



Societas Magica Newsletter

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Encounters with Amulets

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What follows is a personal account of one researcher's encounters with amulets. I have been working with Lea Olsan on a study of the Middleham Jewel (to appear in *Viator*, 2000), a 15th century piece of English jewellery now on display at the Yorkshire Museum in York. This jewel is a reliquary worn as a pendant, and adorned with images on both sides, set with a sapphire, and inscribed with words of power. It evidently functioned as an amulet even if it is the finest piece of English goldwork of the Middle Ages. As a Librarian I am used to working with texts, manuscripts and printed books, but not with museum objects, and in attempting to understand the Middleham Jewel I have for the first time been feeling my way into this other world. I received a quizzical look in the British Museum when I asked in my innocence at the Department of Medieval and Later Antiquities if they had any amulets. For answer the Keeper pulled out several drawers full of objects – all unprovenanced, some of unknown make, and of extraordinary variety in appearance. For the most part the objects labelled as amulets are the lost sheep of the museum world, undocumented and without a history.

But if the surviving amulets in museum collections are without a history, amuletic beliefs and practices certainly have their historians. Amulets are of course closely bound up with the world of written charms, since in so many cases these charms give instructions as to how to make amulets, and readers of this Newsletter can turn to No.2, Spring 1996, for guidance from Lea Olsan on recent literature on charms. Suzanne E. Sheldon's Tulane PhD dissertation on 'Middle English and Latin charms, amulets, and talismans from vernacular manuscripts' D.A.I. –A, 39.7 (1979), 4233, assembles a corpus of relevant texts and objects.

Amulet, or its Latin equivalent 'amuletum' is not a medieval term but is first used by renaissance authorities at a time when critical and historical thinking

about amulets was just getting under way. Medieval sources talk of suspensions and ligatures, worn or bound on the person. Lynn Thorndike's *A History of Magic and Experimental Science*, 8 vols. (New York, 1923-58) is still the best introduction to the medieval and later literature on works expounding the uses and values of suspensions and ligatures. One of the most important and influential treatises is the *Physical Ligatures* of Qusta ibn Luqa, translated into Latin in the 12th century, and now edited with a translation into English by Judith Wilcox and John M. Riddle in *Medieval Encounters* 1,1 (1995) 1-50. This work shows how Greek medicine made use of remedies that depended on the mutual influence of mind and body, and so provided a rationale and unimpeachable authority for the use of ligatures.

On the other side of the fence theologians and ecclesiastical authorities were eager to make sure that suspensions and ligatures were not used by the wrong people for the wrong reasons. Yet they were not opposed to the use of suspensions and ligatures outright, just so long as the wearer was not putting his or her trust in the efficacy of the object, image or inscription itself, but was rather petitioning God or the saints for support with their aid. In fact there were many ecclesiastically sanctioned suspensions and ligatures. At one end of the spectrum you have an object like the Middleham Jewel which was used as a repository for sacred relics, and whose imagery and inscription make full use of Christian story and liturgy. The powers invoked by the wearer protected her from the perils of sudden death or disease. Other

portable reliquary amulets might take the form of rings rather than pendants, like the Thame ring in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, with its container for a fragment of the True Cross. So-called iconographic rings, with images of the saints, or gold rosaries with images on each bead, can be found illustrated in R. W. Lightbown, *Mediaeval European Jewellery* (London 1992). These objects enabled the wearer to enlist the protective power of his chosen saint or saints. The most searching investigation of amuletic jewellery remains however Joan Evans, *Magical Jewels of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, particularly in England* (London 1922, repr. New York 1976).

The agnus dei in the shape of a disc made every seven years from the paschal candle at St Peter's in Rome was also a sacralised object which focussed amuletic powers. Wolfgang Brückner deals with the various classes of object associated with the agnus dei, from the sacralised wax disc itself to the metal containers and secondary copies of the agnus, in his chapter 'Christlicher Amulett-Gebrauch der frühen Neuzeit', in *Frömmigkeit : Formen, Geschichte, Verhalten, Zeugnisse*, ed. I Bauer (Deutsche Kunstverlag, 1993) 89-134. Ecclesiastical sanction was given also to objects with amulets for specific protection against disease. As far back as King Edward the Confessor English kings, with the approval of the church, were believed to have blessed the so-called cramp rings to be given to the sick. In fact the first instance of the rings being used specifically in the cure of epilepsy or cramp date to the reign of Edward II. The custom continued into the

reign of Queen Mary Tudor. The tradition is described by Raymond Crawford, 'The blessing of cramp rings', in C. Singer, *Studies in the History of Science*, I (1917), 165-88.

The commonest Christian amulet in medieval Europe must have been the pilgrim badge. This was made of tin-lead alloy, or poor quality pewter, usually, though examples survive made of more noble metals. These originated on sale at pilgrim shrines all across Europe - the most famous probably being those in Rome, at Compostela in Spain, the shrine of the Magi at Cologne, and St Thomas of Canterbury - but there were hundreds of other sites where badges could be had. The badges fulfilled many functions, from that of passport, or ordinary souvenir of a trip, to proof of a pilgrimage completed, to decoration of a hat or clothing. But because the badge had been at least notionally in contact with the shrine of a saint, it benefited from encounter with holy relics. The badge might often represent the particular relic associated with the shrine. The badges in effect became secondary relics, which could work miracles. Even the string from which a Canterbury souvenir (an ampulla of holy water) had once been suspended was found to be a relic of St Thomas Becket sufficiently powerful to work a miracle for its owner. Pilgrim badges might be obtained specifically to fulfil their role as amulets. The French King Charles V, whose health was always delicate, obtained three 'enseignes' for the disease of the kidneys, as recorded in 1379-80. The protective role of the pilgrim badge is often implicit in the design itself, the inscription on it or the depiction of the saint, who is fre-

quently shown in the act of intercession. One inscription reads 'All weakness and pain is removed; the healed man eats and drinks, and evil and death pass away.' For others we have to infer the amuletic power ascribed to the badge by noting the uses to which it was put. Pilgrim badges could be attached to the door of a house, hung over the bed or on the wall, or incorporated in the bell of a church or the margin of a manuscript, once they were brought home.

Many museums have collections of pilgrim badges, large or small. Two of the largest are at the Museum of London and in the van Beuningen collection in Rotterdam : excellent catalogues exist of both collections, namely Brian Spencer, *Pilgrim Souvenirs and Secular Badges* (London: The Stationery Office, 1998); J.H.E.van Beuningen, A.M. Koldewij, *Heilig en Profaan* (Cothen, Rotterdam Papers 8, 1993). Both catalogues also draw attention to secular badges, and many of these too must be regarded as amulets.

Sexual amulets, a significant category in their own right, are dealt with in Malcolm Jones's article in the Rotterdam catalogue, and other articles by the same author in *Folklore* 101 and 102 (1990, 1991). See also J.B. Bedaux, 'Laatmiddeleeuwse sexuele amuletten. Ein sociobiologische benaderung', in *Annus quadriga mundi*, ed. J.B.Bedaux, A.M. Koldewij (Zutphen, 1989) 16-30.

Clothing accessories like brooches or buckles were sometimes turned into amulets by the addition of inscriptions, whether invocations or characters scratched on them in imitation of the powerful words inscribed on more expensive jewelry. A useful survey is G. Egan and F. Pritchard, *Medieval Finds from Excavations in London: 3, Dress Accessories c.1150-c.1450* (London, H.M.S.O., 1991). Archaeology has much to offer the student of medieval amulets, particularly of course for the early Middle Ages. Many kinds of amulet, both christian and

pagan, were buried as grave-goods. The comprehensive guide for English material is Audrey L. Meaney, *Anglo-Saxon amulets and curing stones* (Oxford, B.A.R., 1981), but there are other good regional surveys, for north-west Europe at least.

Moving eastwards there have been some important studies of Byzantine amulet traditions. Jeffrey Spier, 'Medieval Byzantine magical amulets and their tradition', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 56 (1993) is both a catalogue of amulets belonging to one tradition (a rare thing in itself) and a guide to the research and literature. He gives references for instance to the many valuable articles on amulets by A.A.Barb which have appeared in the same journal. The language barrier between Greek east and Latin west does seem to have coincided with separate amuletic traditions during the Middle Ages.

Finally this personal excursion into amulet territory must end with

Query

Mary K. Greer

Many people on the Tarot Discussion List (TarotL) have been (or begun) reading books in the Magic in History series in our continuing effort to understand if and how magic may have been related to early 15th c. Tarot. Early wood-block images were sometimes used as charms or holy relics. Early Tarots often have pin holes showing that they were hung on a wall (as were woodblock holy pictures printed by the same printers of playing cards) and not just used in card games.

As a former college professor (literature and women's studies) and author of a group-biography called *Women of the Golden Dawn: Rebels and Priestesses*, I have, with others, been putting together a *Timeline of Divination* as relates to Tarot. I am indebted, for instance, to Professor Braekman's work on dice divination, which may be important since two dice have 21 possible combinations (the Trumps) and three rolls have 56 (small cards). Will anyone interested in sharing research please contact me at taro@nccn.net.

CALL FOR PAPERS

Proposed Societas Magica Sessions for the
International Congress on Medieval Studies, May 3-6, 2001

The Medieval Institute
Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, Michigan 49008-3801
www.wmich.edu/medieval/

1. **Dirty Magic I: Effluvia**
2. **Dirty Magic II: Erotica**
3. **Medieval/Renaissance Visions: Magic and Divine Knowledge**
4. **Medieval/Renaissance Nightmares: Magic and Demonic Delusions**

For the Session on **Effluvia**, we are looking for papers addressing magical or alchemical uses for any bodily excreta, including blood, milk, tears, semen, piss and dung. Papers on **Erotica** might address specific spells to obtain, enhance or hinder sexual activity, as well as broader notions of sexual union in alchemy, the idea of Eros as magician, erotic magic in literature, romance, etc. Papers on **Magic and Divine Knowledge** might address aspects of medieval ritual magic, mystical technologies of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, Kabbalistic theurgy, etc. (we are especially interested in links between medieval and renaissance notions and currents). Papers on **Demonic Delusion** might include medical, legal or theological aspects of demonology, necromancy, witchcraft and the like.

If you have material suitable for any of the above sessions please email proposals (not more than 200 words) before September 15, 2000 to Claire Fanger cfanger@bmts.com or Lisa Carnell, carnell@wmich.edu.

a brief look at some surveys of western amuletic traditions. The best introduction is still that of L. Hansmann and L. Kriss-Rettenbeck, *Amulett und Talisman* (Munich, 1977), which has the bonus of a treasury of excellent illustrations. Jean Marquès-Rivière, *Amulettes, Talismans et Pantacles dans les traditions*

orientales et occidentales (Paris, 1972) is still useful on medieval amulets. A thoughtful approach to the whole subject is to be found in E. Bozóky, 'From Matter of Devotion to Amulets,' *Medieval Folklore* 3 (1994). The problem of astrological amulets is addressed by Bruno Delmas, 'Médailles astrologiques et talismaniques

dans le midi de la France (XIII^e-XVI^e siècle)', *96^e Congrès national des Sociétés savantes* (Toulouse, 1971), vol.2, 437-54, and the intellectual background is the subject of Nicolas Weill-Parot, 'Causalité astrale et 'science des images' au Moyen Age: Éléments de réflexion', *Revue d'Histoire des Sciences* 59 (1999), 207-40.