce condemnation of amulets by several Christian bishops had a considerable impact on modern research into ancient amulet use.⁸⁷⁶ The large number of sources criticising the use of amulets may give the impression that the entire early Christian church condemned the creation and use of amulets. The critical bishops, however, only formed the small top-layer of the early Christian church – many Christian amulets were actually made by priests and monks who, like the bishops, were members of Christian institutions.⁸⁷⁷ Although the sermons must be read as normative texts, they provide many insights into Christian day-to-day practice. They also make it possible to place changes and continuities in the use of amulets against the background of late antique society.

4.2.1 Critique on the use of amulets

Some non-Christian authors who discussed the process of creating traditional amulets were sceptical about their use. Pliny described the amulet-making Magi as ‘a lying crowd’.⁸⁷⁸ On the other hand, he also made the following statement: ‘In quartans [fever] ordinary medicines are useless; for which reason I shall include several of the magicians’ remedies, and in the first place the amulets (*adalligari*) they recommend.’⁸⁷⁹ Pliny was very sceptical about some amulet instructions, but praised the effects of others.⁸⁸⁰ While there had been criticism before, the advent of Christianity brought not only scepticism, but also outright condemnation of using and producing amulets.⁸⁸¹ Early Christian authors rejected such practices, even to the point of advocating exclusion from baptism or excommunication.

876 See for example the discussion on the normative discourse at the beginning of chapter one of this book and Sanzo, ‘Early Christianity’. For the focus on healing see below under ‘Focus on healing amulets’.

877 For example: de Bruyn had to deal with the normative discourse before embarking on his analysis of amulets with early Christian elements. De Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, chapter one on the normative discourse.

878 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.86, see also: 28.100. Criticism of Galen, for example on Egyptian quackery: Galen, *De simplicium medicamentorum* Kühn XI.792-793.

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

880 This is a broader theme in Pliny’s reaction to the religious practices he describes: Cordovana, ‘Pliny the Elder between Magic and Medicine’, 75, see also 71.

881 Apart from amulets, other religious practices, such as speaking charms or performing divination rituals, were regarded as ‘magic’ and unacceptable. Augustine of Hippo, *De catechizandis rudibus* 7.11 (CCSL 46.7.18); Caesarius of Arles, *Sermones* 54.5. On the condemnation of ‘magical’ practices see: Sanzo, ‘Early Christianity’; Van der Vliet, ‘Christian Spells’; de Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, chapter on the normative discourse.

Sanzo describes a passage from the Apostolic tradition – a collection of community rules – in which ‘*magoi*’, fortune tellers, interpreters of dreams and makers of amulets were excluded from baptism.⁸⁸² Most of the criticism of amulet use was expressed by bishops in their sermons.⁸⁸³

Some bishops prepared their sermons, others improvised. The oral performances were written down by members of the clergy as they were listening or afterwards by the bishops themselves. The sermons could be altered, copied, and used by others as a source of inspiration.⁸⁸⁴ When studying a surviving sermon, one must take into account that its text may be different from the words that were actually spoken. Details may have been lost or altered when making notes or copies.⁸⁸⁵ The sermons unfortunately provide little information on how they were received.⁸⁸⁶ It goes without saying, however, that the bishops used their sermons to convey a message to their audiences. In the words of Rebillard: ‘The explicit goal of the preachers is to change habits and practices, to teach different, new values.’⁸⁸⁷ Scholars have argued that, in between the lines, these sources give us a glimpse of the preachers’ world, because the bishops must have reacted to the lived experiences of their audiences. They could not deviate too far from the truth as they saw it.⁸⁸⁸

The sermons addressed those who came to mass – people who were already involved or interested in Christianity. The early bishops thus criticised the actions of people who may have identified with Christianity.⁸⁸⁹ For example, a sermon of Caesarius of Arles that will be discussed below warns amulet users that ‘who does this evil loses the sacrament of baptism’.⁸⁹⁰ Caesarius’s criticism is thus directed at people who had already received this sacrament. Interestingly, sermons and canonical laws refer to priests, monks and clerics who themselves created, provided and/or used amulets.⁸⁹¹ Caesarius mentions people receiving amulets from priests (*clerici*), who tell their customers that they ‘contain holy facts and divine lessons’.⁸⁹² The latter is probably a reference to the scriptural and liturgical

882 *Traditio Apostolorum* 16.14, Sanzo, ‘Early Christianity’, 220-221.

883 See Sermon 13.5 from Caesarius of Arles discussed below for the consequences of losing the sacrament of baptism, discussed under ‘Caesarius of Arles’.

884 See for example, Mayer, ‘Preaching and Listening’. Sometimes bishops also wrote ‘model’ sermons for other bishops, which were thus not necessarily pronounced.

885 Cook, *Preaching and Popular Christianity*, 5, 8-9.

886 Mayer, ‘Preaching and Listening’, 19-20. See also: É. Rebillard, ‘Sermons, Audience, Preacher’ in: A. Dupont, et al. (eds.), *Preaching in the Patristic Era. Sermons, Preachers, and Audiences in the Latin West* (Leiden 2018) 87-102.

887 Rebillard, ‘Sermons, Audience, Preacher’, 95.

888 Rebillard, *Christians and Their Many Identities*, 6; Rebillard, ‘Sermons, Audience, Preacher’, 95-97.

889 On people participating in both Christian church rituals and local traditional practices see: W.E. Klingshirn, *Caesarius of Arles. The Making of a Christian Community in Late Antique Gaul* (Cambridge 1994) 211-214; Barb, ‘Survival of Magic Arts’, 106-107.

890 Caesarius of Arles, *Sermones* 13.5.

891 Shenoute of Atripe, *Acephalous work A14* par. 255-262 (Orlandi 18-20); Caesarius of Arles, *Sermones* 50.1.

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

elements that form part of textual amulets with early Christian elements.⁸⁹³ Consequently, when Christian preachers criticised the use of amulets, they criticised people identifying with Christianity, including their own colleagues.⁸⁹⁴

One of the Christian authors' main arguments was the relation with the Devil amulet use implied. In the eyes of the bishops, amulets were able to heal because their power came from the Devil. The amulet would heal the user's body, but kill their soul.⁸⁹⁵ Caesarius, for example, writes as follows:

If some people have recovered their health by these charms (*ligaturae*), it was the Devil's cunning that did it. (...) For this reason the phylacteries (*filacteria*) sometimes seem to have power and beneficial effects; when the Devil has affected the soul with its consent, then he ceases to trouble the body. Anyone who makes these phylacteries (*filacteria*) or asks to have them made, as well as all those who consent to it have become pagans, and unless they perform sufficient penance they cannot escape punishment.⁸⁹⁶

Christian authors worried about the Devil tampering with the souls of those who, in times of need, reached out to amulets.⁸⁹⁷ Using amulets would make the users 'pagan' in the words of Caesarius; it would undo baptism.⁸⁹⁸

In the following sections, I will examine the work of three bishops to see which practices were criticised and on what grounds. The analysis will also shed light on the early Christian context of amulet use, because the bishops present a variety of motives for their criticism and between the lines provide insights into their own time's ideas about amulet use.

John Chrysostom

John Chrysostom became a priest in 386 and preached in Antioch. In 397 he became bishop of Constantinople. A large corpus of his sermons has survived. In many of these, John Chrysostom criticised the (religious) practices of his congregation such as using amulets.⁸⁹⁹ In his sermon 'Against Judaising Christians' he argues that using Jewish amulets leads to

893 See the discussion on the role of text on amulets below in 4.3D.

894 Compare Luijendijk: 'To what extent are these church leaders acting against colleagues in the clergy whose theology, economics, and practices they resisted?' Luijendijk, 'Gospel Amulet for Joannia', 429.

895 Some ancient authors thus believed that amulets were able to act, but only because of the Devil's aid. Graf, 'Augustine and Magic', 96-98, 102; Van der Vliet, 'Roman and Byzantine Egypt', 262. For the shift towards 'magic' as the work of the Devil see: M.W. Dickie, 'Magic in Merovingian Gaul: Continuity or Discontinuity' in: M. Piranomonte, F.M., Símon (eds.), *Contesti magici-Contextos magicos. Atti del Convegno internazionale* (Rome 2013) 313-325: 313.

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

897 De Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 41.

898 Dosoo, 'Healing Traditions', 55.

899 For a general introduction see: C. de Wet, 'John Chrysostom' in: *Brill Encyclopedia of Early Christianity Online*, last accessed September 2025.

the loss of the soul and thus of the perspective of everlasting life:

Suppose he uses the cures which the Jews effect as his excuse; suppose he says: ‘They promise to make me well, and so I go to them.’ Then you must reveal the tricks they use, their incantations, their amulets (περιάμματα), their charms and spells. This is the only way in which they have a reputation for healing; they do not effect genuine cures. Heaven forbid they should! Let me go so far as to say that even if they really do cure you, it is better to die than to run to God’s enemies and be cured that way. What use is it to have your body cured if you lose your soul? What profit is there that you find some relief from your pain in this world if you are going to be consigned to eternal fire?⁹⁰⁰

Amulets were also linked to Judaism because of the Jewish use of *tefillin* and *mezuzot*, capsules with passages from the Pentateuch worn around the forehead and arm or at the door to which people may have attributed apotropaic powers.⁹⁰¹

John Chrysostom had an active audience. While he was preaching, scribes wrote down what he said, sometimes including reactions of, or interaction with, the audience – unfortunately not in the case of passages that discuss amulets.⁹⁰² Although it has previously been argued that Chrysostom’s audience must have consisted of members of the elite, the prevailing view is now that it included people from various layers of society.⁹⁰³ In any case, the sermons contain much information on the daily lives of the ordinary members of Chrysostom’s flock. Therefore, his works are often used by modern scholars to study the social reality of ‘popular Christianity’ in Chrysostom’s time.⁹⁰⁴ Two passages on amulets run as follows:

Do you not see how women and little children suspend Gospels from their necks as powerful amulets (φυλακαί), and carry them about in all places wherever they go?⁹⁰⁵

900 John Chrysostom, *Adversus Judaeos* 8.5 (PG 48.935) (This work is quite antisemitic). Translation by P.W. Harkins, *Saint John Chrysostom. Discourses against Judaizing Christians* (Fathers of the Church 68) (Washington 1979) 222-223. For other passages on amulets, see for example: John Chrysostom, *In epistulam I ad Corinthios* 12.7 (PG 61.104-6); *In epistulam ad Colossenses* 8.5 (PG 62.357-59); *Adversus Judaeos* 8.6-7 (PG 48.936-8); *Ad illuminandos catacheses* 2 (PG 49.240); *Catachesis ultima ad baptizandos* 3.6 (SC 366, 232-235).

901 Skemer, *Binding words*, 33-35; Sanzo, ‘Early Christianity’, 235.

902 J.D. Cook, *Preaching and Popular Christianity: Reading the Sermons of John Chrysostom* (Oxford 2018) 5.

903 Cook, *Preaching and Popular Christianity*, 8-9.

904 See: De Wet, ‘John Chrysostom’ or the introduction in Cook, *Preaching and Popular Christianity*, which summarises many earlier publications. For even newer perspectives see: C.L. de Wet, W. Mayer, ‘Approaching and Appreciating John Chrysostom in New Ways’ in: W. Mayer, C.L. de Wet (eds.), *Revisioning John Chrysostom. New Approaches, New Perspectives* (Leiden 2019) 1-31: 5, but also see the whole volume.

905 John Chrysostom, *Homiliae de statu ad populum Antiochenum* 19.14 (PG 49.196). Translation by Luijendijk, ‘Gospel Amulet for Joannia’, 431-432.

And what are these amulets (φυλακτήρια) and borders (κράσπεδα)? Since they were continually forgetting God's benefits, he commanded that his wonders be inscribed on little books and that these should be suspended from their hands....which they call phylacteries (φυλακτήρια), as now many of our women have Gospels hanging from their necks.⁹⁰⁶

It has been argued that the Gospel amulets described by Chrysostom are the activated textual amulets that have been excavated: Gospel passages, or only the incipits representing the whole text, inscribed on papyrus or metal, rolled up and worn in a capsule around the neck.⁹⁰⁷ The connection between amulets and women is also found in other sermons, where women are described as using amulets, tying amulets on their sick children, or providing others with amulets.⁹⁰⁸ Chrysostom does not approve of amulets, but he does endorse the use of the cross – not in its material form, but as the sign representing the crucifixion of Christ. He even attributes exorcistic and protective powers similar to those of amulets to this non-material practice: 'But the cross has the strength of a wonderful amulet (περίπτρον) and a mighty incantation; blessed is the soul which speaks in the name of Jesus Christ crucified. Call upon that name and every disease will flee, every attack of Satan will yield.'⁹⁰⁹

Recently there has been discussion on whether the sermons of Chrysostom tell us anything about how they were received. They seem to suggest that Chrysostom's words did not have much effect; he continued to condemn amulets, while his audience continued to use them. Scholars have tried to explain this. J.D. Cook has, for example, asked himself how Chrysostom could be so critical and harsh and yet remain so popular. He argues that Chrysostom may have been unusually critical, but did not necessarily react to the lived reality of his audience. Chrysostom used the harsh language of a teacher and a medical healer, because he wanted his followers to live a life without sin and attain eternal salvation: 'He wanted to arouse in his congregation a fear of judgement and of hell, that such fear might spark a deeper obedience to their God.'⁹¹⁰ I. Sandwell argues that the sermons tell us nothing about how they were received. In her view, 'ordinary Christians' probably

906 John Chrysostom, *In Matthaëum (homiliae 1-90)* 72.2 (PG 58.669). Translation by Luijendijk, 'Gospel Amulet for Joannia', 418.

907 Luijendijk, 'Gospel Amulet for Joannia', 423-425; see also de Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 141-153 on these types of amulets.

908 John Chrysostom, *In epistulam ad Colossenses* 8.5 (PG 62.357-359).

909 John Chrysostom, *Catechesis ultima ad baptizandos* 3.6 (SC 366, 232-235). Translation by P.W. Harkins, *John Chrysostom: Baptismal Instructions* (London 1963) 11.25 on page 168. On the (sign of the) cross see also: *In epistulam I ad Corinthios* 12.13 (PG 61.105-106); John Chrysostom, *In epistulam ad Colossenses* 8.5 (PG 62.357-359).

910 Cook, *Preaching and Popular Christianity*, quote on 199, but see 11-22 and the rest of the book.

formed some kind of interpretation on the basis of their personal knowledge.⁹¹¹ Although we certainly should be critical about the degree to which these sermons reflect lived reality, we must accept that they were created with an audience in mind. In another publication, Sandwell discusses the way in which Chrysostom used his sermons to construct a Christian identity, attempting to set the boundaries of what he believed to be correct and wrong Christian behaviour. Good Christian behaviour did not include the use of amulets. Sandwell argues that his audiences did not necessarily see the use of amulets as an un-Christian practice and continued to reach out to them. This matter will be further discussed below.⁹¹²

Augustine of Hippo

Augustine became a priest around 390-391 and was given the right to preach. In 396 he became bishop of Hippo. Most of his comments on amulet use can be found in his sermons.⁹¹³ More than 800 of Augustine's sermons are known to us, but this is probably only a small proportion of the total number of sermons he delivered during his life.⁹¹⁴ Augustine did not write out his sermons and delivered them without the support of written notes. Others would write them down as he was speaking and in some cases Augustine is known to have edited the texts afterwards. Already during his lifetime, Augustine's sermons were available for copying and used as examples by other bishops and priests. In the early sixth century, for instance, Caesarius of Arles used Augustine's sermons.⁹¹⁵ In his preaching, Augustine often referred to everyday life. Although we only see his vision, in order to resonate with his audience his sermons must have related to their lived experience.⁹¹⁶

Augustine particularly discussed amulets in his sermons of the 'sickbed genre', which evoke a situation of a very devout Christian suffering from a potentially lethal illness, pressured by family and friends to use an amulet. The patient refuses, however, then dies

911 I. Sandwell, 'Preaching and Christianisation: Communication, Cognition, and Audience Reception' in: W. Mayer, C.L. de Wet (eds.), *Revisiting John Chrysostom. New Approaches, New Perspectives* (Leiden 2019) 137-174.

912 Sandwell, *Religious Identity*, 3-9.

913 See the examples below as well as Augustine of Hippo, *Sermones (ad populum)* 4.36 (CSSL 41.20-48), 318.3 (PL 38.1437-1440), 328 (PLS 2.800), 335D.3 and 335D.5 (PLS 2.778-780). See also: *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 93.20 (CSSL 39.1322). There are more examples of Augustine discussing amulets, but they are often less elaborate. For Augustine's views about 'magic' in general see: F. Graf, 'Augustine and Magic' in: J.N. Bremmer, J.R. Veenstra (eds.), *The Metamorphosis of Magic from Late Antiquity to the Early Modern Period* (Leuven 2002) 87-103.

914 Augustine not only preached on Sundays, but also on feast days and during specific liturgical periods even daily. Apart from the *Sermones*, the preachings of Augustine can also be found in the *Tractatus* and *Enarrationes*. However, the sermons in these treatises were not all actually performed, but written as examples for other priests. S. Boodts, A. Dupont, 'Augustine of Hippo' in: A. Dupont, *et al.* (eds.), *Preaching in the Patristic Era. Sermons, Preachers, and Audiences in the Latin West* (Leiden 2018) 177-197: 177-178.

915 Boodts, Dupont, 'Augustine of Hippo', 177-186.

916 See also: Rebillard, *Christians and Their Many Identities*, 75.

and becomes a martyr.⁹¹⁷ These scenes reflect a discussion on martyrdom. As Christians were no longer persecuted in Augustine's time, there were fewer chances of becoming a martyr.⁹¹⁸ Augustine apparently sought to broaden the concept of martyrdom. In sermon 4.36, for example, he maintains that martyrdom is not limited to those who are killed by wild beasts in the amphitheatre, but also includes those who die of an illness after having rejected the use of healing amulets or other non-Christian healing practices.⁹¹⁹ The sickbed scenes provide us with a glimpse into the social situations surrounding amulet use. In sermon 286.7, Augustine paints the following picture:

So while he's being wracked with pain, along comes trial and temptation by tongue; either some female, or a man, if man he can be called, approaches the sickbed, and says to the sick man: "Tie on that spell (*ligatura*), and you will get better; let them apply that charm (*praecantatio*), and you will get better. So-and-so, and So-and-so and So-and-so; ask, they all got better by using it." He doesn't yield, he doesn't agree, he doesn't give his consent; he has to struggle, all the same. He has no strength, and he conquers the devil. He becomes a martyr on his sickbed, and he is crowned by the one who hung for him on the tree.⁹²⁰

In this scene people of both genders try to persuade the patient to use an amulet. They talk about people they know, who believed they had been cured because they used an amulet. However, the patient conquers the Devil (who is supposed to give amulets their power), rejects the use of an amulet, dies, and becomes a martyr. Augustine seeks to put an end to amulet use and makes the 'reward' of martyrdom part of his criticism. Similar scenes often appear in sermons. One of the reasons why they were so popular may have been the fact that life-threatening illnesses were so common at the time.⁹²¹ Listeners would recognise the scene or elements of it. The social aspects of these scenes will be further discussed below.

In the passage quoted above, Augustine's alternative for amulet use is death and martyrdom. Other passages give the impression that Augustine was still searching for the boundaries of 'good' and 'bad' religious (healing) strategies.⁹²² His *Tractates on the Gospel of John* contain the following passage:

917 This format was not solely used for amulets. For example, sermon 376A.3 criticises turning to a local healer or astrologer: Rebillard, *Christians and Their Many Identities*, 74.

918 Rebillard, *Christians and Their Many Identities*, 74-75.

919 Augustine of Hippo, *Sermones (ad populum)* 4.36 (CCSL 41.20-48).

920 Augustine of Hippo, *Sermones (ad populum)* 286.7 (PL 38.1297-1301). Translation: Rebillard, *Christians and Their Many Identities*, 74.

921 De Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 26-27.

922 See also the discussion below in section 4.2.2 on the motivations for criticising amulets.

When you have a headache, we commend you if you put the gospel by your head and do not hurry to an amulet (*ligatura*). For human frailty has come to this, and men who hurry to amulets (*ligaturae*) must be so lamented that we rejoice when we see that a man, confined to his bed, is tossed by fever and pain and yet has placed no hope anywhere else except that he put the gospel by his head, not because the gospel was made for this but because it has been preferred to amulets (*ligaturae*). Therefore, if it is put by the head so that a headache may be eased, is it not put by the heart that the heart may be healed of its sins?⁹²³

While it is clear that using an amulet was unacceptable in Augustine's eyes – this would even include textual amulets with passages from the Gospel, rolled up and worn in a capsule around the neck – holding the book itself to the head to ease a headache was allowed. As J.E. Sanzo points out, 'a gospel artifact represented a "pure" artifact that supported ecclesiastical ritual idiom and, moreover, did not require ailing Christians to visit practitioners who might influence them in theologically unsavoury ways.'⁹²⁴ This suggests, in other words, that the main reason for rejecting the use of amulets was that their creation was not controlled by bishops.

Caesarius of Arles

Caesarius became bishop of Arles in 502. The people in his diocese, both from the city and from the more rural areas around Arles, were still involved in traditional religious practices, such as pre-Roman tree worship and the use of Graeco-Roman amulets inscribed with *charaktères*.⁹²⁵ One of his sermons contains the following passage:

Moreover, if you still see men fulfilling vows to fountains or trees, and, as was already⁹²⁶ said, consulting sorcerers, seers, or charmers, hanging devilish phylacteries (*fylacteria*), magic signs (*caracteres*), herbs, or charms⁹²⁷ on themselves or their family, rebuke them harshly, telling them that one who does this evil loses the sacrament of baptism.⁹²⁸

Apart from faith in fountains and trees, this passage mentions all sorts of textual and natural amulets. Caesarius saw these rituals and practices as un-Christian. The people who

923 *In Iohannis euangelium tractatus* 7.12 (CCSL 36.73). Translation by J.W. Rettig, *St. Augustine: Tractates on the Gospel of John 1-10* (Washington 1988) 165.

924 Sanzo, *Ritual Boundaries*, 27.

925 Klingshirn, *Caesarius of Arles*, for example: 208-209.

926 See Caesarius of Arles, *Sermones* 13.3.

927 Caesarius writes *sucinos*, from *sucinus* 'made of amber'. For the use of amber in 'magical' practices see for example Davis, 'Rubbing and Rolling'.

928 'A sermon necessary in parishes', part of Sermon 13.5. Caesarius of Arles, *Sermones* 13.5. Translation by Mueller, *Volume 1*, 78.

performed them, however, had been baptised and therefore must have identified themselves as Christians. Nevertheless, they apparently did not see the traditional practices referred to by Caesarius as problematic. This ties into notions proposed by, for example, W.E. Klingshirn, who described the Christian communities of sixth-century Gaul as follows: 'It was a form of Christianity that was defined as much by local custom as by outside authority; it was a form of Christianity that permitted the continuation of many traditional observances; and above all it was a form of Christianity that the rural population actually practiced.'⁹²⁹ With his sermons, Caesarius sought to reach people from all layers of society in order to teach them Christian doctrine and morals. He made sure to adapt the language and line of argument of his sermons to his audience. In addition, he wrote examples of sermons for priests, so that they could do the same.⁹³⁰

Caesarius discussed amulets in several of his sermons, especially in those in which he focussed on morals and a good Christian life.⁹³¹ He not only sought to improve the morals of laypeople, but also those of the clergy.⁹³² As becomes clear from sermon 50.1, some clergymen were in the habit of providing amulets:

What is deplorable is that there are some who seek soothsayers in every kind of infirmity. They consult seers and divines, summon enchanter, and hang diabolical phylacteries and magic letters (*caracteres*) on themselves. Often enough they receive charms (*ligaturae*) even from priests and religious, who, however, are not really religious or clerics but the Devil's helpers. See, brethren, how I plead with you not to consent to accept these wicked objects, even if they are offered by clerics. There is no remedy of Christ in them, but the poison of the Devil which will not cure your body but will kill your poor soul with the sword of infidelity. Even if you are told that the phylacteries contain holy facts and divine lessons, let no one believe it or expect health to come to him from them.

If some people have recovered their health by these charms (*ligaturae*), it was the Devil's cunning that did it. (...) However, brethren, ask health from Christ who is the true Light. Hurry to church, be anointed with holy oil, and receive the Eucharistic Christ. If you do this, you will receive health of soul as well as of body.⁹³³

929 Klingshirn, *Caesarius of Arles*, 224-225.

930 In the context of his giving the right to preach to priests – initially, it only belonged to bishops. N. De Maeyer, G. Partoens, 'Preaching in Sixth-Century Arles. The Sermons of Bishop Caesarius' in: A. Dupont, *et al.* (eds.), *Preaching in the Patristic Era. Sermons, Preachers, and Audiences in the Latin West* (Leiden 2018) 198-231: 199-205. On using older priests as examples see page 214-215. Similarities with Augustine's ideas about martyrdom: Caesarius of Arles, *Sermones* 184.4. Similarities with John Chrysostom on blaming the mothers of sick children: sermon 52.1 and 52.5-6.

931 Some more elaborate than others, see Caesarius of Arles, *Sermones* 1.12; 13.3 and 13.5, 14.4, 19.4, 50.1 and 50.2, 52.1 and 52.2-6, 54.5, 184.4, 204.3.

932 De Maeyer, Partoens, 'Preaching in Sixth-Century Arles', 202-203.

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

Caesarius speaks of amulets containing ‘holy facts and divine lessons’ and here seems to refer to the many textual amulets with liturgical and scriptural passages that have been found, which were likely made by the priests he criticised. In his time, the amount of Christian elements in these types of amulets had significantly increased as compared with the times of Augustine and Chrysostom.⁹³⁴ Nevertheless, Caesarius did not consider them acceptable.

Caesarius’s approach to amulets is similar to that of his predecessors, but there is one important difference. Whereas other bishops had tried to convince people that it was better to die than to use amulets, Caesarius identified acceptable Christian healing practices. In his view, the sick should have recourse to the church and receive holy oils and the bread of the Eucharist. He saw these practices as legitimate Christian alternatives.⁹³⁵

4.2.2 Motivations for criticising amulets

Over time the vocabulary of textual amulets became more Christian. At the same time, amulets presented fewer references to non-Christian supernatural beings.⁹³⁶ However, the bishops of the fourth to sixth centuries not only criticised the use of traditional amulets. As we have seen, Caesarius also condemned amulets containing ‘holy facts’ made by Christian priests.⁹³⁷ Augustine condemned the use of amulets with texts from the Gospels, although he allowed using the actual book for healing purposes.⁹³⁸ Chrysostom stated that the cross as a sign and a speech act had the power of an amulet, but at the same time rejected the use of (cross-shaped) amulets.⁹³⁹ The practice itself, even if the amulets were Christian, was condemned. The bishops seem to have been looking for the boundary between acceptable and unacceptable religious practice.⁹⁴⁰ Exactly why, then, did they condemn amulets?

Controlling the congregation: centralisation

One possible explanation for the criticism is the idea that the bishops sought to institutionalise Christian religious practices and control individual religious acts – personal religious strategies for control over everyday life were identified as illegitimate. In relation to the work of Chrysostom, I. Sandwell argues: ‘It was no longer acceptable for individuals

934 See for example the work of Dosoo, ‘Magical Names’.

935 Klingshirn, *Caesarius of Arles*, 233. For an analysis of the prescription of alternatives see 233–234.

936 Dosoo, ‘Magical Names’, 128–132.

937 Caesarius of Arles, *Sermones* 50.1.

938 Augustine of Hippo, *In Iohannis euangelium tractatus* 7.12 (CCSL 36.73).

939 Stander, ‘Amulets and the Church Fathers’, 65–66.

940 In some passages the bishops give the impression that they allowed certain practices that were very similar to amulets. Stander, ‘Amulets and the Church Fathers’, 62–63. Gospel at bed or box with alms in John Chrysostom, *In epistulam I ad Corinthios* 43.7 (PG 61.372–3); sign of the cross in John Chrysostom, *In epistulam ad Colossenses* 8.5 (PG 62.357–359); recourse to the church, anoint with holy oil, and receive the Eucharistic bread in Caesarius of Arles, *Sermones* 50.1.

to have control and contact with the divine for their own ends (rather than the prescribed ends of the Church), even if they were calling on Christian divinities.⁹⁴¹ This, of course, did not prevent people from using these religious strategies when trying to cope with everyday misfortune.⁹⁴²

Early church authors seem to have felt threatened by the domestic, personal sphere, an environment where the bishops did not have much influence.⁹⁴³ K. Bowes has argued that in the Christian debates of the fourth and fifth centuries, the domestic sphere played a large role.⁹⁴⁴ Although the bishops grew more powerful and the liturgy became more centralised, the power of the institutions remained limited.⁹⁴⁵ Based on archaeological material, she argues that ‘institutions, particularly episcopally-defined institutions, did not matter as much as we thought they had, and that what we casually termed “Christianization” was marked by the unorchestrated, often eccentric projects of pious individuals that frequently clashed with still-nascent ideas of episcopal authority.’⁹⁴⁶ Such concerns explain why many bishops objected to individuals building, or funding the building of, churches in their houses or on their estates and performing Christian rituals at home.⁹⁴⁷ Keeping relics at home was likewise criticised, because bishops wanted relics to be kept in church buildings.⁹⁴⁸ Similar ideas seem to have been at the background of a small elite of bishops’ condemnation of amulets.

D. Kalleres demonstrated that the debate regarding control over individual religion changed over time. This can, for instance, be seen in the use of the female as a trope. In line with an already existing Roman literary *topos*, women were criticised as the ones who brought ‘magical’ practices, such as amulets, into the home.⁹⁴⁹ As the primary caretakers for sick family members, they would have recourse to ‘inappropriate’ healing practices and should therefore be ‘feared’.⁹⁵⁰ Early Christian authors re-introduced this trope with the purpose of establishing the boundaries between good and bad behaviour and ‘crafting the

941 Sandwell, *Religious Identity*, 270-271.

942 For observations on Chrysostom’s audiences and the works of Libanus: Sandwell, *Religious Identity*, 271-273. For ancient Christian spells as a corpus of ‘crisis management’ see: Van der Vliet, ‘Christian Spells’, 331.

943 D.S. Kalleres, *City of Demons. Violence, Ritual, and Christian Power in Late Antiquity* (Oakland 2015) 70. See also Sanzo’s comments on why Augustine allowed the actual book but not the Gospel amulet (because it had to be made by someone): Sanzo, *Religious Boundaries*, 27.

944 K.D. Bowes, *Private Worship, Public Values, and Religious Change in Late Antiquity* (New York 2008) 189-216.

945 K.D. Bowes, ‘“Christianization” and the Rural Home’, *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 15.2 (2007) 143-170: 162-164.

946 Summary by Bowes of her book. Quote in: K.D. Bowes, ‘Sixth-Century Individual Rituals. Private Chapels and the Reserved Eucharist’ in: É. Rebillard, J. Rüpke (eds.), *Group Identity and Religious Individuality in Late Antiquity* (Washington 2015) 54-88: 56. About: Bowes, *Private Worship*.

947 See also: K.D. Bowes, ‘The Rural Home’.

948 Wiśniewski, *Cult of Relics*, 138-140.

949 Kalleres, ‘Drunken Hags’, 220-231 in general.

950 Kalleres, *City of Demons*, 70-71.

ecclesiastical family.⁹⁵¹ Chrysostom, for example, argues that amulets are the work of silly, drunken, old women.⁹⁵² In the works of Christian authors of the sixth century, however, the trope of the (old) woman is much less dominant. As a distinctly Christian kind of materiality gained ground, bishops were able to offer alternative religious practices, which were, moreover, institutionalised. The availability of these alternatives meant that it was no longer necessary to blame women for unacceptable behaviour.⁹⁵³ Instead, Caesarius is now critical of clergymen making amulets and investing them with Christian power. All in all, while amulets became increasingly institutionalised and monks, priests, and other members of the clergy gave people access to amulets, bishops still sought to bring every religious practice under the control of the central, institutionalised church.

Identity formation: the ideal Christian

Although emphasising the role of the church, early Christian authors also strove to present an image of the ideal Christian. They wanted to show people how they should live, to construct an idea of what a 'good' Christian does.⁹⁵⁴ Chrysostom, for example, argues that using omens and amulets is 'foreign to Christianity'.⁹⁵⁵ As traditional religious practices and Christianity started to mix, for example in amulets with Christian elements, church leaders had to make decisions about what was acceptable and what was not.⁹⁵⁶ It was in this context that authors attempted to construct a Christian identity. Identities are, however, relational; in order to determine what is good, it is necessary to define what is bad.⁹⁵⁷ By making lists of unacceptable religious practices, early Christian authors sought to establish which forms of religion were legitimate.⁹⁵⁸ In his sermons, Augustine expresses his ideas about the good Christian: the person who rather dies than damage his soul by using an amulet.⁹⁵⁹ The strong contrast – between earthly life and eternal life – helps to demarcate an ideal Christian identity.⁹⁶⁰

The bishops felt the need to define the boundaries of Christian identity because different people had different ideas about them – the people who were criticised in the sermons, for

951 Kalleres, 'Drunken Hags', 224.

952 John Chrysostom, *Ad illuminandos catacheses* 2 (PG 49.240); John Chrysostom, *In epistulam ad Colossenses* 8.5 (PG 62.357-359).

953 Kalleres, 'Drunken Hags', 234-235.

954 Sanzo, 'Early Christianity'; Van der Vliet, 'Roman and Byzantine Egypt', 254.

955 M. Kahlos, '"A Christian cannot employ Magic": Rhetorical Self-Fashioning of the Magicless Christianity of Late Antiquity' in: R. Flower, M. Ludlow (eds.), *Rhetoric and Religious Identity in Late Antiquity* (Oxford 2020) 130-133. John Chrysostom, *Ad illuminandos catacheses* 2 (PG 49.240).

956 Sanzo, 'Early Christianity', 236-237. Stander argues similarly: 'The problem of Christians wearing amulets became most complex and acute when believers began to mingle the essence of Christian and pagan practices': Stander, 'Amulets and the Church Fathers', 62.

957 Sandwell, *Religious Identity*, for example 5.

958 For example: Kahlos, 'A Christian Cannot Employ Magic', 140-141.

959 Augustine of Hippo, *Sermones (ad populum)* 4.36 (CSSL 41.20-48).

960 Sandwell, *Religious Identity*, 80-81.

instance, such as mothers with sick children or priests making amulets. As J.E. Sanzo has shown, most people had their own ideas about right and wrong.⁹⁶¹ Many amulets were made and used to protect those wearing them from being poisoned or cursed. While calling on the supernatural to hurt others was widely regarded as unacceptable, amulets for one's own benefit were generally seen as unproblematic.⁹⁶² The people criticised by Augustine and Chrysostom in their sermons probably saw amulets as a true Christian practice. Chrysostom, for example, describes how the people who 'make money' with amulets, justified their trade. They would say: "we call upon God, and do nothing extraordinary", "the old woman is a Christian", "and one of the faithful."⁹⁶³ Using amulets made by priests and inscribed with passages from the Bible was widely accepted as good Christian behaviour, especially if such amulets were provided from within Christian institutions.⁹⁶⁴ As these examples show, conflicting ideas about a Christian identity coexisted in Late Antiquity.⁹⁶⁵

Focus on healing amulets

Early Christian sources of the fourth to sixth centuries mostly speak about healing amulets. If one would only study these particular sources, one might get the impression that amulets were almost exclusively used to cure the sick.⁹⁶⁶ Alternatively, these texts might be read as evidence that the demand for healing amulets was so high that the church simply had to deal with the issue.⁹⁶⁷ Although amulets for other purposes are largely absent from early Christian sermons, reality was different. As will be discussed below, there is evidence that other types of amulets continued to be used.⁹⁶⁸

Perhaps the quasi-exclusive focus on healing should be understood as reflecting a deliberate choice. One aspect of Christian authors' attempts to define the boundaries of

961 Sanzo, *Ritual Boundaries*, 38, for the work of demons and spiritual attacks see 34.

962 *Codex Theodosianus* 9.16.3. For protection against others including sorcery and cursing see: GMA 52; SM 31; PGM P13; PGM P3.

963 John Chrysostom, *In epistulam ad Colossenses* 8.5 (PG 62.357-359). Translation: J.A. Broadus, *Homilies on the epistles of St. Paul the Apostle to the Philippians, Colossians, and the Thessalonians*. A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, series 1, Vol. 13 (New York 1889) 173-368.

964 Kahlos, 'A Christian Cannot Employ Magic', 134-140; Sanzo, *Ritual Boundaries*, 1-2.

965 Sanzo, *Ritual Boundaries*, 20-23, 38-42.

966 For example, in the works of John Chrysostom (*In epistulam ad Colossenses* 8.5 (PG 62.357-359); Augustine of Hippo (for example *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 93.20 (CCSL 39.1322); Caesarius of Arles (for example *Sermones* 13.3-5). Sometimes specific diseases or ailments are mentioned, such as fever (Augustine of Hippo, *Sermones (ad populum)* 335D.5 (PLS 2.778-780)) or headaches (Augustine of Hippo, *Sermones (ad populum)* 260D (PLS 2.586)). De Bruyn also mentions the focus on healing: *Making Amulets Christian*, 29. Although he also speaks of amulets for protection, I would like to stress that these are mentioned significantly less.

967 See for example: MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire*, 77, where it is argued that the church did not offer enough alternatives for non-Christian healing practices. I do not agree, see below in 4.3H. For the unignorable high demand, see also de Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 29.

968 For example, sixth-century house amulets: PGM P2; PGM P2a; PGM P6a.

proper Christian ritual practice was competition – with (older) local practices and with new Christian ritual practices they considered doubtful.⁹⁶⁹ Their aim was to carve out practices that would be ‘right’ as well as successful. In the fields of bodily healing and protection Christianity had something to offer.⁹⁷⁰ As for healing, (non-material) Christian *remedia* included church rituals and sacraments, the miracles of Christ and the cults of martyrs and saints.⁹⁷¹ Caesarius of Arles urges his congregation to make use of the prayers of the priest, of consecrated oil, to run to the church to ask Christ for health, to attend church often and take part in the Eucharist.⁹⁷² It was thus for health-related fears and problems that the early Christian authors could provide the best alternatives.

The quasi-exclusive focus on health may therefore reflect concerns of a different kind. Certain types of amulets are probably mentioned more often, because, in the eyes of the bishops, they formed the greatest threat. The sick were more easily tempted to reach out to amulets.⁹⁷³ And since the power of amulets was understood to come from the Devil, these Christians were in greater danger of harming their soul.⁹⁷⁴ M.W. Dickie argues in favour of a complementary relationship between Christian reprimands and imperial law: ‘It is precisely the areas of magic ignored by secular law as harmless and of no importance that engage the concern of the Church.’⁹⁷⁵ An edict issued by Constantine in 318 CE allows the use of religious strategies to heal individual human bodies or protect built structures, ‘since by such devices no person’s safety or reputation is injured.’⁹⁷⁶ This contrasts with early Christian authors, who did see harm in these devices.⁹⁷⁷

Anxieties about what people would do in times of crisis and the fact that Christianity had a variety of healing alternatives to offer, provide a conceivable explanation for Christian criticism’s focus on healing amulets. While bishops are unlikely to have approved of house amulets or amulets for obtaining charisma or victory, they clearly felt they had most authority in the area of healing.⁹⁷⁸

Using criticism to understand amulet users

Although the words of the bishops can give us a glimpse of the social reality of amulet use,

969 See for example: Sanzo, ‘Early Christianity’, 230-233; similar arguments in Van der Vliet, ‘Roman and Byzantine Egypt’, 521-522.

970 G.B. Ferngren, ‘Early Christianity as a Religion of Healing’, *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 66 (1992) 1-15; Sanzo, ‘Early Christianity’, 233-234; Van der Vliet, ‘Roman and Byzantine Egypt’, 248.

971 See also: Kalleres, ‘Drunken Hags’, 230.

972 For example, Caesarius of Arles, *Sermones* 19.4, 50.1, 52.5, 54.5, 204.3.

973 De Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 40.

974 See also: Kalleres, ‘Drunken Hags’, 230.

975 Dickie, *Magic and Magicians*, 257.

976 *Codex Theodosianus* 9.16.3. Translation by C. Pharr, *The Theodosian Code and Novels, and the Sirmundian Constitutions* (Princeton 1952) 237. Dickie, *Magic and Magicians*, 255-257.

977 Dickie, *Magic and Magicians*, 257-261.

978 This conclusion deserves more research, but will not be further explored in this book as the main focus is on the actual practice of amulet use.

they mostly show the bishops' narrative – a narrative that concerned the use of amulets with Christian elements by baptised Christians. Sermons provided the bishops with a means to control Christian religious practices and thus centralise the Christian religion. They presented examples of right and wrong religious behaviour, mostly referring to the area of healing where Christianity had something to offer. Nevertheless, as I have suggested before, in between the lines they refer to the social reality of their audiences, giving insights into specific situations, motivations and practices of amulet use – such as the social processes of talking about and promoting amulets. The sermons also reveal continuities and changes in amulet use. Examples include the continued use of amulets with herbs, amber, and *caractères* and the inclusion of Christian elements in amulets created by members of the clergy. This interaction between change and continuity will be further analysed in the remaining sections of this chapter.

4.3 THE LATE ANTIQUE PROCESS OF AMULET USE

An Egyptian papyrus amulet of the fourth or fifth century contains the following text:

CH M G. (Maria gives birth to Christ!) Hor Hor Phor Phor, Yao Sabaoth Adonai, Eloë, Salaman, Tarchei, I bind you, artemisian scorpion, 315 times. Preserve this house with its occupants from all evil, from all bewitchment of spirits of the air and human (evil) eye and terrible pain [and] sting of scorpion and snake, through the name of the highest god, Naias Meli, 7 (times) (?), XUROURO AAAAAA BAINCHOOCH MARIIIIIL ENAG KORE.
Be on guard, O lord, son of David according to the flesh, the one born of the holy virgin Mary, O holy one, highest god, from the holy spirit. Glory to you, O heavenly king, Amen.

A † O (ChiRho) A † O
IXΘΥΣ⁹⁷⁹

This amulet shows the continued use of amulets made to protect houses. The text itself clearly includes Christian elements, but they are combined with Egyptian (Hor = Horus) and Judeo-Christian elements typical of amuletic texts (Yao, Sabaoth).⁹⁸⁰ This combination of novel and traditional features is found in many amulets made and used in Late Antiquity. They show an enormous variety in religious elements and many ways to creatively use materials, texts, and imagery.

979 PGM P3. Translation by Marvin Meyer in ACM, nr 26.

980 De Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 90-98: for similar amulets as well as developments and meanings of Christian elements.

To gain a deeper understanding of developments in the use of amulets in the early Christian world, we have to study the actual objects. In what follows, I will analyse amulets containing Christian elements in order to elucidate the impact of these elements on the use and meaning of the object. However, the objects themselves cannot inform us on every aspect of their use. I will, therefore, also examine other sources, such as sermons and instructions for making amulets in late antique handbooks. Investigating the successive steps of amulet use set out in chapters two and three enables me to study continuity as well as change in amulet use in Late Antiquity on different levels.

A. Human individuals with problems and motives

The sermons discussed above give the impression that amulets were primarily used by women. As noted above, D. Kalleres has shown that this was a literary trope. Nevertheless, the information is valuable. John Chrysostom mentions that ‘many of our women have Gospels hanging from their necks’⁹⁸¹ and that ‘women and little children suspend Gospels from their necks as powerful amulets (φυλακαί), and carry them about in all places wherever they go.’⁹⁸² It has been argued that Chrysostom is referring to textual papyrus amulets containing incipits, i.e. the opening words of biblical passages, rather than the complete Gospels, although miniature Gospels may also have been worn as amulets.⁹⁸³ In any case, John Chrysostom’s remarks suggest that many women and children were still wearing amulets.

The arrival of Christianity does not seem to have brought about a change in the social background of people using amulets. Amulet users still included men and women, people of all ages, and from all layers of society.⁹⁸⁴ It is possible that slightly more women and children used amulets in relation to health, because pregnancy, childbirth, and childhood made them more vulnerable than adult men.⁹⁸⁵ However, the ancient medical handbooks do not confirm this hypothetical state of affairs. Compared to Pliny the Elder, for example, Marcellus of Bordeaux and Alexander of Tralles provide fewer instructions for female (in) fertility, childbirth, and childcare.⁹⁸⁶ One reason for this may be that the *Medicina Plinii*

981 John Chrysostom, *In Matthaeum (homiliae 1-90)* 72.2 (PG 58.669). Translation by Luijendijk, ‘Gospel Amulet for Joannia’, 418.

982 John Chrysostom, *Homiliae de statutis ad populum Antiochenum* 19.14 (PG 49.196). Translation by Luijendijk, ‘Gospel Amulet for Joannia’, 431-432.

983 Luijendijk, ‘Gospel Amulet for Joannia’, 423-425. For an amulet with a biblical passage see also: Jones, *New Testament Texts*, 94-100 (nr. 7).

984 For a male amulet user: John Chrysostom, *In epistulam I ad Timotheum* 13 (PG 62.564). For the use of amulets in early Christianity: Stander, ‘Amulets and the Church Fathers’, 59-60.

985 Stander, ‘Amulets and the Church Fathers’, 60.

986 Dioscorides also includes pregnancy-related amulets, but there is significantly less mention of these in the works of later authors discussed in this book. See Pliny the Elder: *Naturalis Historia* 20.6, 24.171, 26.161, 27.30, 28.99, 28.246-247, 30.125, 30.129, 32.6, 36.151, 36.153; Dioscorides, *Materia Medica* 2.164.1, 3.150.2, 5.142, 5.154; example of activated amulet: British Museum, London, registration number 2009,8042.1.

had become a more popular source than Pliny the Elder's original work – Marcellus of Bordeaux is known to have copied the *Medicina*.⁹⁸⁷ The *Medicina Plinii* was based on Pliny's *Naturalis Historia*, but it was a selection created for travellers, which would explain the absence of recipes for the female reproductive system, although it does include a few recipes for children.⁹⁸⁸ The amulets found in the archaeological record, however, provide ample evidence of the continued use of amulets by women and children. A. van den Hoek, E. Feissel and J.J. Herrmann jr., for example, have studied amuletic inscriptions on everyday objects and found slightly more references to female users in the health category.⁹⁸⁹

Apart from human bodies, amulets and amuletic texts or imagery continued to protect buildings such as houses; see for instance the amulet quoted above.⁹⁹⁰ As we have seen, it is usually impossible to establish the religious identity of amulet users. We do not know whether the user of an amulet with Christian elements would have identified as Christian or not. Religious identities were defined in different ways by different people.⁹⁹¹

Motives

Augustine describes how the Devil persuades people to use amulets: 'Just because there is no obvious enemy attacking your body, does that mean no hidden persecutor is assailing you with the allurements of materialism? How many wicked things he suggests, how many things through greed, how many things through fear!'⁹⁹² He felt that fear made people reach out to material ritual practices – not just amulets. This fits the motives described earlier. Both fear and hope were still important incentives for using amulets. People reached out to amulets because they hoped or expected that these would protect them, heal them or provide them with something. Christianity this does not seem to have brought any change in this respect.⁹⁹³

Changes in relation to healing

As the Christian bishops knew, many people reached out to amulets for healing purposes, just as they had done in earlier centuries. A comparison between Pliny and the medical works of the fifth and sixth centuries does not reveal much development. Later authors

987 Brodersen, 'Introduction', 5-6.

988 Brodersen, 'Introduction', 6.

989 Van den Hoek, Feissel, Herrmann jr., 'Magic of Portable Inscriptions', 317, 329, and 336; see also: Stander, 'Amulets and the Church Fathers', 60.

990 Sanzo, *Ritual Boundaries*, 32. See PGM P6a en PGM P2 for house-door protective amulets with Christian elements.

991 For example: Klingshirn, *Caesarius of Arles*, 224; see also Sanzo, *Ritual Boundaries*.

992 Augustine of Hippo, *Sermones (ad populum)* 4.36 (CSSL 41.20-48). Translation by E. Hill, *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century, Vol. III 1. Sermons 1-19. On the Old Testament* (New York 1990) 205-205.

993 For example: PGM P2, a sixth-century amulet for house protection; SM 35, a sixth-century amulet for fever; P.Oxy. LXXXII 5312, a sixth-century amulet for favour and success.

mainly copied earlier instructions, although there were some shifts such as the prominence of the *Medicina Plinii*. One example of the practice of copying is an arthritis amulet made of the feet of a hare. Pliny in the first century, Aelius Promotus in the second, Marcellus of Bordeaux in the fifth, and Alexander of Tralles in the sixth all describe a similar recipe: a foot (or several feet) had to be cut off a living hare to be worn on the body by the patient.⁹⁹⁴ All authors include the same recipe, but Marcellus of Bordeaux is the only one to specify where the amulet should be worn (on the patient's painful feet).⁹⁹⁵ The prevalence of copying suggests that earlier amulet instructions were still valid.⁹⁹⁶

P. Brown has put the work of Marcellus of Bordeaux in its contemporary context and analysed the differences between Marcellus's work and local healing practices in relation to saints.⁹⁹⁷ Even though Marcellus probably lived and worked with Christians (it is not clear if he was a Christian himself), he does not refer to the various Christian healing practices available in his lifetime, such as exorcism at the tombs of saints.⁹⁹⁸ Brown stresses that in the work of Marcellus healing power is not derived from a Christian or institutional source. Instead, Marcellus's writings emphasise reliance on powers present in nature, which people could access themselves. No middleman (priest, specialist, dead saint) was needed to create objects such as amulets. In Marcellus' time, people would not have seen the simultaneous use of different healing practices as problematic.⁹⁹⁹

994 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.220; Aelius Promotus, Wellmann 775.17; Marcellus, *De Medicamentis*, 36.26; Alexander of Tralles, *Therapeutica* P. 2.581.20-21.

995 Marcellus, *De Medicamentis*, 36.26.

996 Examples of similarities: headaches: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 24.170; *Medicina Plinii* I 1.4; Marcellus of Bordeaux, *De Medicamentis* 1.43 and 2.20; swelling in the groin area: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.48; *Medicina Plinii*, II 22.2; Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 32.19; 32.21; tying fingers against a cold: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 30.46; *Medicina Plinii*, I 11.2; Marcellus, *De Medicamentis*, 10.71 and 10.73.

997 P. Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago 1981) 114-119.

998 Some Judeo-Christian elements can be discerned in the textual amulets he described: Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 8.58-9 and 21.2-3 (in the name of Jacob and Zebaoth (Sabaoth)).

999 P. Brown, *The Cult of the Saints*, 114-119. Or as Zellmann-Rohrer and Love argue for the work of Marcellus, his recipes will probably have been 'at least unoffensive to Christian practitioners.' Zellmann-Rohrer, Love, *Traditions in Transmission*. 68.

Although medical handbooks show continuity over a long period of time, this does not mean that there were no developments at all. Some copied versions of specific recipes show small changes, for instance a different purpose for the same or a similar amulet. An amulet made of stones found in (or near) a swallow is described by Dioscorides, Pliny, *Medicina Plinii*, and Alexander of Tralles as a remedy for epilepsy; Marcellus of Bordeaux, however, presents it as a remedy for eye problems and fever.¹⁰⁰⁰ According to Pliny, a nail used in a crucifixion worn around the neck would act against fever, but according to Alexander such a nail should be worn around the arm against epilepsy.¹⁰⁰¹ Similarly, an eagle stone prevents miscarriage in Pliny and fever in Alexander.¹⁰⁰² It is not clear if these examples show new ideas or should be interpreted as copying mistakes.

There is one notable change that needs to be discussed: compared to earlier sources, the handbooks of the fifth and sixth centuries more frequently refer to amulets in the category of stomach pains, or gastrointestinal problems.¹⁰⁰³ Marcellus of Bordeaux and Alexander of Tralles, for instance, copying instructions from sources such as Pliny the Elder, incorporate additional directions.¹⁰⁰⁴ Alexander of Tralles, for example, gives a recipe using wolf faeces very similar to a much earlier one in the works of Pliny, Galen, and Marcellus of Bordeaux: ‘An amulet (Περίσπτον) of which we have had experience and which nearly all the of the best doctors hold in good opinion: Take the feces of a wolf, (...) and enclose it in a leather case and give it to the patient to wear.’¹⁰⁰⁵ In the work of Marcellus of Bordeaux, many instructions to create amulets for digestive issues refer to textual amulets.¹⁰⁰⁶ In one case he prescribes a Greek inscription: ‘These are the symbols that must be inscribed on a gold lamella: “Lpsmthkia Lpsmthkia Lpsmthkia.”’¹⁰⁰⁷ The textual amulets found in the archaeological record do not show a rise in gastrointestinal requests. It was, however, a very popular category in gemstones, both during the early Imperial period and in Late Antiquity.¹⁰⁰⁸

In addition, there are differences among the ancient medical authors in the types of amulets they describe. This could be due to the nature of the sources or the interests of

1000 Dioscorides *Materia Medica* 2.56; Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 30.91-92; *Medicina Plinii* III 21.2 and 21.3; Alexander of Tralles, *Therapeutica* P. 1.561.3-9; Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 8.45.

1001 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.46; Alexander of Tralles, *Therapeutica*, P. 1.567.10-13.

1002 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 36.151; Alexander of Tralles, *De Febribus* P. 1.407.1-3.

1003 As Faraone had also noticed: Faraone, *Transformation*, 261.

1004 An example of an instruction that was copied: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.211; Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 28.52, 29.35; Alexander of Tralles, *Therapeutica* 2.375.20-25

1005 Based on Alexander of Tralles, *Therapeutica* P.2.375.20-25. Taken from Faraone, *Transformation*, 280-281. Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.211 (for colitis); Galen, *De simplicium medicamentorum* Kühn, XII.295; Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 28.52, 29.35.

1006 Marcellus, *De Medicamentis*: belly pains: 20.66, 21.2-3, 29.26 and not a textual amulet but a gemstone: 20.98.

1007 The ‘symbols’ are Greek letters. Paraphrase by Faraone, *Transformation*, 279 of Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 29.26 (as 29.38 in Faraone).

1008 In general, gemstone amulets were often made for belly related problems: Dasen, ‘Healing Images’, 179-184.

the author. Marcellus of Bordeaux seems to have been particularly interested in amulets for throat problems, for instance with the uvula and tonsils, and less in fever amulets.¹⁰⁰⁹ Alexander of Tralles seems to have been especially interested in epilepsy and gout.¹⁰¹⁰

Protection and benefits

Textual amulets, the papyrus handbooks from Roman Egypt, and other sources on amulets indicate the continued use of amulets to obtain protection, healing or benefits in the fourth-to-sixth centuries. Protective agricultural amulets remained in use, for instance. Two second-century hailstorm amulets inscribed on metal tablets carry the following text: ‘divert from this property all hail and all snow’.¹⁰¹¹ This type of amulet is also described in the fourth-century Edict of Constantine; the use of *remedia* is allowed ‘in order that rains may not be feared for the ripe harvest’.¹⁰¹² Examples from Late Antiquity can be found as well, but with the addition of new Christian elements: ‘With respect to you, Jesus Christ, grant the fruit and tribute to the vineyard of Cyriacus, son of Zosimus’.¹⁰¹³ T.S. de Bruyn has shown that *charitësia*, favour amulets, likewise remained in use in a Christian world. The structure of the texts, the use, and the perceived functioning of the object remained the same.¹⁰¹⁴

In all of these objects, however, changes do occur. As the hailstorm amulets show, instead of the traditional supernatural powers, the text now addresses Jesus Christ. The favour amulets also show Christian innovations as well as the use of the Coptic language.¹⁰¹⁵ These textual changes will be further analysed in section 4.3D.

All in all, there is much evidence for continuity in the use of amulets. Amulets were still used by the same social groups for healing, protection, and other benefits. Using amulets for digestive problems became more popular, although the reasons for this remain obscure. The medical handbooks also show several developments. Instead of Pliny the Elder’s original work, the *Medicina Plinii* was often copied, which shifted the focus away from women and children. Authors also had preferences of their own and tended to prescribe certain types of amulets. Longstanding habits ensured that amulets remained the ‘go-to’ option when in need.

B. How to acquire an amulet and the role of the priest

If an issue occurred that could be solved with the help of an amulet, the object had to be

1009 Marcellus, *De Medicamentis*: fever: 8.45 and uvula and tonsils, for example: 14.20, 14.23, 14.25, 14.26, 14.30, 14.53, 14.63, 14.65, 14.67, 14.68–69, 15.12–13, 15.67; 15.71, 15.89, 18.108.

1010 Alexander of Tralles, *Therapeutica*: epilepsy, see for example: 1.561.3–9, 1.567.10–13, 1.567.13–16, 1.567.16–18, 1.571.16–19. For gout, see for example: 2.579.20–31, 2.581.14–19, 2.581.20–21, 2.583.4–13, 2.585.5–19.

1011 GMA 11. Translation by Kotansky, GMA 11.

1012 *Codex Theodosianus* 9.16.3. Translation by Pharr, *Theodosian Code*, 237.

1013 SEG 50 (2000): 1014. Translation by Alvar Nuño, ‘Ritual Power’, 89.

1014 T.S. de Bruyn, ‘An Anatomy of Tradition: The Case of the Charitësion’, *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 16.1 (2015) 31–50.

1015 De Bruyn, ‘Anatomy of Tradition’.

bought, received, or made. The early Christian sermons provide insight into the ways in which people could reach out to amulets. In addition, the arrival of Christianity saw a new category of providers of amulets: priests, monks, and other clerics. They became new authorities in the field of amulet makers. What did the creation of amulets by people belonging to Christian institutions mean for the experiences of the amulet user?

Advice from friends and family

In his analysis of the creation of Christian textual amulets, T.S. de Bruyn argued that the social context of amulet use is of importance for understanding the continuation of amulets. In his view, ‘the durability of the practice was not simply a result of the urgency of the need to which it responded. It was also – if not even more so – a result of the social matrix in which people lived.’¹⁰¹⁶ As will become clear, the use of amulets was not only accepted in Late Antiquity, but also promoted by relatives, neighbours, and acquaintances. This is not necessarily a new development, but earlier sources on this issue are scarce and mainly concerned with the use of amulets in a family context.¹⁰¹⁷ The lens of the bishops enables a broader picture of the social context of amulet use.

Critical texts concerning healing amulets are a valuable source for references to people advising others to use amulets in life-threatening situations. John Chrysostom,¹⁰¹⁸ Augustine of Hippo¹⁰¹⁹ and Caesarius of Arles¹⁰²⁰ describe similar sickbed scenes in which patients receive such advice. One example is the following passage:

You are lying on your sickbed, and are one of God’s athletes. You can’t move hand or foot, and you’re fighting battles to the finish. The fever doesn’t leave you, and your faith goes ahead to God. But lo and behold, a neighbor at your bedside, and a friend and a maid, even perhaps, as I said, your old nurse, bringing wax and an egg in her hand and saying, “Do this and get better. Why prolong your illness? Tie on this amulet (*ligatura*). I heard someone invoke the name of God and the angels over it, and you will get better. To whose care will you leave your widowed wife, to whose care your young children?”

But he says, “I won’t do it, because I’m a Christian. Let me die in such a way that

I don’t thereby die forever”¹⁰²¹

1016 De Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 28.

1017 See for example the discussion on making amulets in a family context in 2.3.2.

1018 John Chrysostom, *In epistulam ad Colossenses* 8.5 (PG 62.357-359); John Chrysostom, *In epistulam I ad Thessalonicenses* 3 (PG 62.412).

1019 Augustine of Hippo, *Sermones (ad populum)* 286.7 (PL 38.1297-1301), 328 (PLS 2.800), 335D.3 and 335D.5 (PLS 2.778-780); Augustine of Hippo, *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 93.20 (CCSL 39.1322).

1020 Caesarius of Arles, *Sermones* 184.4.

1021 Augustine of Hippo, *Sermones* 335D.5 (PLS 2.778-780). Translation by Rebillard, *Christians and Their Many Identities*, 74-75.

Similar passages were discussed in section 4.2. Although these texts had a rhetorical purpose, it is reasonable to assume that the bishops of the early church reacted to a practice of talking about amulets and their effects and of giving advice to sick loved ones.

In the work of John Chrysostom, those who are trying to persuade others to use amulets are mostly female: mothers or old and drunken women.¹⁰²² In Augustine's sermons the group is more diverse and consists of neighbours, friends, maids, old nurses, husbands, and wives.¹⁰²³ In their attempts to persuade sick relatives or acquaintances, these people would also mention others who actually had used amulets with positive effects: 'So-and-so, and So-and-so and So-and-so; ask, they all got better by using it.'¹⁰²⁴ In some passages, those urging others to use a certain amulet present the argument that other users are Christians: 'So-and-so did it and was cured immediately. Don't you know Such-and-such, that he's a Christian, a believer? Look, he did it, and he got well.'¹⁰²⁵ Hearing the success stories of others, from within the group they identified with, would have motivated people to reach out to amulets.¹⁰²⁶ These passages also imply that Christians experienced social pressure from others identifying as Christians.¹⁰²⁷

The sources suggest that amulets continued to be widely used, despite the objections of some bishops. The sickbed scenes provide insight into the social context of the continued acceptance of amulets.¹⁰²⁸ Persistent social habits supported the decision to reach out to an amulet and contributed to their acceptability – even though the bishops did not agree.

Acquiring an amulet

Since amulets continued to be used, they must have been available. In Late Antiquity people could still reach out to a variety of craftspeople and ritual specialists for practices such as amulets.¹⁰²⁹ Especially in areas outside the church's direct sphere of influence, the more traditional ritual specialists probably retained their importance.¹⁰³⁰ However, new providers of amulets appeared on the market in the form of people affiliated with Christian

1022 Dickie, *Magic and Magicians*, 281-283. Or Jews: Luijendijk, 'Gospel Amulet for Joannia', 429-430. The Jew or old woman as amulet advisers in John Chrysostom: John Chrysostom, *In epistulam ad Colossenses* 8.5 (PG 62.357-359).

1023 De Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 28; Augustine of Hippo, *Sermones (ad populum)* 335D.5 and 335D.3 (PLS 2.778-780), and Augustine of Hippo, *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 93.20 (CCSL 39.1322).

1024 Augustine of Hippo, *Sermones (ad populum)* 286.7 (PL 38.1300-1). Rebillard, *Christians and Their Many Identities*, 74. Similar in Augustine of Hippo, *Sermones (ad populum)* 335D.3 (PLS 2.778-780).

1025 Augustine of Hippo, *Sermones (ad populum)* 335D.3 (PLS 2.778-780). Translation by E. Hill, *The Works of Saint Augustine. A Translation for the 21st Century, Vol. III 9, Sermons 306-340A on the Saints* (New York 1994) 229-231.

1026 Getting better for example: Augustine of Hippo, *Sermones (ad populum)* 286.7 (PL 38.1300-1), 318.3 (PL 38.1437-1440) and 335D.5 (PLS 2.778-80).

1027 Stander, 'Amulets and the Church Fathers', 60.

1028 De Bruyn gives 'accepted in the social circles of many in the population' as one of the reasons for the continuation of amulet use. De Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 42.

1029 Klingshirn, *Caesarius of Arles*, 208-209, 223.

1030 Klingshirn, *Caesarius of Arles*, 222.

institutionalised environments. Although the level of institutionalisation varied from region to region, priests, monks, and clerics were certainly involved in making amulets and this constitutes a significant change.

That members of the clergy participated in amulet production is evident from the criticism formulated in canonical texts and by authors such as the bishop Caesarius of Arles and the abbot Shenoute.¹⁰³¹ Shenoute, for instance, mentions that an amulet user justified himself by claiming that ‘a respectable monk gave them to me.’¹⁰³² Because of their level of literacy and their knowledge of the Scriptures and the liturgy, clerics were well-suited for amulet production.¹⁰³³ Modern scholars have analysed textual amulets with Christian elements and argued that many of them were made by scribes belonging to Christian institutions such as a church or monastery.¹⁰³⁴ Elements from Scriptures and liturgy found their way to amulets and the new amulet makers were important agents of innovation.¹⁰³⁵ T.S. de Bruyn demonstrated that scriptural passages were added to amulets ‘as a means to invest the amulet with protective or healing power.’¹⁰³⁶ The following fifth- or sixth-century papyrus amulet from the Faiyum region may serve as an example:

In the name of the father, the son, and the Holy Spirit. (Ps. 90.1) The one who lives in the help of the Most High will abide in the shelter of the Lord of heaven ... (Jn 1.1-2) (...)

The Lord is a helper to me and I will not fear what a person may do to me. The Lord is a helper to me and I will observe my enemies. (Ps. 17:3) The Lord is my firmness and my refuge and my rescuer. (Mt. 4:23) The Lord Jesus went around all of Galilee teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom and healing every illness and every infirmity. (Incantation) The body and the blood of Christ spare your servant who carries this amulet. Amen. Allelouljah. † α † ω †¹⁰³⁷

The level of scriptural or liturgical knowledge and the writing skills of the scribes varied. Some amulets were probably made by scribes working at the centre of an early Christian

1031 See below and for example Caesarius of Arles, *Sermones* 50.1.

1032 Translation by Van der Vliet, ‘Roman and Byzantine Egypt’, 253-254; Shenoute of Atripe, *Acephalous work A14* par. 255-262 (Orlandi 18-20). In the Apostolic tradition and the Phrygian canon: Sanzo, ‘Early Christianity’, 220-223. On the ‘magical’ handbooks found in a jar in the floor of a monk’s cave and other finds see de Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 84-86.

1033 Skemer, *Binding Words*, 72-73.

1034 In general, see: de Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*; Luijendijk, ‘Gospel Amulet for Joannia’.

1035 De Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, see for example 233-237. Directly copied or written down from memory: de Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 181-182. For liturgical language see: *PGMP*13; *GMA* 35; *P.Oxy.* LXXXII 5306, 5307 and *PGM* P5a.

1036 Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 181, see also 238-244. In general, see: Jones, *New Testament Texts*; Sanzo, *Scriptural Incipits*.

1037 Translation and references to biblical passages by Jones, *New Testament Texts*, 65-71, nr. 2. Staatliche Museen, Berlin (P. 6096).

institution, others by people who operated on the periphery, but within a Christian framework and after receiving a Christian training.¹⁰³⁸ T.S. de Bruyn deems it unlikely that personalised amulets with elements such as the *charaktères* were made by members of the higher clergy.¹⁰³⁹ Still, the people who did make these amulets must have conceived of their practice as Christian.¹⁰⁴⁰ Writing about priests who were involved in amulet production in medieval times, D.C. Skemer suggest that ‘they might even interpret it as an act of Christian devotion and generosity, worthy of divine blessing and heavenly rewards.’¹⁰⁴¹

The role of the priests

Although we know who made amulets, we do not know exactly how their customers acquired them. T.S. de Bruyn distinguishes between amulets with primarily scriptural passages and personalised amulets reflecting specific personal requests.¹⁰⁴² The acquisition of scriptural amulets may not always have required personal contact with a priest, as they may have been available from stock. For personalised amulets some contact with the scribe would have been necessary for the communication of a name, the nature of an ailment or a specific request.¹⁰⁴³ Although not every customer required direct contact with a monk or priest, the institutional background of Christian amulet makers must have impacted users. What did it mean for the user that the amulet came from within this particular authoritative environment?

As I have argued earlier, contact with a ritual specialist involved interaction and ritual practices of various kinds which added to the experience of the object and the formation of a sense of control.¹⁰⁴⁴ Several early Christian authors certainly disapproved of amulet use, but why would an ancient individual question the use of amulets when the amulets came from an institutionalised Christian environment?¹⁰⁴⁵ On the contrary, faith in the institution the provider belonged to probably contributed to the provider’s credibility.¹⁰⁴⁶ Because of their position as members of the Christian clergy, customers regarded these creators of

1038 Because of the mistakes they make and the types of texts they cite. De Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 107, 114, 120, 238, 240-241.

1039 De Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 244-245

1040 See also: Klingshirn, *Ceasarius of Arles*, 223-224.

1041 Skemer, *Binding Words*, 22.

1042 De Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, devotes two chapters to these different types of amulets. De Bruyn stresses that it is impossible to determine why some amulets contain a specific request and others only scriptural passages: de Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 181-182.

1043 According to de Bruyn even personalised amulets were often copied, for instance the many similar scorpion amulets beginning with the ‘hor hor’ phrase: de Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 90-98.

1044 See section 2.3 of chapter two of this book and Frankfurter, ‘The Demonic in Christian Egypt’, 59-62; D. Frankfurter, *Evil incarnate. Rumors of Demonic Conspiracy and Satanic Abuse in History* (Princeton/Oxford 2006) 19-20.

1045 See also: Lujendijk, ‘Gospel Amulet for Joannia’, 429-430.

1046 As argued in chapter two section 2.3.

amulets as trustworthy sources of authority.¹⁰⁴⁷

The production of amulets by monks and priests created new experiences for amulet users. These people were able to endow amulets with the power associated with the institutions they belonged to, especially in the case of textual amulets containing passages from the Scriptures or in relation to rituals derived from the liturgy. The use of these sources of power would have enhanced the agency of the amulet and created trust in the customers.¹⁰⁴⁸

Christian authority

As I have shown earlier, early church authors criticising the use of amulets included colleagues who made and used amulets in their criticism.¹⁰⁴⁹ On the other hand, church members conceived of amulets as compatible with their Christian identity precisely because they were made by members of the clergy. In these circumstances amulets with Christian elements were not seen as a non-Christian alternative to common Christian religious practices – such as the oils, relics and church rituals for healing that Caesarius mentions – but as a fully legitimate option.¹⁰⁵⁰ Priests, monks, and clerics must have been considered by many as authoritative church officials, capable of creating legitimate, reliable, and effective amulets. By becoming part of Christian practices, amulets became acceptable. This ensured their continuation.

We may ask ourselves whether the experiences of amulet users in Late Antiquity were fundamentally different from those of the era before the advent of Christianity. After all, the traditional Graeco-Roman religious specialist was also considered a figure of authority. However, from an emic point of view, these new figures were clearly an important development. They created amulets based on a new religious power and brought Christian religion into people's lives and homes in the form of amulets with Christian texts and imagery. On the level of access to the amulet and the role of the specialist we therefore see some notable developments. The introduction of amulets into the Christian repertoire by priests and monks provided amulets with connections to Christian institutions. This must have made an impact on the amulet user. Those using amulets made by monks or priests would have regarded their course of action as a fully Christian practice. Secondly, it is highly likely that the involvement of these specialists enhanced the belief in the capacity of the amulets they made.

C. The efficacy of amulets: externalisation of danger

In Late Antiquity, people continued to ascribe power to objects. Augustine, for example,

1047 De Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 243.

1048 De Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 9-11, 184-185, 223-234; Luijendijk, 'Gospel Amulet for Joannia', 428.

1049 Luijendijk, 'Gospel Amulet for Joannia', 429.

1050 Jones, *New Testament Texts*, 29: 'Alternative to the religious institution of the Church'.

describes the healing power of holding the Gospels against the head of someone suffering from headaches.¹⁰⁵¹ Amulets remained in use for hundreds of years and their users continued to believe in their efficacy in the fields of healing, protecting, and providing benefits. If the bishops can be believed, the power of amulets was talked about and even praised.¹⁰⁵² To shed some further light on the interaction between continuity and change in amulet use, I will in what follows explore belief in the efficacy of amulets in relation to the externalisation of danger by focussing on exorcism. As will become clear, exorcism is not a late antique development, but gained in importance in this period.

Exorcism and amulets

Exorcism, in general, is based on the idea of ‘an unfamiliar spirit possessing a human being by somehow infiltrating the body and securing control,’ and the conviction that the spirit in question can be driven out with the help of religious practices.¹⁰⁵³ Exorcism was practiced before Late Antiquity and was shaped by a variety of cultural influences. It has Near Eastern origins; Graeco-Roman and early Christian amulets largely derive from Jewish exorcistic traditions, but also show Egyptian influences.¹⁰⁵⁴ M. Zellmann-Rohrer, who studied Greek exorcistic epilepsy amulets, found that they not only use the Greek Hippocratic diagnosis and classification of epilepsy, but also the Jewish idea that epilepsy is caused by a demon that can be expelled.¹⁰⁵⁵

Exorcism started as an oral practice; in due course the spoken formulae were written on amulets when these became more textual.¹⁰⁵⁶ Demons, diseases and other inconveniences caused by demons, and personified illnesses would be expelled from the body of the person who used an amulet inscribed with such formulae – thus healing the body. Other amulets of this kind served as a protective measure against evil (re-)entering from the outside. Exorcism is thus based on the externalisation of danger, an idea that already played a role in the amulets of the first-to-third centuries CE, for example two second- or-third-century amulets to ‘protect from every male and female demon’ and release

1051 Augustine of Hippo, *In Iohannis euangelium tractatus* 7.12 (CCSL 36.73). The Scriptures, the eucharist, holy oil and other material aspects of religion were believed to have some sort of power and these will be discussed below: see section 4.3D-H of this book.

1052 Augustine of Hippo, *Sermones (ad populum)* 286.7 (PL 38.1297-1301). Translation: Rebillard, *Christians and Their Many Identities*, 74.

1053 Kotansky, ‘Greek Exorcistic Amulets’, 246, 276.

1054 S. Lunn-Rockliffe, ‘Demons and Demonologies’ in: J. Lössl, N.J. Baker-Brian (eds.), *A Companion to Religion in Late Antiquity* (Hoboken 2018) 493-509: 494; Kotansky, ‘Greek Exorcistic amulets’, 246-247; M. Zellmann-Rohrer, ‘Hippocratic Diagnosis, Solomonic Therapy, Roman Amulets: Epilepsy, Exorcism, and the Diffusion of a Jewish Tradition in the Roman World’, *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 53 (2022) 69-93: 69-70.

1055 Zellmann-Rohrer, ‘Hippocratic Diagnosis’, 80-82.

1056 Zellmann-Rohrer, ‘Hippocratic Diagnosis’, 76, 89; Kotansky, ‘Greek Exorcistic Amulets’, 267.

the wearer from ‘demonic apparition’.¹⁰⁵⁷ Another example is a first-to-second-century amulet now in the British Library: ‘Serve as amulet (φυλακτηριάζω) for Alexandros *alias* Makedon! (...) Whether spirit of epilepsy or of derangement or of ill speech or of draught of poisons (...) I adjure you, spirit entering the body of Alexandros *alias* Makedon’.¹⁰⁵⁸

The practice of exorcism was taken up in the early Christian era, heavily influenced by Jewish practices.¹⁰⁵⁹ As an oral practice it used the names of Jesus or God to expel demons. The ritual might include the laying on of hands and making the sign of the cross. The powerful name of Jesus could also be used on its own in an oral performance.¹⁰⁶⁰ This new Christian form of exorcism aligned with practices of amulet use and the formulae came to be used for amulets.¹⁰⁶¹ SM 25, a fifth-century amulet, presents Christ as a pursuer of fever: ‘Shivering, and fever with shivering, and fever, the Son of God pursues you’.¹⁰⁶² Other late antique amulets use a combination of religious elements to release the wearer from a demon. A fourth-to-sixth-century amulet from Xanthus, for example, contains the following text: ‘† Lord, help the bearer, Epiphanius, whom Anastasia bore. I adjure you by Solomon, the great angel Michael, Gabriel, Uriel, Raphael. I adjure you by Abrasax. I adjure you in Hebrew, ‘Phthaôthbaraô’, by Sabaoth’.¹⁰⁶³ In this text a Christian cross, the ‘magical’ Abrasax, and Hebrew terminology are combined.

Surviving textual amulets present various different formulations to expel demons from human bodies. R.D. Kotansky stresses the consistency of these formulations over time.¹⁰⁶⁴ He describes the phrases used to ‘adjure’ the demon or make the demon ‘flee’.¹⁰⁶⁵ As I mentioned above, amulets were also used to make sure the demon would not enter, or re-enter after expulsion.¹⁰⁶⁶ Some amulets directly address the demon in question (‘I adjure you, spirit’), others introduce benevolent beings to perform the exorcism (‘the Son of God pursues you’).¹⁰⁶⁷ As the latter example shows, over time Christian aspects of exorcism were

1057 GMA 38. Translation by Kotansky GMA 38; GMA 46. Translation by Kotansky GMA 46. In the case of amulets of this type, demonology is often seen as a Jewish influence.

1058 British Library, London, registration number: Add. MS 57302. Translation: M. Zellmann-Rohrer, ‘A Greek Exorcistic Amulet against Epilepsy and Other Ills (with an Appendix on the Early Greek Exorcism Formulary of P. Fouad 203)’, *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 218 (2021) 143-157: 149.

1059 On New Testament texts see Zellmann-Rohrer, ‘Hippocratic Diagnosis’, 73-74, 89; de Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 204-212.

1060 De Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 204-205; Zellmann-Rohrer, ‘Hippocratic Diagnosis’, 73-76.

1061 Zellmann-Rohrer, ‘A Greek Exorcistic Amulet’, 145.

1062 SM 25. Translation by Daniel, Maltomini, SM 25.

1063 D.R. Jordan, R.D. Kotansky, ‘Two Phylacteries from Xanthus’, *Revue archéologique* (1996) 161-74: 168-169. See also: Faraone, ‘Circular Gem-Designs’.

1064 Kotansky, ‘Greek Exorcistic Amulets’, 276.

1065 In earlier Greek amulets, but this continued in the Christian amulets: Kotansky, ‘Greek Exorcistic Amulets’, 249-254, 276.

1066 Kotansky, ‘Greek Exorcistic Amulets’, 259.

1067 Zellmann-Rohrer, ‘Hippocratic Diagnosis’, 88 and 149. British Library, London, registration number: Add. MS 57302 and SM 25.

added to the amulets' texts such as invoking or naming Jesus Christ, quoting the Christian creed, or using multiple adjurations in the same text.¹⁰⁶⁸ PGM P9 is an example of a sixth-century amulet reaching out to God and Jesus:

(Prayer) Master, Oh God Almighty, The Fath[er] of our Lord and Savior [Jesus Christ], and St. Serenus: I, Silvanus, son of Sarapion, give thanks and bow [my] head before you, asking and beseeching that you might chase away from me, your servant, the demon of the evil eye, the (demon) of the e[vil d[e]d an[d] the (demon) of unpleasantness and take away from me every illness and every infirmity so that I might be healthy and [able] to say the Gospel-prayer [of health] (...) ¹⁰⁶⁹

PGM P5b directly addresses the demon: 'Flee, hateful spirit, Christ drives you out. The son of God and the Holy Spirit have gained advantage over you.'¹⁰⁷⁰ Alongside these examples, which address a demon or a spirit, there are amulets that address an illness – often believed to be caused by a demon.¹⁰⁷¹ SM 23, for instance, a fifth-century amulet, uses the Christian creed to directly address the fever with the flee formula: '† Christ was born, amen. Christ was crucified, amen. Christ was buried, amen. Christ arose, amen. He has woken to judge the living and the dead. You too, fever with shivering, flee from Kale, who wears this phylactery.'¹⁰⁷²

Many objects, textual amulets as well as gemstone or bronze pendant amulets, refer to Solomon or the seal of Solomon.¹⁰⁷³ In Late Antiquity this became a popular reference. Solomon was believed to have imprisoned demons in the foundations of the temple in Jerusalem and to have used a seal (or signet ring) to do so.¹⁰⁷⁴ The seal enabled Solomon to control the demons and make them work for him.¹⁰⁷⁵ One textual amulet for the expulsion of demons describes the user, Allous, as 'the holder of the Seal of Solomon'. The text ends with an instruction to draw a seal of Solomon on the amulet; instead of drawing an image,

1068 De Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christians*, 206-208.

1069 PGM P9. Translation by Jones, *New Testament Texts*, 108.

1070 Translation Luijendijk, 'Gospel Amulet for Joannia', 420.

1071 This is the case in most of the amulets de Bruyn discusses in his text on exorcistic amulets: de Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 206-208; see also SM 22, 30, 34 and PGM P18.

1072 This is the first part of the text on the amulet, in the second a stele and *caractères* are invoked: SM 23. Translation by Daniel, Maltomini, SM 23.

1073 See for example: J. Franek, *Solomonica Magica: Solomon, Sisinnius, and the Holy Rider on Greek-Inscribed Amulets from Late Antiquity and the Early Byzantium* (Leiden 2025); R.H. Cline, 'Amulets and the Ritual Efficacy of Christian Symbols' in: D.K. Pettegrew, *et al.* (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Archaeology* (Oxford 2019) 350-366: 356-358; Zellmann-Rohrer, 'Hippocratic Diagnosis'; Kotansky, 'Greek Exorcistic Amulets', 268.

1074 Faraone, 'Circular Gem-Design', 87.

1075 Frankfurter, 'Demonology in the Roman Mediterranean World', 127.

the maker copied this instruction onto the amulet.¹⁰⁷⁶ Other Solomonic amulets include the iconography of a mounted rider spearing a demon. This iconography resembles earlier holy rider figures conquering evil.¹⁰⁷⁷

The ‘external’ danger that amulets were supposed to deal with might come from outside the body, the house, or from outside even larger areas. Amulets demarcated the inside, protected it from the intrusion of evil and/or expelled danger and disease.¹⁰⁷⁸ This is in line with my analysis of pre-Christian amulets as described in chapters two and three. The large textual amulets with demonological elements from Late Antiquity show that the vocabulary of demonology was used to express existing ideas, but now included the new Christian vocabulary. The power of Jesus Christ or Solomon could easily be integrated into existing amulet structures and added the experience of the involvement of the Christian supernatural. (Jewish) demonology had informed texts written on amulets before the arrival of Christianity, but Christian demonology and amulets turned out to be an attractive combination for users living in a world in which ‘Christian’ identities became increasingly important.

D. The role and experience of text

One specific significant change that took place over time was the rise of textuality. This important development is not directly related to the advent of Christianity.¹⁰⁷⁹ The increased use of text is reflected by handbooks with instructions for amulets. While Pliny in the first century only describes (not ‘prescribes’) one textual amulet containing two Greek letters, Marcellus of Bordeaux includes no fewer than seventeen instructions for amulets carrying a text inscribed on a piece of metal or papyrus.¹⁰⁸⁰ To stop bleeding, for instance, he prescribes the inscription of a ‘vanishing act’: ‘Write this charm on a clean papyrus and tie it with a linen thread and attach it to him or her around the middle, those who suffer a flow of blood from whatever part of the body: sycuma, cucuma, ucuma, cuma, uma, ma, a.’¹⁰⁸¹ Marcellus wrote in Latin, but sometimes his instructions prescribe Greek amulet texts.¹⁰⁸² In due course, new Christian elements were added to these textual amulets. For one of his

1076 P.Köln VIII 338. Translation and comments by D.R. Jordan and R.D. Kotansky on page 53-69 of P.Köln VIII. For an explanation: Faraone, ‘Circular Gem-Design’, 86-87.

1077 Faraone, *Transformation*, 113-115.

1078 Kotansky also noticed a spatial relationship between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ in exorcistic amulets: Kotansky, ‘Greek Exorcistic Amulets’, 256, 261-263 and 276.

1079 See the discussion in section 4.1 of this chapter.

1080 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 28.29. Marcellus of Bordeaux, *De Medicamentis*: 8.56, 8.57-58, 8.58-59, 8.59-60, 10.34-35, 10.35, 10.70, 14.67, 15.89, 15.108, 20.66, 20.89 (gemstone), 21.2-3, 21.8, 22.10, 24.7 (gemstone), 26.43, 29.26, 32.25.

1081 Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 10.34-35. Translation in Faraone, *Vanishing acts*, 7.

1082 This is often the case for amulets. Latin amulets in Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* are: 10.34-35, 10.35, 14.67, 20.66 and 21.2-3.

amulets Marcellus advises adding a Christian symbol: the Chi-Rho.¹⁰⁸³ Still, amulets did not become Christian overnight and older elements interacted with the new ones.

While all sorts of amulets were present in Late Antiquity, the textual ones have attracted most attention from modern scholars. As G. Bohak argues with regard to the textual tradition in general: ‘the scribal nature of the Greco-Egyptian magical tradition probably creates a distorted image of its supremacy within late-antique society’, and this statement appears valid for amulets as well.¹⁰⁸⁴ The early Christian textual amulets have recently been extensively studied, not only because many of them have survived, but also because textual amulets are more recognisable than non-textual ones and because they can provide information on aspects of the gradual ‘Christianisation’ of amulets.¹⁰⁸⁵ In what follows, I will investigate the textuality of amulets with a focus on the experience of the user, still an underdeveloped topic. Was the experience of textual amulets containing Christian elements different from amulet experiences of earlier centuries or did the experiences of amulet users remain largely the same?

Continuation of the format

In 1997 R. MacMullen wrote: ‘Yet in wording, tone, and strategy, though not in the deity addressed, the old traditions persisted also among the bishops and lower clergy themselves.’¹⁰⁸⁶ T.S. de Bruyn argues that ‘Christian elements tend to frame rather than modify the traditional adjuration.’¹⁰⁸⁷ In practice, the ‘Christianisation’ of amulets was much more complicated, as will be shown below, but in general it can be stated that many of the traditional textual elements remained in use. There was, however, a change in the supernatural powers they addressed.

New Christian elements were added to existing formulations and structures. One example is the often used formula: ‘now, now, quickly, quickly’.¹⁰⁸⁸ In amulets, this formula remained in use, but would, for instance, be introduced to urge Christ to perform the healing.¹⁰⁸⁹ One sixth-century amulet starts with a version of the Christian creed and continues with the following formula: ‘Christ saves Vibius, whom Gennaia bore, from all

1083 In this particular instruction, Marcellus advises to use a Greek inscription that included three Chi-Rho signs (or perhaps a combination of Chi-Rho signs and staurograms). Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 8.58-59.

1084 Bohak, ‘Diffusion of Greco-Egyptian Magical Tradition’, 359, see 358-360.

1085 De Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*; de Bruyn, Dijkstra, ‘A Checklist’; Sanzo, *Scriptural Incipits*; Jones, *New Testament Texts*. See also: Van der Vliet, ‘Tradition and Innovation’, 261-267. Van der Vliet studied late antique Egyptian ‘magic’ and noticed four forms of ‘Christianisation’: reframing, rewriting, overwriting, and supplanting.

1086 MacMullen, *Christianity and Paganism*, 142.

1087 De Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 137. He makes this statement in relation to customary amulets, distinguishing between customary and scriptural amulets.

1088 This formula also made it into the sixth-century medical handbook of Alexander of Tralles, *Therapeutica* P. 2.583.4-13.

1089 Now, now, quickly, quickly, for example in: SM 35; SM 32; *PGM* CXXVIII.; *PGM* C.; P.Köln VI 257.

fever and from all shivering, daily, quotidian, now now, quickly quickly.¹⁰⁹⁰ Other textual elements, such as powerful names, vowel series, and ‘vanishing acts’, also remained in use, as did *charaktêres*. These were even themselves addressed as powerful entities in late antique amulets, for example in SM 21: ‘Holy signs (*charaktêres*), heal Tiron, whom Palladia bore.’¹⁰⁹¹ When Caesarius of Arles criticised amulet use, he included older traditions such as the use of *charaktêres*: ‘Do not hang on yourself and your family diabolical phylacteries, *caracteres*, amber charms, and herbs.’¹⁰⁹² This demonstrates that these elements were still known in Caesarius’s times.

What did the continuation of old formats mean for the experiences of amulet users? T.S. de Bruyn has studied continuity and change in *charitesia*, favour amulets.¹⁰⁹³ In this group many formulae and other textual elements remained the same, but in due course Christian features began to appear. Which elements remained in use, and which were added probably depended on the preference of the scribes or on local circumstances.¹⁰⁹⁴ One reason for hanging on to traditional formulae may have been that, in this way, amulets corresponded to the users’ expectations. The efficacy of amulets was associated with traditional textual features, such as the ‘now, now’ formula and the *charaktêres*; these familiar elements created trust. According to de Bruyn: ‘Knowing and recognizing trusted formulations (...) would have been inherent to writing an amulet.’¹⁰⁹⁵ In other words, the traditional elements made amulets recognisable as amulets and ensured belief in their power.

The textual amulets of the fourth-to-sixth centuries show that the elimination of non-Christian elements was a gradual process. G. Bohak stressed that Greek-Egyptian ‘magical’ traditions could not compete with what Christianity had to offer, but it took time for these traditions to disappear. Elements of the older traditions remained in use for centuries.¹⁰⁹⁶ As noted by K. Dosoo, Coptic had been used in handbook instructions from the sixth century onwards, but it was only in the seventh century that Coptic appeared in the activated ‘magical’ texts, such as amulets. The explanation might be that the amulets were copied from centuries-old handbooks.¹⁰⁹⁷ Similarly, non-Christian elements may have remained part of amulet use because of copying practices.¹⁰⁹⁸ Dosoo has researched the names of supernatural powers referred to in late antique ‘magical’ texts from Egypt and found that in the course of the fourth century the number of Greek and Egyptian religious names

1090 SM 35. Translation by Daniel, Maltomini, SM 35.

1091 SM 21. Translation by Daniel, Maltomini, SM 21. See also SM 23.

1092 Caesarius of Arles, *Sermones* 14.4. Translation by Mueller, *Volume*, 82, adapted by the author. Similarly in Sermon 1.12, 13.5, 50.1, 184.4, 204.3.

1093 De Bruyn, ‘Anatomy of Tradition’.

1094 De Bruyn, Dijkstra, ‘A Checklist’, 182.

1095 De Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 235.

1096 Perhaps even still: Bohak, ‘Diffusion of Greco-Egyptian Magical Tradition’, 378.

1097 Dosoo, ‘Magical Names’, 89–90.

1098 Dosoo, ‘Magical Names’, 131–132.

decreased as the use of Christian elements gained ground. While this development is in line with expectations, it is remarkable that the use of Jewish elements and ‘magical’ names continued. It seems possible that some ‘magical’ names, such as Abrasax, continued as part of the textual tradition. They may have survived because they were no longer connected to non-Christian public cults with temples, but still part of a longstanding practice of inscribing private religious objects.¹⁰⁹⁹

Although many traditional textual elements remained in use, it does not follow that their meaning remained the same in the experiences of amulet users.¹¹⁰⁰ Users may have come to see the formulae as Christian, or at least as not clashing with Christianity.¹¹⁰¹ Certain texts or images probably became formulaic; their meaning changed when they were used in the new Christian context.¹¹⁰² Two papyrus amulets of the fourth or fifth century used by people to keep scorpions out of their houses illustrate the interpretational difficulties posed by formulaic continuities:¹¹⁰³

† The door, Aphroditên phroditên roditên oditên ditên itên tèn tèn ên. Hôr Hôr Phôr Phôr
Iaô Sabaôth Adône. I bind you, Artemisian scorpion. Deliver this house from every evil
creeping thing, quickly, quickly. St. Phocas is here. Phamenoth 13, third indiction.¹¹⁰⁴

Hor, Hor, Phor, Eloei, Adonai, Iao, Sabaoth, Michael, Jesus Christ. Help us and this house.

Amen¹¹⁰⁵

Both amulets refer to the Egyptian god Horus (Hor/Phor) who was often called upon in connection with scorpion stings. The objects also use Jewish divine names, such as Iao, Adonai and Sabaoth, which frequently appear in Greek-Egyptian ‘magical’ texts. The first text features a ‘vanishing act’ based on the name of the Greek goddess Aphrodite. It also mentions the Christian St. Phocas, who was commonly called upon to heal snake bites. The second refers to the archangel Michael and to Jesus Christ and ends with Amen.¹¹⁰⁶ The first text seems to contain some copying mistakes: ‘the door’ was most likely part of the instruction for the location the amulet had to be attached to and the words of the vanishing

1099 Dosoo, ‘Magical Names’, 128-130.

1100 Certain ‘magical’ formulae may have lost their original meaning over time while still being kept in use: Versnel, ‘Poetics of the Magical Charm’, 105-109.

1101 Van der Vliet, ‘Christian Spells’, 329-330.

1102 Sanzo, *Ritual Boundaries*, 110.

1103 In total six amulets with similar formulations have been found, the others are: *PGM* P3; *PGM* XXVIIIa.; *PGM* XXVIIIb. 1-9; *PGM* XXVIIIc. For an analysis of *PGM* P3 see: Korsvoll, ‘Same, Same, But Different’.

1104 *PGM* P2, sixth century. Translation: de Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 93.

1105 Fifth to sixth century, *PGM* P6a. Translation in P.Oxy. VII 1152. See also Sanzo, *Ritual Boundaries*, 32.

1106 More on these types of amulets in de Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 90-97.

act are supposed to be written as successive lines. The two amulets thus show a combination of a variety of ‘new’ and ‘old’ religious elements. T.S. de Bruyn, however, wonders whether the inclusion of Horus was still understood by the makers as a reference to a non-Christian deity: ‘Did they understand the invocation to refer to Horus, or was the meaning of the sequence attenuated into something one simply said to ward off scorpions and snakes?’¹¹⁰⁷ The same can be said for the Jewish and Greek elements. Since part of the instruction for the creation of the amulet was copied inadvertently, other elements may also have been copied without giving thought to their meaning. The examples illustrate that it is far from easy to say anything definite about the meaning of traditional elements for amulet users. Although the old formulas were evidently still believed to have performative powers, their religious meaning may have changed in the new religious context of late antique society.

Adding Christian elements to an existing framework

The textual amulets from the fourth to sixth centuries contain many new Christian elements.¹¹⁰⁸ Augustine writes that amulet makers ‘mingle the name of Christ in their enchantments’.¹¹⁰⁹ The following papyrus amulet contains the incipits of the four Gospels as well as several (references to) passages from the Bible:

Christ savior: (Jn 1.1) In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God. (Mt. 1.1) An account of the genealogy of Jesus Christ son of David, son of Abraham. (Mk 1.2) Just as Isaiah the prophet said, (Mk 1.1) [The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, son of God, son of Abraham. (Lk. 1.1) Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us. (Ps. 90.1) The one who lives [in the help] of the Most High, and so forth. (Mt. 6.9) Our father who is in heaven hallowed be your name, a[nd so forth]. Glory to the father and son and Holy Spirit, both now and always, and forever and ever. Amen.¹¹¹⁰

In many other textual amulets we likewise find direct quotes from the Scriptures,¹¹¹¹ liturgical formulae, prayers, acclamations such as ‘amen’, incantations, as well as elements from

1107 De Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 97-98.

1108 For example: de Bruyn, Dijkstra, ‘A Checklist’, 180-181; Dosoo, ‘Magical Names’, 130. For other publications on the discussion of emphasis on continuity or change, see for example: de Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*; Van der Vliet, ‘Tradition and Innovation’; N.H. Korsvoll, ‘Official Teaching and Popular Practice. Are Church Opinions on Magic Reflected in the Surviving Amulets from the Early Middle Ages?’ in: S. Kiyanrad, C. Theis, L. Willer (eds.), *Bild und Schrift auf ‘magischen’ Artefakten* (Heidelberg 2018) 149-163: 151 and 161.

1109 Augustine of Hippo, *In Iohannis euangelium tractatus* 7.6 (section 5) (CCSL 36.73). Translation by Rettig, *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, 160.

1110 PSI 6.719. Translation by Jones, *New Testament Texts*, 77. Jones added the references to the scriptural passages used for this amulet: Jones number 4.

1111 Jones, *New Testament Texts*; Sanzo, *Scriptural Incipits*.

sermons and various rituals.¹¹¹² All of these were incorporated in existing frameworks, for example in amulets with exorcistic formulae.¹¹¹³ Three fourth-century ‘traditional’ amulets to expel fever all end with the formula ‘Power of Jesus Christ! Father, Son, Mother, Holy Spirit. A-O Abrasax.’¹¹¹⁴ Abrasax is the snake-legged, cock-headed non-Christian supernatural being often mentioned in the Graeco-Roman Egyptian ‘magical’ texts and amulets.

Some amulets only contain small details, such as a cross, others contain multiple references to the Bible.¹¹¹⁵ Often only short passages or incipits were used to represent the whole text.¹¹¹⁶ In addition, excavations have yielded a number of small papyrus scraps inscribed with biblical or liturgical texts. Although they contain no information regarding their function, scholars argue that these scraps may have been used as amulets, because of their size or because they were folded.¹¹¹⁷ The biblical references would have legitimised the power of the amulet, and amulet users who were literate would have recognised passages, names and elements from church ritual.¹¹¹⁸

Even the inclusion of small elements of scriptural texts may have been seen as significant. J.N. Bremmer argues that, from the fourth century onwards, the Bible – or specific books such as the Gospels – was understood as a book with active healing or apotropaic powers and points out that this same period saw an increase in the use of scriptural amulets. References to the use of Gospel amulets can be found in the works of various Christian authors of this period.¹¹¹⁹ C. Rapp compared small scriptural textual amulets to relics. These could be divided into smaller pieces that were believed to contain the power of the original whole. Similarly, incipits and small passages contained the power associated with the larger texts they represented: ‘the physical depositories of the Word of God shared in the holiness of the message they contained’.¹¹²⁰ Adding biblical texts can thus be seen as a new strategy that could be used alongside existing ones to create and enhance

1112 De Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 139, 184-187, 204-220, 237; de Bruyn, Dijkstra, ‘A Checklist’, 179-182. For developments in liturgical rituals see for example: M.E. Johnson, ‘Worship, Practice and Belief’ in: P. Esler (ed.), *The Early Christian World* (London 2017) 406-426.

1113 De Bruyn, Dijkstra, ‘A Checklist’, 179-180; de Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 139-141.

1114 *PGMP* 5a; P. Oxy. LXXXII 5306 and P. Oxy. LXXXII 5307. Translation by Maltomini, P. Oxy. LXXXII 5306 and P. Oxy. LXXXII 5307, 76-91.

1115 De Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 236.

1116 De Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 139.

1117 See for example the probable and possible amulets in de Bruyn, Dijkstra, ‘A Checklist’. Example: T.S. de Bruyn, ‘P. Ryl. III.471: A Baptismal Anointing Formula Used as an Amulet’, *The Journal of Theological Studies* 57 (2006) 94-109.

1118 This would require that the users would be able to see the amulet’s text. De Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 9-11, 184-185, 223-234; Luijendijk, ‘Gospel Amulet for Joannia’, 428.

1119 Bremmer, ‘Magical Books’, 264-267. See also Augustine about holding the Gospel to your head: Augustine of Hippo, *In Iohannis euangelium tractatus* 7.12 (CCSL 36.73); and Chrysostom on Gospel amulets: John Chrysostom, *In Matthaeum (homiliae 1-90)* 72.2 (PG 58.669).

1120 C. Rapp, ‘Holy Texts, Holy Men, and Holy Scribes. Aspects of Scriptural Holiness in Late Antiquity’ in: W.E. Klingshirn, L. Safran (eds.), *The Early Christian Book* (Washington 2007) 194-222: 196, see also 199-202.

amuletic power. This would have changed the experiences of amulet users.

Impact of new Christian elements: wearing the Bible

As I have mentioned in chapter three, the question whether ancient amulet users knew what was written on their amulets is often overlooked. The objects were rolled up or folded and worn in a container.¹¹²¹ Some excavated amulets contained remains of the plants that had been folded into the object.¹¹²² Of course, it is possible that the text on the amulet was also spoken by the specialist or priests when creating or attaching the object and the user remembered it.¹¹²³ Although amulet users probably had some knowledge of the content, they may not have been aware of all the details that we can study today. According to some researchers, medieval amulets were rarely opened, perhaps even bought closed.¹¹²⁴ This may be compared to the invisibility of early relics, which were kept in reliquaries without ‘peepholes’. The relics would not be visible or touchable, but people would still try to be close to them.¹¹²⁵

For users’ experience of the object it was probably not necessary to know every textual detail; knowing that it contained a biblical text quite likely was a powerful experience in itself. In Late Antiquity, there was widespread belief in the protective and healing properties of the Scriptures.¹¹²⁶ The mere presence of scriptural passages would therefore have made the amulet in question more powerful and efficacious in the eyes of its user. Most people in Late Antiquity never actually handled a copy of the Scriptures: ‘They encountered the Scriptures in the liturgy of the church—in the form of acclamations, prayers, readings, and the like.’¹¹²⁷ For many, the Bible was not a book they could hold, but a multisensory experience: they could see the book from a distance and listen to the priest reading the words.¹¹²⁸ Adding parts of the Scriptures to amulets made these texts tangible. Amulets brought people into direct contact with the Bible. In this way, its healing and protective powers became palpable. The act of writing Biblical and liturgical texts on it would provide an amulet with long-lasting efficacy – quite apart from the fact that these authoritative sources would enhance the user’s trust. In the end, the exact details did not matter, the presence of the Scriptures did.

Textual amulets carrying Scriptural and liturgical passages not only made these

1121 See chapter three. Dosoo also points this out in his discussion of late antique amulets: Dosoo, ‘Magical Names’, 132.

1122 *PGM* P15b; *GMA* 8.

1123 As Luijendijk suggests for example: Luijendijk, ‘Gospel Amulet for Joannia’, 421.

1124 Although some textual amulets were opened and read, see: Skemer, *Binding Words*, 134, 144–158 (opening on 156).

1125 Wiśniewski, ‘Relics’.

1126 Bremmer, ‘Magical Books’, 264–267, see also: Rapp, ‘Holy Texts’.

1127 De Bruyn, ‘Appeals to Jesus’, 81.

1128 Sanzo, *Ritual Boundaries*.

texts and practices tangible and personal, but they also played a part in decentralising Christian practices – taking them into the lives of individual people. This fits K. Bowes’s findings regarding the relationship between Christian institutions and private rituals. She argues that in sixth-century domestic or private religious practices, the miniaturisation or fragmentation of public rituals and buildings is reflected by private chapels with a miniaturised basilica structure.¹¹²⁹ In these practices the ‘ritual of the mass is reified into possessable objects’;¹¹³⁰ in this way, the power and meaning of the ritual also becomes possessable. The same holds true for objects that could be taken home from pilgrimages and healing sites. These developments relate to the expansion of the institutional church.¹¹³¹ Amulets carrying biblical or liturgical texts may be understood as miniaturised versions of church ritual. The books and rituals were fragmented into ‘portable, possessable holy objects’, which had power, not because they referred to the original sources, but because they were a version of the original.¹¹³² For users of amulets owning a portable, palpable, and personal version of a holy book must have been a profoundly meaningful experience. Those who were illiterate or did not have access to an actual copy of the Bible thus obtained a tangible version of the Scriptures – and the power inherent in its material presence – or of other important and powerful religious phrases they knew from sermons or rituals.¹¹³³

The portable and tangible nature of textual amulets sets them apart from alternatives such as those mentioned by Caesarius of Arles: oral prayer, anointing with oils, going to the church.¹¹³⁴ However, Caesarius does not mention portable, possessable objects carrying written texts.¹¹³⁵ As we have seen, Augustine advises holding the Gospels to the patient’s head against headaches, but this would not be the same as wearing an amulet.¹¹³⁶ It would seem that the alternatives did not bring what amulets could bring. As the Scriptures were understood as inherently powerful, possessing a material and personal version of the Scriptures to carry with them, must have impacted users. While the experience of having a powerful amulet was not new, in the context of early Christianity having a powerful, personal, possessable Biblical amulet could bring about a significant new experience.

It seems possible to conclude that both continuities and changes had meaning for the users. The continued use of familiar formularies made amulets recognisable and created trust. It cannot be ruled out that the old elements gradually lost their connection with earlier religions, but were, even in a Christian context, still considered powerful.

1129 Bowes, ‘Sixth-Century Individual Rituals’, 66-71.

1130 Bowes, ‘Sixth-Century Individual Rituals’, 75.

1131 Bowes, ‘Sixth-Century Individual Rituals’, 75-78.

1132 Bowes, ‘Sixth-Century Individual Rituals’, 80.

1133 For example: Frankfurter, ‘Syncretism and the Holy Man’, 379.

1134 De Bruyn, ‘Appeals to Jesus’, 79-80.

1135 Caesarius, *Sermones* 50.1.

1136 For Augustine’s advice, see Augustine of Hippo, *In Iohannis euangelium tractatus* (CCSL 36.73). Bremmer, ‘Magical Books’, 264-267; Rapp, ‘Holy Texts’, 196, 199-202.

The addition of new elements to amulets meant a shift in the perception of the religious power behind them and created new experiences. Textual amulets were portable objects full of possessable Christian power. The biblical and liturgical elements associated with an authoritative institution created trust, strengthened belief in the objects' efficacy, and brought Christianity closer to people. Within the existing framework of amulet use, a new power was possessable, which meant additional motivation for reaching out to them.

E. The sensory experience of amulet use

As discussed in chapter three, the materiality of amulets provided a variety of sensory experiences, which was of great influence for the way in which they were experienced. From an etic point of view, one would be inclined to say that the experience of amulets changed little in Late Antiquity because the size, shapes, and uses of the objects were similar to those of the preceding period. We must, however, also take into account possible changes in sensory experience in the emic context of early Christianity.

Sensing late antique amulets

In general, the tangible experience of late antique amulets was probably not very different from that of earlier times, because the objects were of comparable shapes and sizes. Papyrus or parchment strips and metal tablets were still rolled up or folded and worn in a capsule or tied with a string. Although new shapes became popular – the bronze pendants with Solomonic exorcistic iconography are a case in point –, wearing a metal pendant will not have felt 'new'.¹¹³⁷ All in all, in terms of sensory experience the situation remained much the same.

The proximity of amulets to their designated locations was a precondition for their positive impact. In Late Antiquity, amulets were still placed at significant boundary locations. They protected an 'inside area' from external danger or took danger that had already penetrated out of it. This inside area could be a human body. In a fifth-or-sixth-century amulet we read: 'The body and the blood of Christ spare your servant who carries this amulet.'¹¹³⁸ As in earlier centuries, the power of the amulet was believed to be effective for its wearer. In Late Antiquity individuals could also still encounter amulets attached to doors and gates to protect houses or vineyards, and they could touch the amulet when

1137 For the Solomonic pendants see: Franek, *Solomonica Magica*. The experience was probably similar to that of wearing a *bulla*. Developments in the use of the *bulla* deserve more research. It has been argued that their use went into a decline after the first century (although many later examples were found, which were not only worn by young boys but also, for instance, by adult women). See for example: A. Croom, *Roman Clothing and Fashion* (Gloucestershire 2010) 84–85; Szilágyi, 'Late Roman Bullae'; Kotansky, *Greek Magical Amulets*, xix.

1138 ACM 9. Translation by Jones, *New Testament Texts*, 66. Still including name references as well: SM 34 and P.Oxy LXXXII 5312.

passing the boundary location.¹¹³⁹ The wish to create a safe space remained an important motivation for amulet use.¹¹⁴⁰

Amulets will still have been visible. We have, for instance, a fourth-or-fifth-century house amulet in the form of a gold *lamella* with small pinholes, which was probably placed on a wall.¹¹⁴¹ A written text on another papyrus amulet made for the protection of a house starts with the words ‘the door’, after which the amulet text follows. In all likelihood, the instruction that was used to make this amulet, part of which was copied inadvertently, referred to the location where the object had to be placed.¹¹⁴² Of course, some amulets carried new Christian iconography, such as the cross that was also often visibly worn. Sound, smell and taste will only occasionally have played a role, as was the case before. A. Luijendijk suggests that the text on a papyrus amulet with many Christian elements may have been read aloud.¹¹⁴³ John Chrysostom describes the use of bells tied as amulets around the arms of little children; the sounds were believed to be apotropaic.¹¹⁴⁴ Smell and taste can be found in the handbook instructions that resemble the instructions from the first-to-third centuries.¹¹⁴⁵

Although some details were certainly different, experiences of wearing a portable object that could be seen and felt, and sometimes heard or smelled, must have remained fundamentally the same. The user would experience the object and the material it was made of. The iconography and/or text inspired feelings of trust, and sensing the object made wearers feel they were ‘undergoing treatment’ – being healed, protected, or favoured by the supernatural.¹¹⁴⁶ Because of the proximity of amulets, sensory experience was a consistent element of amulet use.

Sensing amulets in a Christian context

With the dissemination of Christian material culture from the fourth century onwards, sensory experiences became more important in a Christian context. An obvious example is the increased use of incense. Sensory experiences not only became more prominent, they also gained in meaning because they were seen as ways to acquire knowledge about the holy.¹¹⁴⁷ From an emic perspective, the sensory experiences of amulets thus received a

1139 Late antique house amulets with many Christian elements: *PGM* P2a, *PGM* P2, *PGM* P6a, *PGM* P3, *GMA* 41. For the protection of vineyards see for example: Alvar Nuño, ‘Ritual Power’, 89.

1140 And remained so during the Middle Ages: Skemer, *Binding Words*, 133-135.

1141 *GMA* 41.

1142 *PGM* P2.

1143 *PGM* P5b. Luijendijk, ‘Gospel Amulet for Joannia’, 420.

1144 John Chrysostom, *In epistulam I ad Corinthios* 12.13 (PG 61.105-106).

1145 On using dried dung (to reduce smells?) in Marcellus of Bordeaux: Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 14.53, 16.11. On consuming something while using the amulet: Alexander of Tralles, *Therapeutica*, P. 1.571.16-19, P. 1.567.16-18; Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 28.52, 28.20.

1146 See the conclusion of chapter three of this study.

1147 Harvey, ‘The Senses in Religion’, 97-98; Toner, ‘Sensing the Ancient Past’, 18-20.

new layer of impact.

One of the new elements in amulet use is the introduction of the cross iconography. The cross on which Jesus had died became a powerful symbol to avert evil.¹¹⁴⁸ Making the sign of the cross was a potent gesture and images of crosses were added to a variety of amulets. According to John Chrysostom, the symbol of the cross had exorcistic powers. He even compares this power to that of amulets: ‘But the cross has the strength of a wonderful amulet (περίαιπτον).’¹¹⁴⁹ It has been argued that a cross (or its variations such as the staurogram) in amulet texts indicates performing the actual gesture (i.e. making the sign of the cross) when reading the text aloud, which would have added sound and movement to the experience of the amulet.¹¹⁵⁰ In general, the iconography of the cross must have had many meanings for amulet users, ranging from recognition of its apotropaic powers, to associations with church ritual and perhaps feeling the urge to make the sign of the cross. In relation to cross-shaped amulets, N.H. Korsvoll argues that they become more Christian over time and that these examples demonstrate the impact of the rising church.¹¹⁵¹ Seeing or feeling the cross on their amulets and/or making the sign of the cross when remembering the amulets’ rituals thus created a new and impactful embodied experience.

Many late antique amulets seem to have a connection to church rituals, which means that there was a larger context for the experience of amulet use. One illustration is a third-or-fourth-century textual amulet that seems to include references to pre-baptismal ritual exorcisms.¹¹⁵² Other textual amulets apparently refer to church liturgy; the objects’ texts reflect the language of prayers and sermons.¹¹⁵³ In the process of reaching out to a Christian specialist, such as a monk or a priest, certain rituals may have taken place when making and attaching the amulet. If prayers were spoken aloud, they will have brought about an impactful experience of sound.

As argued above, amulets would have been especially impactful in a Christian context, because of the power ascribed to the Scriptures in their concrete, written form. Seeing, but most of all feeling the presence of the Scriptures when wearing an amulet or placing an amulet at a door, must have been a powerful experience. Through amulets, the Bible

1148 R. Popa, ‘The Evil Eye and the Cross: The Unity of the Magic Metaphor in Gal 3:1 from a Mainly Papyrological Perspective’, *Early Christianity* 12 (2021) 447-470: 464.

1149 John Chrysostom, *Catachesis ultima ad baptizandos* 3.6 (SC 366, 232-235). Translation by P.W. Harkins, *John Chrysostom: Baptismal Instructions* (London 1963) 11.25 on page 168. On the cross see also: *In epistulam I ad Corinthios* 12.13 (PG 61.105-106); John Chrysostom, *In epistulam ad Colossenses* 8.5 (PG 62.357-359).

1150 Sanzo, *Ritual Boundaries*, 81, 86-87.

1151 Korsvoll, ‘Official Teaching and Popular Practice’, 161-162.

1152 GMA 35, Kotansky, GMA, 177-180. Possibly also in P. Oxy. 82 5306 and see *PGM* P13 whose text also reminds us of exorcistic rites.

1153 As suggested by de Bruyn in *PGM* P15b; de Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 216-217; for more examples of Christian ritual language in textual amulets, see 184-234.

could turn into an embodied interactive phenomenon.¹¹⁵⁴ The amulet became a carrier of Christian power, especially in its text and imagery. Furthermore, as has also been discussed above, the authority of Christian amulet makers, such as priests and monks, enhanced the experience. The abbot Shenoute, for example, refers to amulets made from animal parts and distributed by monks: 'I saw myself the head of the snake bound on the hand of some. With another the tooth of the crocodile is bound on his arms; yet another has the claws of foxes bound on his feet.'¹¹⁵⁵ The agency of such amulets was 'guaranteed' through the involvement of Christian functionaries and the experience of having them attached to one's body, feeling the object press to one's skin, and hearing the prayers uttered by the monk or priest must have been very impactful.

The appearance of Christian elements in iconography and text, and the involvement of Christian specialists carrying out Christian rituals, brought about a new 'Christian' sensory experience. This experience was personal and engaged touch, as well as sight and hearing. In this context the amulet may have acquired an additional level of meaning: the sensory, personal, and portable aspects of amulets made them the perfect religious strategy to bring early 'church' practices closer to home. The sensory experience remained central to the use of amulets in Late Antiquity. In a Christian context, this experience was enhanced and meaning was added through the personalisation of institutional practices.

F. The experience of a controlled amulet space

In chapter three I discussed the way in which amulets facilitated experiences of place and created a sense of protection and control within a space. What happened to such experiences of place in Late Antiquity? Although the texts inscribed on late antique amulets contained new elements, these amulets still demarcated places, kept danger away from a designated area or drove illness and demons out of this area. For example, a late handbook text states that 'the place to which this manuscript [the fictional letter of Christ to king Abgar] will be affixed, no power of the Adversary nor unclean spirit will be able to approach nor to reach into the place, and forever.'¹¹⁵⁶ Compared to amulets of the first-to-third centuries, late antique amulets include more references to the spatial proximity of amulets. The descriptions of the place in question are also more elaborate. What does this tell us about the practice of using amulets in Late Antiquity?

Listing and place

A fourth-century metal amulet from Beirut, GMA 52, begins with a long list containing the names of angels and the locations (or natural phenomena) they are associated with.

1154 Sanzo, *Ritual Boundaries*, 112-113.

1155 Shenoute of Atriye, *Acephalous work A14* par. 255-262 (Orlandi 18-20). Translation by van der Vliet, 'Roman and Byzantine Egypt', 253-254.

1156 *PCM* I 11, p. 25. Translation by K. Dosoo, E. Love, M. Preininger, *PCM*, 161.

The following passage may serve as an example: 'I call upon the one who sits in charge of rivers, Bêdliā. I call upon the one who sits in charge of roads, Phasousouêl.'¹¹⁵⁷ The amulet's editor, R.D. Kotansky, explains that these types of lists originated in a Jewish tradition and can be found in other amulets as well. *PGM* XXXV. and P.Oxy. LXXXII 5312, for example, both favour amulets from Late Antiquity, call upon angels who are responsible for the seas, snow, rain, and other phenomena.¹¹⁵⁸ The locations (or natural phenomena) mentioned in these protective angel lists are very general and describe a generic landscape any amulet user might traverse. Wearing such an object, the user carries the power of all the angels addressed in the lists.

Other lists enumerate potentially dangerous locations and situations where the help of the amulet was needed. GMA 52 also contains a list of situations in which danger in the form of demons or curses could strike: 'lest you harm or defile her, or use magic drugs on her (...) either on the street or abroad; or while river-bathing or a bath.'¹¹⁵⁹ At these locations the wearer of the object needed extra protection. *PGM* P10, a sixth-century papyrus amulet, also lists places where a person would need protection. The text adjures 'unclean spirits' or demons to leave specific locations where they apparently could be found: 'Do not hide down here in the ground; do not lurk under a bed, nor under a window, nor under a door, nor under beams, nor under utensils, nor below a pit.'¹¹⁶⁰ *PCM* I 11, a sixth-to-eighth-century Coptic codex with amuletic texts, requests the protection of the Christian God and Christ for the enumerated locations: 'may you watch over the entrance and the exit and all its dwelling places and its windows and its courtyards and its bedrooms and its open places and its lands that belong to it and its foundations and its gardens and its wells and its trees which bear fruit and its trees which do not bear fruit!'¹¹⁶¹ The text subsequently asks God and Christ to 'undo' possible curses which may have been placed on a long list of locations:

or if someone bound a place, having placed in it the bond of deceit, hidden in its foundations, or in its extended places, or in its entrance or in its exit, or in the door, or in the window, or in the bedroom or in the yard, or in the dining-room or in the courtyard in the middle of it, or in the field, or among the fruits, or in the garden, or at a forked road or crossroad, or in a fruitless tree, or in the waters that are in the rivers or in the canals, or in vineyards, or in any place!¹¹⁶²

1157 Translation by Kotansky, GMA 52. Christian element: 'One God and his Christ, help Alexandra'.

1158 *PGM* XXXV. from the third to fourth century and P.Oxy. LXXXII 5312 from the sixth century. Neither contains clear Christian elements. The latter is a favour amulet and includes angels taking care of 'good appearance' and 'tribunals'. Translation by F. Maltomini, P.Oxy. LXXXII 5312, 100.

1159 GMA 52. Other parts of the text concern specific protection against demons and binding spells.

1160 Fourth century, *PGM* P10. Translation by Marvin Meyer in ACM, nr. 20.

1161 *PCM* I 11, p. 3. Translation by Dosoo, Love and Preininger, *PCM*, 117.

1162 *PCM* I 11, p. 4. Translation by Dosoo, Love and Preininger, *PCM*, 117.

All these examples refer to the geographical influence sphere of amulets. Usually, the locations are boundary locations, places where help was needed or where danger was believed to linger.

The lists present a world full of danger.¹¹⁶³ In the domestic sphere, evil influences might lurk almost everywhere, particularly at boundary locations and ‘under’ all sorts of things. Penetrable boundary locations such as entrances, exits, doors, and windows were believed to be danger zones because of their liminal character. These were the locations that required the agency of an amulet to close off the area, as is borne out by the activated late antique house amulets found on or near doors.¹¹⁶⁴ These amulets demonstrate that ideas about amulets’ ability to create protected spaces were still present in Late Antiquity. Indeed, the focus on the spatial proximity of amulets seems to have become stronger.

D. Frankfurter and others connect these amulets with ancient demonology and the idea of ‘listing’. In relation to *PGM* P10 he writes: ‘what is listed are the various domestic sites popularly regarded as susceptible to demonic presence as well as the effects wrought by demonic beings in proximity.’¹¹⁶⁵ As S. Lunn-Rockcliffe points out, the belief in demons or ‘intermediate spirits’ was present in many of the late antique religions and the beliefs and practices also had much in common.¹¹⁶⁶ As noted in my discussion of amulets with exorcistic formulae, the idea of demons as the force behind danger and disease was taken up by Christian makers of amulets. The monks and priests used, for example, Jewish lists with the names of angels as well as the *Testament of Solomon*, a text which lists demons and their areas of influence.¹¹⁶⁷ There is also a connection between the late antique amulets containing lists and older Egyptian temple oracles. In the texts that would be worn as amulets, traditional Egyptian priests listed topological (demons of rivers etc.), ethnic, zoological, and theological dangers that might threaten the customer. When worn on the body, the rolled up text would work apotropaically and protect the wearer.¹¹⁶⁸ So, neither the idea of lists nor the idea that places were threatened by demons were exclusively Christian.

The amulets with lists point to a deeply felt urge to control certain locations. D. Frankfurter suggests that, a monk, a scribe, or another amulet maker might use the technique of listing when asked for a solution to a problem and that, moreover, what was included in the list would probably resonate with the knowledge of the customer.¹¹⁶⁹ According to Frankfurter, the lists reflect ‘the scribal impulse to arrange and systematize.’¹¹⁷⁰ The lists present the world as catalogued and structured; places marked as dangerous

1163 Sanzo, *Ritual Boundaries*, 32.

1164 *PGM* P2 which starts with ‘door’ and *PGM* P2a which is a *historiola* in which the door is protected.

1165 Frankfurter, ‘The Demonic in Christian Egypt’, 67.

1166 Lunn-Rockcliffe, ‘Demons and Demonologies’, 494.

1167 Zellmann-Rohrer, ‘Hippocratic Diagnosis’, 76.

1168 Frankfurter, *Evil Incarnate*, 18.

1169 Frankfurter, ‘The Demonic in Christian Egypt’, 61, 66-67, 73.

1170 Frankfurter, ‘The Demonic in Christian Egypt’, 66-67.

could be controlled with the proximity of amulets.¹¹⁷¹ The scribes' ability to create such lists would give them authority; the lists themselves gave amulet users a sense of (spatial) control.¹¹⁷² They would have felt reassured about the locations and situations mentioned in these texts; the demonic dangers would be controlled at the dangerous boundaries where they were lurking and order would be created.¹¹⁷³

Taken together, the surviving sources suggest that the relationship between amulet, user, and place became more prominent in Late Antiquity. The scribes (many of whom were connected to church institutions) took spatial elements from existing and developing ideas about demonology, put them in a Christian context, and used them when people reached out to them for the creation of an amulet.¹¹⁷⁴ However, the idea of amulets' faculty to create safe spaces within a world full of demons, danger, misfortune, and disease was not new. Early Christian amulets makers must have shared developing ideas about demons in relation to space. As amulets in general became more textual, the urge to systematise also grew stronger and longer lists of dangerous places were added to amulets. Early scribes making amulets and adding the Christian elements to them thus participated in larger developments in ancient religion and amulet use.

Place and portable power

A considerable number of amulets were used to demarcate and control the landscape. Many amulets, however, were made for the human bodies that moved through the landscape. Danger and illness could be everywhere, and one might have to leave the closed-off, protected environment of one's house. A fourth-century papyrus amulet (*PGM LXXXIX*.) requests the supernatural to 'check and annihilate him who is approaching upon' the wearer.¹¹⁷⁵ In the sixth-century *PGM P6d* we read that the object will protect its wearer against all danger surrounding them.¹¹⁷⁶ Other amulets are said to act for 'the one wearing your holy and unconquerable power' and for 'who wears this divine amulet'.¹¹⁷⁷ Amulets thus provided a portable form of protection. With the help of body amulets, protection could be permanently present.

This particular function of amulets is most explicitly described in amulets from Late Antiquity. For example, *PGM XXXV*. 1-42 requests 'the god of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob'

1171 Lunn-Rockcliffe, 'Demons and Demonologies', 505.

1172 Frankfurter, *Evil Incarnate*, 22.

1173 See for example: Frankfurter, 'Demonology in the Roman Mediterranean World', 128-129; Frankfurter, *Evil Incarnate*, 22, 26, 30.

1174 Frankfurter, *Christianizing Egypt*, 85.

1175 *PGM LXXXIX*. Translation by Daniel, Maltomini, SM 13. See also: *PCM I* 11, p. 10.

1176 *PGM P6d*.

1177 GMA 58; *PGM P18*. Other late-antique references to wearing something powerful can be found in *PGM P10* and SM 31.

to ‘stay beside me and give me favor’.¹¹⁷⁸ *PGM* P21 gives a list of angels and continues by saying: ‘let them accompany me today, during all the hours of day and night’. This amulet also contains the following text: ‘For I have before me Jesus Christ, who attends me and accompanies me; behind me Yao Sabaoth Ado[nai]; on my right and [left] the god of Ab[raham, Isaac and Jacob]; over [my] face [and] my heart Ga[briel, Michael], Raphael, Saruel, [Raguel], Nuriel, Anael.’¹¹⁷⁹ The creation of boundaries to demarcate a religious place has been connected to speech acts spoken towards the four cardinal directions and to early Christian texts mentioning four angels at the four sides of the divine realm. The creators of these amulets must have been familiar with the idea of using the (Christian) supernatural to demarcate space.¹¹⁸⁰ In all these cases the body amulets provide a portable safe space. A much later amulet, datable to the ninth to twelfth century, has the following text: ‘Watch and protect the 4 sides of the body and the soul and the spirit and the entire house of N. daughter of N.’ and also specifies the area of protection: ‘Do not permit them [evil things] ever to visit her or the child with whom she is pregnant for approximately two hundred miles around’.¹¹⁸¹

Portability was not only a property of protective amulets but also of healing amulets and amulets providing benefits. A healing amulet would be constantly working to heal the body and a charisma amulet would be effective wherever it was worn. The fifth-or-sixth-century *PGM* P17 urges the supernatural to ‘expel toxin or any disease or evil plague from the one who carries (this amulet)’.¹¹⁸² The demarcated area surrounding the user of the amulet could protect against evil, expel evil, or attract good luck.

The need to sustain the proximity of the supernatural with portable amulets was fundamental to the functioning of amulets and was already prominent before the rise of Christian influence in amulet production. As K.A. Rask argues for early amulets, ‘these small objects had the capacity to be intimate portable presences, in keeping with the desire that sacred beings remain close.’¹¹⁸³ Late Antiquity saw the development of explicit textual references on amulets to the portable protection they provided. This is in line with what has been stated above regarding a shift from oral practices to written text.¹¹⁸⁴ Objects such as jewellery and gemstones were given an inscription of the ‘protect the wearer’ type, asking for protection, favour, help, and health. As pointed out by D.C. Skemer in a publication

1178 *PGM* XXXV. 1-42. Translation by R.F. Hock in GMPT.

1179 *PGM* P2. Translation by M.W. Meyer in ACM, nr. 36.

1180 Theis, ‘Präsenz und (Un-)Sichtbarkeit’, 59-60.

1181 ACM 64. Translation by R. Smith in ACM, nr. 64. The aspect of place is very important in this text, but the text is not clear about the demarcated location: it seems to focus on the body of the owner, but also mentions the owner’s house.

1182 Translation by Jones, *New Testament Texts*, 90.

1183 Rask, *Personal Experience*, 114.

1184 See above, but also in relation to exorcistic amulets Zellmann-Rohrer, ‘Hippocratic Diagnosis, 76; see also Kotansky, ‘Greek Exorcistic Amulets’, 267; Van den Hoek, Feissel, Herrmann jr., ‘Magic of Portable Inscriptions’.

dealing with medieval amulets, belief in the portable properties of amulets continued beyond Late Antiquity: ‘As a renewable source of Christian empowerment, textual [body] amulets promised safe passage through a precarious world.’¹¹⁸⁵

Same ideas, new words

Late antique amulet texts testify to the importance of the experience of place for the amulet user. In Late Antiquity there were many sacred and safe places people could go to, such as church buildings, shrines of martyrs, healing sanctuaries and other pilgrimage sites.¹¹⁸⁶ However, by acquiring and wearing an amulet, people could create a portable safe space for themselves. Taking control of a demarcated space gave amulet users the feeling that they were in control of their personal situation. The certainty of being in a safe space that moved with them gave amulet users confidence, a sense of security and control, and the feeling that they were permanently ‘under treatment’ and protected. Amulets used to protect houses and vineyards inspired similar feelings, despite the fact that the safe spaces created through the amulet were not portable.

As we have seen, from the Imperial period onwards the use of amuletic texts increased. Because of this development, amulets of this period are more recognisable for modern scholars. In many cases, formerly oral practices now took some written form.¹¹⁸⁷ The ideas about the functioning of amulets in relation to place reflected by late antique texts were by no means new. They were, however, more often made explicit. In a way they present the same stories as earlier sources, but with more words. It is true that the development of demonology created a new vocabulary with regard to space, but this novelty could easily be accommodated in existing conceptions.

G. The experience of time: reuse in the early Christian era

At the end of the process of amulet use, that use could be assessed. Information on this final step is limited, but through an analysis of processes of reuse at least some insights may be gained. As I noted in chapter three, not every person who had acquired an amulet discarded it after use. There was, in fact, a variety of circular processes. New amulets could be made from used materials, amulets could be reused as amulets, or they could be turned into something new.¹¹⁸⁸ Because of the expanding textuality, such practices become more visible in Late Antiquity, but they must have existed before. In addition, processes of circularity take time – they become more evident as time passes.

1185 Skemer, *Binding Words*, 1.

1186 See for example: Van Opstall, ‘General introduction’.

1187 Faraone, *Transformation*.

1188 See my discussion of reuse in chapter three, section 3.7.

Using existing materials to create amulets

A variety of second-hand materials were reused as amulets, for practical reasons or because of their perceived efficacy or iconographic power. For example, Late Antiquity saw an increasing reuse of scriptural parchment or papyrus sheets.¹¹⁸⁹ Pages taken from scriptural codices were used as amulets.¹¹⁹⁰ Because of the power ascribed to the Scriptures, such objects must have been considered very effective.

In the late antique period, coins were reused for various reasons, but some show reuse as amulets. John Chrysostom criticises the use of amulets by asking: ‘And what is one to say about them who use charms and amulets and encircle their heads and feet with golden coins of Alexander of Macedon. Are these our hopes, tell me, that after the cross and death of our Master, we should place our hopes of salvation on an image of a Greek king?’¹¹⁹¹ The practice of reusing coins as jewellery is older than Late Antiquity, but becomes more prominent from the third century onwards.¹¹⁹² Coins could be mounted, for example as a pendant, or pierced to be worn.¹¹⁹³ Both contemporary and older coins were used as amulets.¹¹⁹⁴ It is often unclear whether coins incorporated in jewellery were used and interpreted as amulets. In their study dealing with coin pendants (not necessarily amulets) from sixth-to-seventh-century England, K.D. Haworth and K.M. Clarke Neish did not find any specific meaning as regards iconography, which would indicate that the coins in their study were valued solely for being coins.¹¹⁹⁵ Still, a clear example of a coin used as an amulet is a pierced follis of Justinian from 538 carrying the inscription: ‘Lord, protect the wearer’.¹¹⁹⁶

As Faraone observes, coins were of an ideal shape and size to be reused as amulets, but

1189 Reused papyrus in: SM 34; *PGM* P15a; *PGM* P6c. (Text could be scraped off, but signs of reuse are often still visible).

1190 The amuletic function was not written on them, but because of elements such as fold lines it has been argued that they were used as amulets. See for example Jones, *New Testament Texts*, 8 on 100-103.

1191 John Chrysostom, *Ad illuminandos catecheses* 2 (PG 49.240). Translation by W.R.W. Stephens, *Instructions to Catechumens*. A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Series 1, Vol. 9 (New York 1889) 171.

1192 C. Perassi, ‘Wearing Coins in Roman Times: When, How, for Whom and Why?’, *Gemmae: An International Journal on Glyptic Studies* 3 (2021) 39-60: 39-42; Faraone, *Transformation*, 43-44; M.M. Fulghum, ‘Coins used as Amulets in Late Antiquity’ in: S.R. Asirvatham, C.O. Pache, J. Watrous (eds.), *Between Magic and Religion: Interdisciplinary Studies in Ancient Mediterranean Religion and Society* (Lanham 2001) 139-47; J. Stoner, *The Cultural Lives of Domestic Objects in Late Antiquity* (Leiden 2019) 14-16.

1193 Perassi, ‘Wearing Coins’, 43-49, 55-57. For example: E. Szabo, ‘Alternative uses of Coins in the Late Roman Cemetery of Unterloisdorf/Austria’ in: B. Zając, S. Jellonek (eds.), *Pecunia Omnes Vincit. Conference Proceedings of the Fifth and Sixth International Numismatic and Economic Conference* (Krakow 2020) 96-108: 100 and 105.

1194 Fulghum, ‘Coins used as Amulets’, 143-145. For example, pectoral: Metropolitan Museum, New York, registration number 17.190.1664, with coins from the fourth to the sixth century.

1195 K.D. Haworth, K.M. Clarke-Neish, ‘Pierced, Looped and Framed: The (Re)Use of Gold Coins in Jewellery in Sixth-and Seventh-Century England’, *Early Medieval Europe* 32.3 (2024) 337-386: 367-368.

1196 Fulghum, ‘Coins used as Amulets’, 140; Perassi, ‘Wearing Coins’, 57-58. Coin in *bullā* in GMA 20; combination of coins with other amulets in: Crummy, ‘Bears and Coins’, 62-74.

this is not the only reason for their reuse. Materiality, value, and iconography were important too.¹¹⁹⁷ C. Perassi distinguishes between pendants with golden coins that were probably worn to show wealth and power, and less valuable pierced copper coins which, worn on a string, may have been intended as amulets.¹¹⁹⁸ These two functions are, however, not necessarily mutually exclusive. Monetary value does not seem to have been on Chrysostom's mind; he worried that people placed their hopes in the image of Alexander, instead of Christ.¹¹⁹⁹ He does not mention any other aspects of coins. In her analysis of the coins that were reused in late antique amulets and jewellery, M.M. Fulghum argues that certain coins were probably chosen because of their imagery.¹²⁰⁰ Coins carrying portraits of powerful men, ready to wrestle with 'evil', may have been considered apotropaic. The reverse of such coins often shows a reference to victory, which could have been interpreted as a victory over evil.¹²⁰¹ Fulghum argues that images and stories of Alexander the Great were still circulating in Late Antiquity and coins with his image may have been seen as powerful apotropaic objects.¹²⁰²



Figure 4. Fifth-to-fourth-century BCE pierced scaraboid that was reused in the second to third century CE when amuletic inscriptions were added. J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu, registration number 85.AN.444.1. Image in the public domain.

Gemstones were also frequently reused. They were applied to be worn as jewellery or to be used as a seal, but also to be used for amuletic purposes. Gemstones belonging to the former category could, at a later date, be inscribed with words or formulae that would

1197 Faraone, *Transformation*, 43; see also Crummy, 'Bears and Coins', 62 and 73-74 for the use of older coins as amulets in children's graves.

1198 Perassi, 'Wearing Coins', 57-58.

1199 Also analysed by Faraone, *Transformation*, 43-44.

1200 Fulghum, 'Coins used as Amulets', 139.

1201 See Fulghum, 'Coins used as Amulets', 141-146; see also: Crummy, 'Bears and Coins', 73-74.

1202 See also Fulghum, 'Coins used as Amulets', 144-146 for the possibility that Chrysostom is not referring to an actual old coin of Alexander but to a contemporary object.

not be out of place on a textual amulet.¹²⁰³ In this way, ‘regular’ intaglios were turned into amulets. This happened especially from the third century onwards.¹²⁰⁴ A gemstone ring of an earlier period, for example, was given a Christian amuletic addition in Late Antiquity. The protruding image (possibly a bust of Serapis) was shaved down and the following inscription was added to the bezel and shoulders of the ring: ‘Sesengenbarpharanges, Sabaoth, Jesus, Christ, Adonai, Elohai, Michael, Gabriël.’¹²⁰⁵ Another example is a gemstone carrying an image of two chariots with Helios and Selene, dated to the first to second century. At a later date, this gem was inscribed on the back with the following text ‘Iaô Sabaôth Abrasax, you the Lord, stand by me.’¹²⁰⁶ Other reworked gems were much older. A Minoan rock crystal seal carrying the image of a lion was, for example, reworked around the third century, when a powerful inscription containing the name of Abrasax was added.¹²⁰⁷ Finally, figure 4 shows a fifth-century BCE scarab that received an inscription much later, possibly in the third or fourth century.¹²⁰⁸

Thunderstones

A more complex example is the reuse of prehistoric stone axe heads. These were reused as amulets in Roman times, but it is not clear if the Romans knew they were using ‘second-hand’ materials. These axe heads were originally made to be held in the hand or to be attached to a haft. Archaeologists have found them at Roman sites, both in graves and in living areas.¹²⁰⁹ Pliny describes these axe-shaped stones as ‘thunderstones’. They were believed to protect against lightning, because they were assumed to be themselves a product of lightning. Pliny reports that ‘the Magi hunt for it zealously because it is found only in a place that has been struck by a thunderbolt.’¹²¹⁰ In his medical handbook (dating to

1203 On reuse of gems see for example: G. Sena Chiesa, ‘Myth Revisited. The Re-use of Mythological Cameos and Intaglios in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages’ in: C. Entwistle, N. Adams (eds.), *Gems of Heaven: Recent research on engraved gemstones in Late Antiquity, c. AD 200-600* (London 2011) 229-238: 229 – here Sena Chiesa pays special attention to a rise in reuse from the fourth century.

1204 Gemstones in general were often reused in Late Antiquity: Stoner, *Cultural lives of Domestic Objects*, 16.

1205 Spier, *Early Christian Gems*, 81-82: British Museum, London, registration number OA.10714. C.A. Faraone, ‘Some Magical Gems in London’, *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 57 (2017) 403-430: 429. This formula was often used without Christian elements, but see: P.Oxy. LXXXII 5306; GMA 38 and 48.

1206 British Museum, London, registration number 1864,1127.38. Translation from museum online catalogue, last accessed September 2025.

1207 The inscription included Abrasax and some additional script that is unclear. British Museum, London, registration number 1772,0315.439.

1208 British Museum, London, registration number OA.9582 and J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu, registration number 85.AN.444.1.

1209 C.A. Faraone, ‘Inscribed Greek Thunderstones as House-and Body-Amulets in Roman Imperial Times’, *Kernos* 27 (2014) 257-284: 1-3 (online version).

1210 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 37.135 (See 37.134-135). Translation by D.E. Eichholtz, *Pliny. Natural History. Books 36-37. Vol. X* (London 1971) 274-275. Faraone, ‘Thunderstones’, 2.

the second century), the Alexandrian physician Aelius Promotus prescribes the use of thunderstones to deal with fever.¹²¹¹ Although Pliny speaks of axe-shaped stones, there are no indications that the later users of these objects knew anything about their origins.¹²¹² A small proportion of the ‘thunderstones’ that can be placed in a Roman context were inscribed, which made the reuse recognisable for scholars.¹²¹³ C.A. Faraone describes ten inscribed ‘thunderstones’, five larger ones which were probably used to protect buildings, and five smaller ones that will have been used to protect bodies.¹²¹⁴ In addition, a bronze Mycenaean axe has been found, which carries a powerful text inscribed at a later date.¹²¹⁵

The drawings and inscriptions that can be found on the axes resemble the imagery and texts found on gemstone amulets: *charaktêres*, names (such as Abrasax), and drawings of gods such as the Egyptian Pantheos. Many of the designs are circular and thus fit gemstone iconography, for example because they were enclosed by an Ouroboros – an Egyptian snake biting its own tail.¹²¹⁶ As pointed out by C.A. Faraone, the positioning of the inscriptions indicates that the power of the axe was thought to reside in its cutting edge.¹²¹⁷ One of the axes has a drawing of a wreath with ‘magical’ names on each leaf. Pliny describes the emperor Tiberius as wearing a laurel wreath during thunderstorms as laurel was believed to protect against lightning.¹²¹⁸ Although we cannot be certain that the wreath depicted on the axe is supposed to be a laurel wreath, it may be useful to mention an instruction to write on a laurel sprig which can be found in a handbook from Roman Egypt.¹²¹⁹ This recipe is for protection, but not against lightning. Perhaps inscribed axes were also used for general protection.¹²²⁰

Prehistoric axes were thus reused, because they were believed to be powerful. It is, however, not clear if they were somehow stored or just accidentally found. Their users will have understood them as a form of reuse, but it is impossible to determine whether the stones were seen as byproducts of thunder, for example, or recognised as handmade products from an earlier age.

1211 Aelius Promotus: Wellmann 776.17.

1212 Faraone, ‘Thunderstones’, 1.

1213 Faraone, *Transformation*.

1214 Faraone, ‘Thunderstones’, 3-17.

1215 N. Franken, ‘Objects with (a) History: Observations on Reworking and Re-using Ancient Bronzes’ in: H.P. Hahn, A. Klöckner, D. Wicke (eds.), *Values and Revaluations. The Transformation and Genesis of ‘Values in Things’ from Archaeological and Anthropological Perspectives* (Oxford 2022) 59-86: 75-76.

1216 Faraone, ‘Thunderstones’, 17.

1217 Faraone, ‘Thunderstones’, 18.

1218 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*, 15.135. For other examples see Faraone, ‘Thunderstones’, 17n.94.

1219 Protecting houses: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 15.127. Writing on laurel to sleep well in GEMF 9.1-7 and on a sprig with leaves to use as protective object during larger ritual in GEMF 31.263-276.

1220 Faraone, ‘Thunderstones’, 17.

Reusing amulets as amulets

We have only a few examples of the reuse of textual amulets as amulets; gemstone amulets, however, yield more information.¹²²¹ As we have seen, amuletic inscriptions were added to ‘regular’ intaglios at a later stage. In addition, there are examples of late antique reuse of original gemstone amulets. As V. Dasen and Á.M. Nagy observe, gemstone amulets in general were not cheap and often set in mounts of precious metal.¹²²² They might be recut and inscriptions might be added.¹²²³ As gemstone use increased over time, these practices also expanded.¹²²⁴ When recutting the amulet, the original text and/or imagery could be altered or shaved off. Some gemstone amulets were, for example, recut from an oval to a round shape.¹²²⁵ It is not clear if such recutting was thought to somehow change the efficacy of the object. It is possible that it was still seen as powerful, although its original function or meaning was lost. We cannot exclude the possibility that some of these amulets were just seen as precious objects, valued for the memories attached to them or for some other reason, but not because of some belief in their power. Still, several examples show that belief in the efficacy of the object continued.

1221 See the discussion in chapter three of the amulets from Vindonissa, the second-century textual amulets in a fifth-century grave, which, unfortunately, posed many dating problems: W. Kosack, ‘Zwei altkoptische Talismane aus dem römischen Gräberfeld von Windisch-Oberburg’, *Pro Vindonissa* (2003) 11-15.

1222 Dasen, Nagy, ‘Gems’, 423; Spier, *Early Christian Gems*, 82: ‘reuse of old pagan magical gems in Christian contexts’ but for these objects it is difficult to draw a clear line between traditional and Christian practices.

1223 However, dating them and dating the moment of change is extremely difficult, if not impossible. For examples, see also the reuse of gems discussed above.

1224 See Dasen, Nagy, ‘Gems’, who noticed that this development continued into the seventh century.

1225 For example: British Museum, London, registration number 1866,1002.10.



Figure 5. Fifth-century necklace with medallion with Christ blessing a marriage and a second- or third-century Abrasax gemstone. Metropolitan Museum. New York, Rogers Fund, 1958, 58.12. Image in the public domain.

In Rome, a fifth-century hoard was found which included two fifth-century gold necklaces. Both had an Abrasax gemstone attached to them that was dated to the second or third century.¹²²⁶ The name and/or figure of Abrasax is layered. In general, he is a powerful figure, often depicted as a man with the head of a cock and two snakes as legs, wearing armour. Wearing an Abrasax gemstone was believed to offer general protection, because it would avert all evil.¹²²⁷ Figure 5 shows one of the necklaces, which consists of the Abrasax gem and a fifth-century medallion depicting two facing busts being crowned with wreaths by the small figure above them. This scene has been interpreted as Christ blessing a

¹²²⁶ As dating gemstones is extremely difficult, I would argue that they could also be from a later date. Still, the argument can be made that the gemstones are older than the rest of the necklaces. Metropolitan museum New York, Rogers Fund (RF), 1958, 58.12 and K.R. Brown, '283 Necklace with Gnostic Gem' in: K. Weitzmann (ed.), *Age of Spirituality: Late Antique and Early Christian Art, Third to Seventh Century* (New York 1979) 309 (in a private collection).

¹²²⁷ For an overview of the complexity see: M. Fallica, 'Abrasax', *Brill Encyclopedia of Early Christianity Online*, last accessed September 2025.

marriage.¹²²⁸ The transition to married life may have necessitated extra protection in the form of a gemstone amulet.¹²²⁹ As for the other necklace, here the Abrasax gem was attached as part of the clasp.¹²³⁰ Like other gems, Abrasax gems were often set in new mounts. The fourth-century hoard found in Thetford – the so-called Thetford Treasure – includes many fourth-century rings with older gems (not all with amuletic iconography) dating from the first-to-third centuries. This group contains one Abrasax gem.¹²³¹

Although it may come as a surprise that an Abrasax gem was combined with a (possibly) Christian medallion – viz. the condemnation of amulets by the bishops, discussed at the beginning of this chapter – the object quite likely kept its protective meaning in the eyes of Christian users. It may, however, have lost its traditional religious meaning. E. Zwierlein-Diehl describes the reuse of antique gems in the Middle Ages, mentioning Abrasax gems found in rings of twelfth-to-thirteenth-century bishops.¹²³² A twelfth-century text on the properties of gemstones still presents stones with the image of a man carrying a shield and spear with snakes at his feet as evil-averting – this is probably a description of an Abrasax figure.¹²³³ Although it would not necessarily have kept its original meaning, the figure seems to have kept its protective amuletic value over time.¹²³⁴

Historicity

Despite the presence of a variety of new (Christian) amuletic strategies in Late Antiquity, much older objects continued to be used and reused. In the case of coins, one might use old coins. In the case of gemstones, old gems were inscribed with amuletic inscriptions, which turned them into amulets (or made their use as amulet visible). Old gemstones amulets, such as the Abrasax ones, were reused in new settings. Reused amulets created a particular experience of time since they were known to be objects from earlier periods and sometimes confronted their users with memories.

Heirlooms had clear connections with memories shared by family members, but other

1228 Although the Christian elements could be discussed, the medallion is still younger than the gemstone. Metropolitan museum New York, Rogers Fund (RF), 1958, 58.12; G. Vikan, 'Art and Marriage in Early Byzantium', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 44 (1990) 145-163: 155-156. Also discussed in: Faraone, *Transformation*, 251; K.R. Brown, '281 Necklace with Marriage Scene and Amulet' in: K. Weitzmann (ed.), *Age of Spirituality: Late Antique and Early Christian Art, Third to Seventh Century* (New York 1979) 307-308.

1229 Faraone, *Transformation*, 251.

1230 Brown, '283 Necklace with Gnostic Gem', 309.

1231 British Museum, London, registration number 1981,0201.13. See, also: Spier, *Early Christian Gems*, 82.

1232 E. Zwierlein-Diehl, 'Antike Gemmen im Mittelalter: Wiederverwendung, Umdeutung, Nachahmung' in: D. Boschung, S. Wittekind (eds.), *Persistenz und Rezeption. Weiterverwendung, Wiederverwendung und Neuinterpretation antiker Werke im Mittelalter* (Wiesbaden 2008) 237-284: 256-258.

1233 Zwierlein-Diehl, 'Antike Gemmen im Mittelalter', 256-258.

1234 On 'magical' figures in Late Antique Greek and Coptic Egyptian 'magical' texts: Dosoo, 'Magical Names', 128-130.

‘old’ objects may also have made an impact.¹²³⁵ R. Hingley shows how Bronze Age objects were used in Iron Age sites to create what looks like genealogical associations. These objects connected past, present, and future.¹²³⁶ The ancient Greek and Roman world also valued historical sites and objects, for instance the votive objects believed to have been offered by legendary heroes or kings, such as Achilles, Herakles, Menelaos, and Minos, stored in temples.¹²³⁷ In Late Antiquity, statues and large architectural features from earlier periods were popular. People bought and used ‘antiques’ to give expression to their cultural identity.¹²³⁸ Old objects were not just there, they were given meaning, they reminded people of family members and local traditions, represented a socio-political narrative, or had a link with ancestral powers.¹²³⁹ In using amulets, we may assume that memories of family members and bygone days, or the meanings that had been attached to the object in the past impacted the users’ experience.¹²⁴⁰

The age of an object could in itself have had value. Certain of the house altars that have been found contained figurines from different time periods; these statuettes of gods were not after some time replaced with new ones, but new figurines were added to the older ones.¹²⁴¹ Textual sources do not explicitly stress the meaning and power of old amulets. Still, Pliny describes how ‘the old Romans’ already assigned power to certain protective practices that he still sees as powerful.¹²⁴² The instructions collected by Pliny in the first century were still copied and valued for their power by the author of the *Medicina Plinii* (third century), by Marcellus of Bordeaux (fifth century) and by Alexander of Tralles (sixth century).¹²⁴³ The fact that an amulet had been in use for centuries may have added to expectations regarding

1235 Stoner, *Cultural Lives of Domestic Objects*, 2-3 and chapter one on heirlooms.

1236 R. Hingley, ‘Esoteric Knowledge? Ancient Bronze Artefacts from Iron Age Contexts’, *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* 75 (2009) 143-165.

1237 Hartmann, ‘Beyond the Bones’.

1238 Stoner, *Cultural Lives of Domestic Objects*, 22-23.

1239 On approaches to historical use of objects and sites see: S. Rutledge, *Ancient Rome as a Museum: Power, Identity, and the Culture of Collecting* (Oxford 2012) 1-30; M. Díaz-Guardamino, L. García Sanjuán, D. Wheatley, ‘The Lives of Prehistoric Monuments in Iron Age, Roman, and Medieval Europe. An Introduction’ in: M. Díaz-Guardamino, L. García Sanjuán, D. Wheatley (eds.), *The Lives of Prehistoric Monuments in Iron Age, Roman, and Medieval Europe* (Oxford 2015) 3-17: especially 9-12.

1240 On the embodied experience of memory see: E.-J. Graham, ‘Memory and Materiality: Re-embodying the Roman Funeral’ in: V.M. Hope, J. Huskinson (eds.), *Memory and Mourning: Studies on Roman Death* (Oxford 2011) 21-39: 25-27.

1241 L.M. Stirling, ‘Pagan Statuettes in Late Antique Corinth: Sculpture from the Panayia Domus’, *Hesperia: The Journal of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens* 77.1 (2008) 89-161.

1242 One example is the power ascribed to wool and wolf’s fat and why brides touch the doorposts with these materials to protect their new house against evil. Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 29.30 (the old Romans) and 28.142 (man of old).

1243 And probably also by other authors. An example of a recipe that was copied, is an amulet made from a white and black stones found inside a swallow (or inside a swallow’s nest). Dioscorides, *Materia Medica* 2.56; Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 30.91-92; *Medicina Plinii* III 21.2 and 21.3; Alexander of Tralles, *Therapeutica* P. 1.561.3-9; Marcellus, *De Medicamentis* 8.45. For Marcellus: Zellmann-Rohrer, *Love, Traditions in Transmission*, 68.

its efficacy. Reused old amulets, such as the Abrasax gemstones, were probably seen as extra powerful, because they had proved their worth over time. In other words, the simple fact that the object was old may have added to its value.

The impact of reuse

The addition of texts and imagery in Late Antiquity shows that much older objects were reused, and the passage of time may have added to the perceived efficacy of these objects. Amulets were not necessarily thrown away after use and they may have been purposely stored. Many objects that were used as amulets clearly were reused deliberately. As discussed in chapter three, a variety of motives for reuse could play a role in this. Economic value was most likely of influence in the reuse of coins and gemstones – as precious objects they also represented wealth.¹²⁴⁴ In addition, reusing objects could save money. Furthermore, it was simply practical to use materials and objects that were at hand. Religious value may also have played a role. The fifth-century users were probably still convinced of the power of their old Abrasax gems; codex pages from the Scriptures will also have been seen as efficacious. We also have to be aware of the layers of memories attached to objects. Their historical value may therefore likewise have impacted experience.

The evidence of reuse has implications for understanding processes of continuity and change in the use of amulets. The circular processes in amulet use indicate the slow pace of developments in amulet use. This element, the continuity of practices, may have had meaning in itself and have contributed to the perception that amulets were powerful objects.

H. Amulets or alternatives?

In his *Christianizing the Roman Empire* of 1984 R. MacMullen argued: ‘In one area, the church plainly offered too little: that of outpatient services and household medicine, as we may describe the whole matter of minor illnesses. So, despite its continual warnings, its members clung to non-Christian practices.’¹²⁴⁵ However, as the sermons of Caesarius of Arles show, the church institutions did offer alternatives. Over time, Christian religious practices, such as making the sign of the cross, visiting churches, using holy oils, and venerating relics, gained currency.¹²⁴⁶

Amulets were not chosen because they were the only option. Alternative Christian healing or protective practices did exist. How did amulets compare to these alternatives? What could amulets offer, that these practices could not? Specifically, what are the similarities and differences on the level of the sensory experience of materialities?

1244 Economic value is a relational matter, see: Moser, Smith, ‘Transformations of Value’.

1245 MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire*, 77.

1246 De Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 25; on the efficacy of the cross see: Popa, ‘The Evil Eye and the Cross’, 447-470; for analysis see: Kalleres, ‘Drunken Hags’, 234-235.

Alternatives in Caesarius of Arles

As we have seen, what the bishops saw as accepted religious practice shifted over time. John Chrysostom and Augustine preferred their followers to solely rely on prayers, although they also ascribe power to the materiality of the Scriptures.¹²⁴⁷ About a century later, Caesarius likewise urges the sick to pray, but also to visit a church, to apply oils, and to take part in the Eucharist.¹²⁴⁸ Caesarius allows the use of material religious strategies within the context of church institutions. Unlike the use of amulets, however, the materials involved were ephemeral and could not be ‘taken home’: oil stays on the body for just a few days and the sacramental bread of the Eucharist is consumed. Amulets could be materially present always and everywhere and, as portable objects, would have been more actively present in the lives of their users.

T.S. de Bruyn has analysed the similarities between using an amulet and the ritual of blessing oil. The ritual invoked the power of Christ to be present in the oil to drive away illness or demons and thus to heal. The ritual was performed by priests or monks, and the lay users could apply the oil themselves.¹²⁴⁹ This practice is similar to amulets in the sense that it involves the ‘activation’ of substances through ritual practices performed by authoritative specialists. Since oil is also applied to the body, all in all the experience of using oil is similar to that of using an amulet. De Bruyn mentions one important difference: ‘amulets could be inscribed’.¹²⁵⁰ Although this is doubtlessly significant, the materiality of textual amulets and the permanence of their inscribed message were perhaps even more important. Oil could be applied to a sick body and the power residing in the oil would force evil out. However, once the oil was absorbed by the skin, it could no longer be seen or touched. Although its smell may have lingered for some time, oil did not have the permanence of an amulet. An amulet worn on the body could be seen, kept close, felt and sometimes also heard or smelled. In other words, unlike holy oils, amulets created a permanent sensory experience. Through its material presence the object would be constantly present in the mind of the user, thus contributing to a more permanent feeling of safety.

Saints and martyrs

As argued in the first part of this chapter, Christian religious practices in general became

1247 Stander, ‘Amulets and the Church Fathers’, 62–66. See for example: Augustine in holding the Gospel to your head: Augustine of Hippo, *In Iohannis euangelium tractatus* 7.12 (CCSL 36.73); Chrysostom on Gospel amulets: John Chrysostom, *In Matthaëum (homiliae 1–90)* 72.2 (PG 58.669).

1248 Caesarius, *Sermones* 13.3, 50.1 and 52.2; see also Klingshirn, *Caesarius of Arles*, 233–234.

1249 Prayer 17 of the Euchologion, dated to the mid fourth century and part of the liturgy of the church in Egypt: de Bruyn, ‘Appeals to Jesus’, 76–77.

1250 De Bruyn, ‘Appeals to Jesus’, 79.

more material from the fourth century onwards.¹²⁵¹ J.E. Sanzo describes how in Late Antiquity ‘the extant material record testifies to a proliferation of healing and protective objects, *eulogiai* (e.g., clay tokens and flasks containing oil), and other materials invoking biblical heroes or associated with the cults of martyrs and saints.’¹²⁵² Objects could be taken home from pilgrimages to holy places, for instance various mementos, (contact) relics, and other objects made of materials that had been in contact with the saints and martyrs or containing materials such as dust from a saint’s tomb. These objects were acquired in the hope of mobilising some of the power associated with the places or the saints for healing or protection.¹²⁵³ As Sanzo’s examples show, the idea of keeping powerful portable objects close to human bodies was not foreign to Christianity.¹²⁵⁴

In the fourth century the mortal remains of saints and martyrs became even more important sites of sanctity and religious power.¹²⁵⁵ In his analysis on religious practices regarding saints, P. Brown argued for the importance of ‘presence’ in the experience of religion. Saints were ‘present’ in their remains, in the sites related to them, in all relics taken from their dead bodies, and in all contact relics that had touched their remains. In handling these objects, ancient individuals interacted with the ‘invisible person’ present, who would wield their power.¹²⁵⁶ People felt the need to be near such a presence, to visit it and take fragments of it with them: ‘the physical presence of the holy, whether in the midst of a particular community or in the possession of particular individuals, was the greatest blessing that a late-antique Christian could enjoy.’¹²⁵⁷

By visiting shrines and taking blessed oils, dirt, tokens, and contact relics from these sites, the power and presence of the saints became portable and possessable.¹²⁵⁸ The power of the presence could thus be fragmented, without minimising it. The ‘fragments’ could be used in private or domestic ritual.¹²⁵⁹ In all these cases, the power of memory could add to the experience of the object; memories of rituals, visits, or encounters could be reactivated by handling the fragments of the presence at home.¹²⁶⁰

In my view, these arguments can be fruitfully applied to amulets. Just like (contact) relics, amulets with Christian elements may be seen as expressions of a tendency to fragment

1251 I will discuss some of the change relevant to the present context, but will not go into detail regarding the question why early Christians felt the need to use more material practices.. See for example: Jensen, ‘Art’, 717-718.

1252 Sanzo, ‘Early Christianity’, 233.

1253 Vikan, ‘Art, Medicine, and Magic’.

1254 Although it was also criticised by the authors of the early church, see the analysis of Shenoute’s perspective on relics by Van der Vliet, ‘Roman and Byzantine Egypt’, 252-253.

1255 Harvey, ‘The Senses in Religion’, 97-98.

1256 Brown, *The Cult of the Saints*, 88, 106-113.

1257 Brown, *The Cult of the Saints*, 88.

1258 On divine power residing in religious sites, see for example: Cline, ‘Ritual Efficacy of Christian Symbols’, 362-363.

1259 Bowes, ‘Sixth-Century Individual Rituals’, *passim*, but 78-80 specifically.

1260 Harvey, ‘The Senses in Religion’, 98; Noga-Banai, ‘Early Christian Reliquaries’, 221-223.

Christian institutionalised power, as they encapsulated the powers associated with liturgical ritual or the Scriptures. Like pilgrim tokens, amulets can be seen as objects facilitating or ensuring a religious presence in private contexts, although in the case of amulets the power believed to be ‘present’ more often was God, Jesus, or an archangel rather than a saint.¹²⁶¹ Perhaps most importantly, both pilgrim tokens and amulets could create a permanent sensory experience that would have inspired a feeling of permanent safety.

Relics

Relics, for example of saints and martyrs, need to be further discussed, because they were also used as amulets. A relic consisted of the ‘corporeal remains or other objects connected with people considered to be saints.’¹²⁶² A relic is in essence (part of) a dead body; the deceased was believed to have a special relationship with the supernatural or spiritual and therefore the corpse was ‘a site of religious contact’.¹²⁶³ The use of relics emerged in the fourth century. According to R. Wiśniewski, it ‘exploded rather than developed.’¹²⁶⁴ He demonstrates that this was a fundamentally new practice as it required a change in mentality regarding the handling of dead bodies. The dead had been seen as polluted – now they were sources of power.¹²⁶⁵ Relics were believed to be able to expel demons or illness and thus to heal and protect.¹²⁶⁶ Although the power of relics originated in the figure of the saint, it was believed to be present in the saints’ remains and in contact relics which had touched saints during their lifetime or after their death.¹²⁶⁷

R. Wiśniewski argues that the need to touch relics was prominent in Late Antiquity, because in this way one was able to reach the power within them.¹²⁶⁸ We do not know how relics were handled, but they were probably not often touched, especially not by ordinary people seeking help or healing.¹²⁶⁹ Relics were stored in closed reliquaries (without ‘peepholes’), which meant that the exact nature of the relic was often unknown.¹²⁷⁰ Furthermore, the objects were kept in ecclesiastical buildings, often in a place where they could not be seen by visiting laypeople.¹²⁷¹ In a study of medieval reliquaries, A. Kurtze showed that relics remained largely invisible, even though in later periods reliquaries were equipped with ‘windows’ made of crystal. The reliquaries would only be taken out

1261 Amulets rarely address saints, however, see: *PGM* P2 and P5b.

1262 Wiśniewski, *Cult of Relics*, 2.

1263 Cox Miller, *Corporeal Imagination*, 1.

1264 Wiśniewski, *Cult of Relics*, 1.

1265 Wiśniewski, *Cult of Relics*, 8, see 8-26 for analysis. See also: Cox Miller, *Corporeal Imagination*, 7.

1266 Wiśniewski, *Cult of Relics*, 27-42 for the development from exorcism to healing. See chapter three for the discussion of the use of relics for protection.

1267 Skemer, *Binding Words*, 50.

1268 Wiśniewski, *Cult of Relics*, 130, see 124-130

1269 Wiśniewski, *Cult of Relics*, 131.

1270 Wiśniewski, *Cult of Relics*, 150-151.

1271 Wiśniewski, *Cult of Relics*, 134-137, 144-150.

for processions on specific days; the windows were not there for visibility, but to allow the power of the relic to radiate. Contact relics could be ‘created’ in this way. Even when the relics in their reliquaries could not be seen or touched, their power was believed to be present in medieval churches: the storage rooms were equipped with ‘Wirkungskanäle’.¹²⁷²

Things were different in the case of private relics. One example is the medallion in the possession of Gregory of Tours, which contained ashes of a martyr. The object would protect him against violent individuals and floodings.¹²⁷³ The medallion had earlier belonged to his mother, and before that to his father, which testifies to the family’s belief in its power.¹²⁷⁴ In Late Antiquity, relics consisting of remains of saints were also kept at home, where they could be ‘touched, kissed, or rubbed’.¹²⁷⁵ The bishops, however, preferred all relics to be stored in ecclesiastical buildings, so that they could control the objects and the interaction people had with them.¹²⁷⁶ Relics could be personal and portable like amulets, and initially the church did not look favourably on them. Again we are dealing with tension between developments in relatively institutionalised church practices and the needs of individuals.

In certain respects, the experience of relics was similar to that of amulets. Both responded to a need for material forms of personal religion, a need for religious objects that could be kept close and touched. Touching a relic could have a large impact: it meant feeling the presence of the source of healing and it did not matter if the relic could not be seen. This was something the relic had in common with the texts on a textual amulet or the natural material in the amulet case. The details of the power of the object were not necessarily of importance, the presence of the object definitely was. As regards personal experience, people were probably more acquainted with contact relics than with relics consisting of human remains stored in churches. Contact relics were objects, for instance pieces of fabric, that had touched (remains of) a saint or a saint’s tomb. They were often taken home after a pilgrimage. Through these objects, one could indirectly touch the power of the saint.¹²⁷⁷ Contact relics (and other pilgrimage souvenirs) had much in common with traditional amulets in terms of functioning and use.¹²⁷⁸ Like amulets, personal relics were worn on the body and were believed to have the power to expel danger and disease.

Both amulets and (contact) relics made divine power possessable and portable, not necessarily readable or visible. However, while using amulets involved a large variety of powerful elements regarding material, text, iconography, and rituals, relics had only

1272 A. Kurtze, ‘Transparenz und Unsichtbarkeit: Reliquiare und Architektur im mittelalterlichen Frauenstift Essen’ in: W.E. Keil, *et al.* (eds.), *Zeichentragende Artefakte im sakralen Raum. Zwischen Präsenz und Unsichtbarkeit* (Berlin/Boston 2018) 309-328.

1273 Gregory of Tours, *Liber in gloria martyrum* 83. See Brown, *Rise of Western Christendom*, 159.

1274 Wiśniewski, *Cult of Relics*, 140.

1275 Wiśniewski, *Cult of Relics*, 139-140.

1276 Wiśniewski, *Cult of Relics*, 138-139.

1277 Wiśniewski, *Cult of Relics*, 134-137, see also 153-154.

1278 For an example see: Kotansky, ‘Greek Exorcistic Amulets’, 244.

one very specific source of power: a dead body that was believed to be in contact with the supernatural. The various steps and choices in the process of amulet use made the experience of amulets more personal and thus, one may surmise, more intense and powerful.

If (contact) relics were attached to the boundary location they needed to work for – a contact relic with powers to heal might be attached to the body – they could function as amulets. However, ordinary relics were not normally attached to a demarcated space. They could be stored out of sight in a nearby church building. In the case of amulets, the proximity of their material presence ensured embodied sensory experiences. The ongoing experience amulets could provide through their demarcating agency was something most other Christian alternative practices were unable to furnish. In this way, amulets created personal material Christian experiences that could ‘be taken home’.

With their material presence, amulets contributed to the decentralisation of institutionalised forms of early Christian religion. The proximity of the amulet made it trustworthy; because of their personal, permanent, possessable, and portable nature, amulets could provide something that other religious strategies could not. In the end, the proximity of the amulet’s material presence, the relationship between amulet and space, and the personal use of the object created a permanent and highly impactful embodied sensory experience. It was this experience that made amulets more attractive than other options offered by the early church.

4.4 CONCLUSION: CONTINUITY, INNOVATION, AND CHANGE IN THE ROLE OF AMULETS IN LATE ANTIQUITY

In this chapter I have discussed the experience of amulet users in Late Antiquity. In the changing world of the fourth-to-sixth centuries, amulets remained in use, but also underwent changes; they moved with the flow of larger religious change. Some of these changes were a result of developments within Christianity, but not all.

Many aspects of amulets remained unchanged. Amulets continued to be used by the same people and mostly for the same reasons. The dissemination of Christianity did not change beliefs in the way amulets acted and amulet makers continued to use the same formulae. The sensory experience of the object cannot have changed much, because the look, feel, and use of amulets remained the same. The fact that amulet practices continued in a manner that was similar to that of earlier times may be attributed to several factors: amulets were often created with the help of old handbook instructions; these instructions had been collected by specialists and copied from even older handbooks; the objects that were subsequently created were sometimes used and reused over a considerable period of time. A religious practice such as amulet use developed very slowly, not because change was seen as undesirable, but because of the nature of the practice. The continuation of elements of amulet use may also have had a function: old forms and formulae made amulets recognisable as powerful objects.

The continuation of familiar practices made amulets trustworthy and old amulets may have been seen as more powerful. We must also take into account that, although certain practices continued, their meaning may have changed. Older, more traditional Graeco-Roman religious elements, such as the Abrasax figure, may, although still seen as powerful, have lost their original religious connotations and no longer clashed with new, Christian, beliefs.

Late Antiquity also witnessed some important changes in the use of amulets, but, as I mentioned above, not all of these were related to Christianity. The textuality on amulets increased, but this development had already started before Late Antiquity. Demonology had a big impact on late antique amulets, but this, too, was not exclusively due to the dissemination of Christianity. The emphasis on the natural environment and the demons living in it relates to the rise of textuality: as the texts on amulets became longer, there was more opportunity to elaborate.

Other changes are part of the expansion of Christianity. A new group of amulet makers came into existence; priests, monks, and other members of the clergy formed the new authority. They were able to inscribe amulets with parts of or references to the Scriptures and thus brought Christianity closer to the people. These amulet makers added new Christian elements. Christian innovations can be noticed in both text and iconography, for instance the inclusion of biblical incipits and the iconography of the cross. Over time, in text as well as in iconography, most non-Christian elements were replaced with Christian ones (or received a Christian meaning). The religious underpinnings of amulet use shifted from traditional Graeco-Roman religions to Christianity. The priests and monks making amulets and the people using them did not see amulet use as 'un-Christian'. Within the framework of what an amulet traditionally was believed to do, the use of the objects was made acceptable, which made it possible for the practice to continue within a Christian world.

The authority of the priests and monks and of the sources they used, must have had a large impact on amulet users. The people who created the increasingly Christian amulets of Late Antiquity made relatively institutionalised forms of the 'new' religion, such as the Scriptures or liturgical rituals, accessible to people by fragmentising them and making them tangible and wearable. Users must have felt the impact of wearing parts of the Scriptures on their bodies or placing them on their possessions. The scribes provided authority and inspired trust, thereby ensuring the continuation of amulet use.

It is likely that the interaction between continuity and change also impacted amulet users. However, from an etic point of view, the impact of new elements can be called into question. The Christian scribes would have been seen as figures of authority, but that was also the case with non-Christian amulet makers. For the users of amulets the details and origins of the new elements used in texts were probably of less importance than the experience of wearing a powerful and performative object around their neck, and that experience, moreover, was not new. It could be argued that the experience of the new elements was very similar to the experience of the existing ones. Nevertheless, in the context of early Christianity, the

experience of the new Christian elements should be studied against the background of various specifically Christian developments, such as new ideas about the power of the Scriptures.

In Late Antiquity, amulets continued to be used for the proximity and portability facilitated by their materiality: they responded to a need to keep a powerful object close to the location it demarcated. It is remarkable that the relationship between the object and the location in question was increasingly described on the objects themselves. Research into relics has shown that the need to keep an object close and the wish to touch it was part of the wider context of early Christianity. In Late Antiquity, people were also able to gain direct access to the powerful writings of the Bible and other liturgical practices, which therefore were no longer strictly oral. The proximity of amulets carrying such specifically Christian texts facilitated the experience of their material presence. They were visibly and tangibly present in the lives of their users, which was something some other Christian religious practices and strategies were unable to achieve. Through amulets, Christian power could be experienced on human bodies, near front doors or in other locations. Sensing the object reminded the user of its efficacy, its healing or protective power, or the benefits that it would bring. Users experienced the performance of Christian power, of the Scriptures, of archangels, of Christ or whoever was believed to direct the power of the amulet. By creating amulets scribes related to the early Christian institutions made Christianity tangible, private, and portable.

In a way, amulets decentralised Christian power, and this is precisely what several early Church authors found problematic. The makers and users of amulets with Christian elements must have seen it all as acceptable Christian practice. However, the early Church authors did their best to find ways to control the use of amulets, Christian elements notwithstanding. Sermons show, however, that the need for personal forms of religion continued to exist and that amulets offered something that alternative Christian practices could not provide: the personal, portable, possessable, and permanent material presence of the power associated with the Christian supernatural. The early Church authors criticising amulets had problems with private religious practices beyond their control, especially in the context of healing where the Church actually had many alternatives to offer. The very thing that seems to have made amulets attractive, their portability and material character, was the subject of the bishops' criticism.

All in all, in Late Antiquity many aspects of religious life slowly changed under the influence of Christianity, but people did not change their religious views and mentality overnight and old and new practices co-existed for a while. During this transition period amulets also transitioned, but at a slow pace. References to the non-Christian supernatural disappeared as amulets were now made by Christian authorities who furnished them with Christian power, thus making the use of amulets acceptable. The bishops of the fourth-to-sixth centuries did not support this development and tried to persuade their congregations to opt for alternative practices. The main reason for the failure of these attempts seems to have been that these alternative Church practices lacked the very elements that made amulets attractive: permanence, portability, proximity, and the capacity to create reassuring sensory experiences.