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

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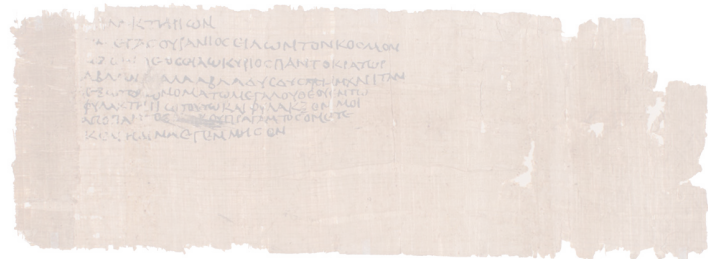
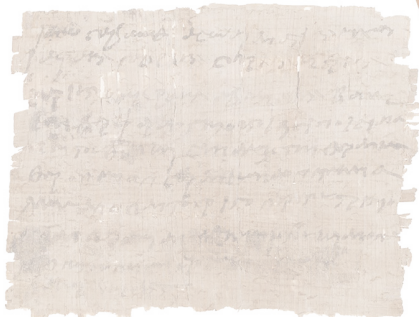
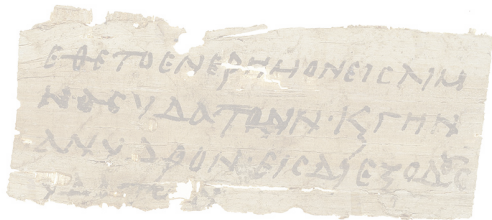
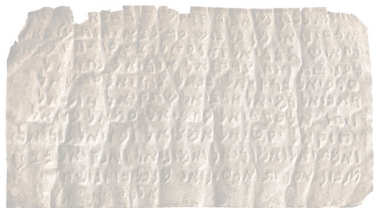
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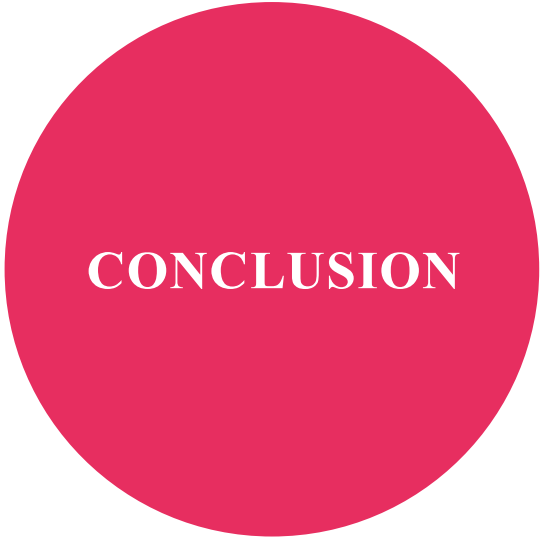
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CONCLUSION

CONTINUITY THROUGH CHANGE

The historiography of ancient amulets is fragmented: different types of sources and different time periods have mostly been studied separately. Roman amulets from before and after the arrival of Christianity have hardly been studied as a single corpus. The present study shows that there is a large group of ancient objects that can and should be studied together. These objects do not necessarily have the same form and features, but they functioned similarly, as is evident from the significant relationship between an object and the space it demarcated. Although major changes took place as a result of the arrival of a new religious power (Christianity), the objects and their users remained much the same over time. With a new focus on the role these objects played in the lives of their users, this book asks why ancient individuals continued to use amulets for hundreds of years. How was this use impacted by religious changes Christianity brought? To answer these questions, I have analysed amulets, handbooks, and other literary sources from within the borders of the (former) Roman Empire, from the first century BCE to the sixth century CE.

As for a theoretical basis: my search for an answer to these questions has been informed by a relational materiality approach which helps to understand the amulet phenomenon as a conceptual whole. Furthermore, I propose a new definition of amulets: an amulet is an object placed by an individual at a certain location in order to demarcate that space in the hope of warding off evil, expelling existing danger from this place, and/or attracting supernatural benefits to it. This definition focusses, first, on amulets as material presences. Amulets were material, they were used, handled, and experienced. Second, the relationship between an object and the space it demarcated plays a vital role in the understanding of amulets. Amulets would be placed at boundary locations to deal with present or possible evil. It is in this relationship between object and demarcated space that amulets were believed to operate and have efficacy. Third, this definition enabled this study to explore the impact amulets had, or could have, on the bodily and/or emotional well-being of their users. Materiality studies contributed to my integrated study of all aspects of amulets – the objects themselves, their use in space, and their impact on a sensing human body.

Using aspects of materiality studies as a basis, I examined amulet use as a *process*. I incorporated the whole process of amulet use and not only looked at the texts written on amulets (which generally formed the focus of earlier researchers), but also took into account the various stages of creation and use. That process involved the following: the problems and motives which made ancient individuals reach out to amulets; the subsequent acquisition and creation of an amulet, and finally the embodied experience of the object, its believed working and the impact experience and expectations could have on the well-being of the user. Only by grasping the whole process of amulet use, the object and its impact can be fully understood. Amulets were attached to significant boundary locations on the human body or in the user's environment. Amulet use is about interaction – about the 'bond'

between objects, locations, individuals and their emotions, thoughts and beliefs, danger and disease, and time. Perceiving this is fundamental to the questions why ancient individuals would reach out to amulets and why, over time, they continued to do so.

My analysis of the various stages of the process shows that, over time, amulets were always available to people of all genders, ages, and status groups. They used amulets for healing, protecting and/or providing benefits, not just for human bodies, but also for larger spaces such as houses or workshops. The objects could be home-made, received from relatives or bought from religious specialists. Especially the latter could have a large impact on the users. Over time, some changes took place in the process of amulet use; amulets gradually became more textual and the texts became longer, for instance. The spread of Christianity added a new source for texts and iconography as well as a new group of amulet makers – Christian priests and monks brought elements from Scriptures and liturgy to the practices of making and using amulets. Gradually, most references to non-Christian deities or powers disappeared from texts and iconography, although old formulae remained in use – perhaps with a different meaning.

Amulets impacted users at various points in the process of use. This remained the same over time. Through the proximity of their material presence, amulets facilitated embodied sensory experiences. Moreover, amulets had to be installed on significant boundary locations to demarcate, guard, and control an ‘inside area’. The relationship between amulet and location was vital and continuous and had a large impact on the user as is apparent, for instance, from the longer texts on late antique amulets. Expectations about efficacy and the experience of the proximity of the object created a sense of being in a controlled space.

WHAT MADE AMULETS PARTICULARLY ATTRACTIVE?

Why did people continue to use amulets? What made amulets particularly attractive? What made people decide to reach out to an amulet, instead of taking recourse to some other religious strategy? There is a variety of pull factors that may have made amulets especially attractive.

First, amulets were *material presences*; they could be kept, owned, placed on something, and moved. By using the object for a certain amount of time, seeing, feeling, hearing, smelling, or tasting it and experiencing accompanying rituals, users felt its impact. In other words, amulets were experienced by sensing embodied individuals. They were present, both visibly and invisibly (when worn underneath clothes for example) and this will have impacted the experiences of the user. This material presence did not change over time: it is one of the elements that defines an amulet.

Furthermore, amulets are defined by their relation with a certain location. Amulets demarcated space and were present on significant boundary locations. In order to have

an effect on human bodies or larger locations such as houses, the object was always near the area it impacted. Even when the amulet could not be seen, the user was aware of its presence. The *proximity* of the object was thus of great importance for people's belief in its efficacy and their experience of it.

This proximity was dynamic in the sense that amulets were *portable*. Amulets demarcated the location they needed to act in and, being portable, they could be used to demarcate any kind of space. They could keep evil away from houses, fields, workshops, and bodies. When worn, body amulets provided a portable power as the demarcated space moved with the user. In this way they created a permanent sense of safety. The portability of the object also meant that the user was not dependent on the presence of religious specialists, sites, or buildings. Once the object was ready for use, it could be installed on any location and in any situation. Amulets lent flexibility to users' religious practices.

Amulets were often *personalised*. Decisions about their use and placement could be left to the discretion of the user, but they could also be adapted to the user's personal situation and include references to their personal life. Users could put their trust in a personalised object that would help them deal with their particular difficulties.

Amulets could be made of a variety of materials. The argument can be made that amulets were relatively *accessible* in an economic sense. Using some kind of material was essential, but there was a wide range of useable materials. As a result, it was possible to cater to people from all layers of society. To reduce costs, or for other reasons, the involvement of ritual specialists might be dispensed with: amulets were also made at home and in some cases, heirlooms were reused.

Amulets were not just present in people's lives, they were visibly worn or affixed, and recommended or promoted by religious specialists, medical specialists, friends, and relatives. I have shown that their use was *accepted*, normalised, and sustained by social practices. Despite early Christian writers' criticism of amulet use, their use continued and remained acceptable – especially when priests and monks took up the creation of amulets with Christian elements.

The continued use of amulets was facilitated by the combination of all these factors. Some of the pull factors did not change over time. Amulets retained their material presence as well as their proximity to the space that needed attention. The essential elements of amulet use – a user with a motive, a material object, and a location of use – did not change either. All of this meant that elements of amulet use could be modified without fundamentally changing the process itself. Other pull factors, such as the aspect of personalisation and the accessibility of amulets, also facilitated the introduction of new elements. Amulets were not defined by their makers or by a specific religious power, and therefore the practice could be embraced by a new religion – which was willing to do so. I would like to point out, however, that developments in amulet use were slow due to the nature of the practice: instructions for the creation of amulets were collected in old handbooks and these instructions were

subsequently copied for hundreds of years; the practice of reuse, moreover, shows that amulets kept their value over time. This consistency also had a function: it made amulets recognisable and trustworthy, which contributed to their appeal and continued use.

POTENTIAL TO IMPACT EMOTIONAL AND BODILY WELL-BEING

The idea that using amulets could *impact emotional and bodily well-being* provides another perspective on the endurance of amulet use. As argued above, the relative consistency of amulet use created trust and flexibility, and made a personal experience possible. But there is more to it. The various practices of amulet use could help individuals cope with ‘danger’, created psychosomatic effects, and brought about meaningful sensory experiences. In other words, using an amulet could make the user feel better. Amulets provided symptom relief, or a sense of protection, happiness or courage. Users were impacted by their amulets through expectations regarding their efficacy and the experience of their use.

Expectations were an influential factor. Amulets were believed to function in a certain way, especially in relation to the demarcation of space. The object was placed at significant boundary locations and created an ‘inside’ and an ‘outside’. Danger was believed to be an external force, that could be kept from entering (protecting) or be expelled (healing) from the ‘inside’ area. Through its function as ‘guard’, the amulet could also facilitate positive developments and attract supernatural benefits. By demarcating space, the users expected to be safe, secure and/or in control. These expectations took shape before and during amulet use, for example by listening to the experiences of others and/or the arguments of a ritual specialist as well as through cultural knowledge about demarcated religious space. The amulet would control the particular personal situation and location of its user(s) and made sure that their wishes were fulfilled. The belief that the amulet would take care of things gave users hope and made them feel more comfortable.

All these ideas and expectations played a role in the embodied sensory *experience* of amulets. From the very beginning, because acknowledging their fears and deciding to deal with them may already have given users a sense of reassurance. Sensing the amulet during its use, users would be reminded of their expectations and wishes, and their ideas on the functioning of the object. The amulet user could sense the object’s power. As the sizes and shapes of amulets did not undergo any drastic change, the experiences of their material affordances were probably consistent over time. Through touch the users could feel the transmission of healing power; seeing the object would give them confidence. Occasionally, other senses may have been involved: hearing the apotropaic sounds warding off evil as the object rattled, smelling the healing properties of the flowers in the amulet, or tasting the drink that accompanied the healing ritual that came with the use of the amulet. Unlike alternative religious strategies, amulets might add a unique additional experience. Amulets

could not only be sensed, they could be sensed within a space. With the help of amulets as boundary markers, demarcating and guarding a certain area, the user of the amulet could feel safe within this space where the supernatural would work for them. Noticing the object through the senses and in relation to space created a sense of safety and empowerment.

The vital relationship between amulet, location of use, and sensing human bodies was crucial for the impact of amulets. Through their demarcating function amulets were always in the proximity of the designated location; the portable powers of a body amulet would even guarantee a constant presence of the supernatural. The proximity of the object facilitated sensory experiences, creating meaningful encounters with the object's efficacy that made people feel better.

CONTINUITY THROUGH CHANGE IN LATE ANTIQUITY

The interaction between continuity and change in Late Antiquity plays a significant role in both the pull factors that kept amulets attractive and the processes that could impact the bodily or emotional well-being of their users. The continued use of amulets was made possible by adaptation and innovation.

In this period, too, the fundamental aspects of amulet use remained the same: amulets were materially present as they demarcated space in proximity to the users or their possessions. Amulets were talked about and visible. As the longer textual amulets show, expectations regarding their believed effect did not significantly change either. The same holds true for the shapes and sizes of amulets and the related embodied experience. These stable elements – the formulae, materials, ritual practices etc. – made amulets recognisable and trustworthy. General knowledge about amulets and their use would help shape expectations and create meaningful experiences. All of this made amulet use consistent; amulets kept their value, and they remained present and accepted. Nevertheless, this does not mean that amulets did not change over time. They certainly did as the world around them changed and they became part of the various transformational processes, but they remained impactful.

As I mentioned above, amulet use was flexible; it had always been possible to adjust amulets to the personal situation of the user, in this way enhancing expectations. With the dissemination of Christianity, amulets became more Christian. Their flexibility made it possible to continue using them, as long as elements such as the materiality and the relation between object and location remained the same. New, Christian makers of amulets came into play and Christian elements were added to texts and imagery. Gradually, traditional elements of amulet use disappeared or gained new meanings as Christian elements took over. The ancient world did not turn Christian overnight and, since change in amulet use is slow due to the nature of the practice, the 'Christianisation' of amulets was likewise a gradual process.

Amulets had to become more Christian in order to continue to make an impact in a Christian world. Christian priests and monks became involved in the creation of amulets and made objects that met the needs of their users. Users, in their turn, were attracted by these amulets with Christian elements. They could have turned to alternative Christian religious practices, but they chose amulets. The combination of the proximity of the object and the sensory experience of its material presence continued to make amulets attractive. Users not only experienced the object, but also the expectations that came with it; amulets now formed small hotspots of early Christian power.

Christian authorities, such as priests and monks, invested amulets with power. Parts of the Scriptures and liturgical texts and images were added to amulets; texts, imagery, and rituals that people knew, but to which they did not necessarily have personal access. Amulets were portable and personal: a small piece of Christian institutionalised religion that could be taken home. Amulets made Christianity accessible and possessable. Through their proximity, the material presence of early Christian power could now be experienced in people's private lives. Bishops advocated Christian alternatives, such as applying holy oils, visiting a church, and prayer. However, these practices were transitory, whereas the portability and proximity of amulets facilitated the permanent presence of Christian power. In a way, amulets 'fragmentised' institutionalised Christianity and helped to bring Christianity closer to people.

The stability of the essential elements of amulets was crucial for their continued trustworthiness. However, it was change – i.e. the adaptation of amulets to Christian practices – that ensured the continuation of amulet use. These changes added a new experience to the expectations of users regarding the effect of their amulet: the experience of the material presence of Christian power in their personal lives.