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Amulets in Roman Religion

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Abstract

Ancient civilizations such as Mesopotamian civilization, ancient Egyptian civilization, and the Roman civilization recognized the phenomenon of the widespread use of amulets. It received great attention from the population, and due to the expansion of the Roman Empire over vast areas that included large parts of the inhabited world, and in light of the exploration of the phenomenon which is the subject of this research, interest in it increased, and new patterns of it were introduced, influenced by ancient civilizations. The phenomenon of the spread of amulets was considered a way of life that arose out of necessity, as humans believed that they possessed supernatural powers that could protect them from diseases, crises, and sudden problems. This phenomenon spread among different segments of society and was not limited to a specific group. Kings and their followers believed in it, as did individuals from other social classes, both women and men. This study shed light on the types of amulets, their forms, the purpose of their use, as well as the materials from which they were made.

Keywords: Amulets, Roman Religion, Ancient Rome, Greek Influence, Egyptian Influence, Roman Empire, Rituals, Symbolism.

Introduction

Amulets are mechanisms devised by humans since ancient times to function alongside established traditions or independently in order to avert crises. Their sizes vary widely, from small enough to be held in one's hand to much larger. Mesopotamian kings used winged creatures with the head of a man and the features of a bull or a lion to guard the king's throne room, as well as other important spaces and pathways throughout the palace complexes from the front, in a way that made them ready to act against any metaphysical enemy. Assyrian kings were famous for filling their palaces with an array of colossal mythical creatures to reinforce the king's power and protect his rule.

The ancient Egyptians used gods or symbols as amulets for protection. It was also believed that certain natural objects, such as claws or shells, were imbued with magical power and could therefore also serve as amulets. Amulets typically consisted of a short magical spell written on a piece of linen or papyrus, which was folded and tied with a string. Thus, any object could be transformed into an amulet through a magical act.

One of the most common amulets used by both the living and the dead is the Eye of Wedjat, which depicts the healing eye of the god Horus. It is, in fact, a combination of a human eye and that of a falcon, as Horus was associated with the falcon in Egyptian mythology. After Horus's eye was injured or stolen by the god Seth, it was restored to him by another god, Thoth. The Eye of Wedjat embodies the healing power contained within it and therefore symbolizes

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regeneration. The eye transmits this regenerative power to its wearer and offers general protection to the individual.

Similarly, the Greeks used the power of amulets worn around the wrists or neck. Greek amulets fall into two broad groups: those that bring good luck and those used for protection. These were made of wood, bone, papyrus, or a metal leaf and could be carried in a pouch or small container. They might take the form of a pouch containing various herbs, and only rarely were they made of precious stones.

Given the Roman Empire's vast expansion, encompassing civilizations of the ancient world, amulets were widely used for a variety of purposes, ranging from good luck, protection, healing, and magic, influenced by all previous civilizations. Accordingly, the topic was chosen in light of this context, as the study explores the uses of amulets during the Roman Empire and the influences they carried. It also highlights their types and the materials used in their production.

Religious Amulets in Ancient Rome

Amulets in Greek *Periapta*, or *periamma*, literally meaning "things wrapped around," and in Latin *lamella*, or *lamina*, (engraved on metal plates), were worn for protection or to confer other benefits on the wearer. Amulets are another classification of amulets, with subtle differences in purpose. There are lucky charms, and others for protection.

Protection amulets are commonly used to alleviate a variety of ailments, including fever, female health problems such as contraception, hardening of the breasts (possibly mastitis or cancer), headaches, gout, and vision problems. Less commonly, they are used against demonic attacks and illnesses, and inclement weather. Amulets can also be aggressive, helping the wearer win a lover or achieve victory by harnessing a demonic attack on an enemy.

The Beginning of the Use of Amulets

Amulets inscribed in Greek or Latin have been found throughout the Greco-Roman world. Inscriptions indicate their use by men and women of all social classes, including pagans, Jews, and Christians, although the religious landscape of the Greek and Roman worlds is unclear. Long, elaborate texts inscribed on gold and precious stones indicate that some spent a lot of money on these items. Simpler, cheaper amulets were made of materials that would wear off over time.

References to wearing the amulet date back to the early 18th century. 400 BC, whether elaborately engraved or not, they were probably a talisman whose effect was activated by the wearer. There is evidence of the common use of amulets, particularly those in the form of rings

In early times, engraved stones contained a kind of supernatural power for their wearer, such as the athletic strength of Hercules, or the physical strength of a pregnant woman, and were represented by the gemstone amulet, which was engraved with clear words such as "protection." "Protection" or phrases such as "Bless Me" appeared in the first century AD, while such amulets were used for magic in the second century AD and extended until the fourth century AD, although they date back to the end of ancient times.

Amulets can be made of any material (animal parts, herbs, or stones). They may be elaborately carved on papyrus, gold, silver, copper, bronze, or other metal and placed in a small capsule that can be worn around the neck, arm, or leg. They may also be engraved on precious or semi-precious stones such as jasper, hematite, chalcedony, lapis lazuli, or agate and worn as pendants

or rings. They may also be as simple as a knotted string or a bag filled with herbs or other medicinal substances. The Greeks and Romans believed that amulets worked based on the latent power of the engraved object. This is also logical: hematite is red, so it is the stone of blood, the womb, and diseases. Hence the power of the amulet found in various stones, plants, and animals.

Some amulets appear in the 4th century AD Book of Secret Formulary, containing images or names of gods or goddesses, arrangements of cursive letters, or magical words and/or characters. From the 4th century AD Book of Secret Formulary, it provides guidance on what should be engraved on the stone and how to use it, i.e., placing it under the tongue when saying a specific spell, including the words to be engraved, the accompanying sacrifice, and the appropriate offering for these words. It also describes how to make the Ring of Hermes. Hermes, when it should be worn, the accompanying charm, and how to make the Serapis ring. Despite these and other recipes, there is nevertheless a great deal of variety and inconsistency in the group of engraved gemstones.

Talismans Between Faith and Religion

The Romans believed in the existence of evil spirits and used their own amulets to protect them from them, in addition to offering animal sacrifices and erecting temples and statues to please their gods in exchange for their protection. Therefore, the Romans wore amulets made of precious stones. The stone had a color associated with the Roman god, so Jupiter was represented by white agate, as it was customary that the wearer of precious stones would be protected from harmful supernatural forces.

In the same vein, Roman religion seemed more inclined towards what the modern world might call superstition. Amulets were popular even among some of the most famous Romans. The Roman general Sulla, he carried the amulet of the statue of Apollo when he entered into any battle, and if he faced a problem, he would kiss it and pray for its protection. Emperor Augustus also kept it. with a piece of sealed leather because he believed it was from bad weather, and it was also believed that putting on the wrong shoes first when getting out of bed was a bad omen on that day and no amulet could prevent it.

Plutarch recorded, when Pericles was injured, with the disease during the plague outbreak in the years 431-27 BC, he was persuaded to wear an amulet, because he did not like superstitions, and Pericles mentioned that there was a woman who told him that this amulet was able to do things that he considered mere foolishness, and the woman hung it around his neck, and he continued to wear it from that time.

And Marcus Caelius Nonianus kept, Marcus Sevirus Nonianus, who was consul in 35 AD, was ordered to wear an amulet around his neck, made of papyrus inscribed with the Greek letters (rho), because he feared attacks of the evil eye. C. Licinius Mucianus, on the other hand, placed a live fly in a linen bag for the same purpose.

The Romans also believed that envy could kill. In the bathhouse, where bathers gathered naked, the gaze of an envious man or woman on an attractive person could cast what they called the "evil eye" on the person. This same eye is common in a number of modern cultures and religions, such as Judaism and Islam. This eye would emit evil particles onto the attractive person's body and kill them. This is why it was important for the Romans to wear amulets that would protect them from the evil eye. They would use a penis or a hand as a symbol to defend themselves from the evil eye.

The Romans used bronze coins bearing images of Alexander the Great or Constantine I as amulets, widely worn or attached to clothing. They believed the image of the coin had guardianship or savior qualities. This was accomplished by piercing it, passing a chain through the hole, and wearing it around the head or foot or attaching it to the individual's clothing. See Figure (1)

Amulets made of gold, amber or animal teeth always contain the literal shape such as (Lumula), on the strength of the material from which it is made, and some of them are known about the identity of the wearer and are linked to transitional stages of vital changes, such as the teething stage in children or the period of the beginning of menstruation in girls, and such amulets were often found in graves even though they were intended to protect the living, see Figure (2)

Pliny the Elder said: Pliny the Elder, about the therapeutic and defensive value of gold, saying: Gold has an effective therapeutic value when used as an amulet for the wounded and newborn children in order to reduce the effects of poisonous magic directed at them.

The Romans were keen to protect infants through certain rituals. The gods were invoked to purify the person. The ceremonies began on the ninth day after the birth of a boy and the eighth day after the birth of a girl, after performing other household rituals to protect the infant. The child was then purified through sacrifice and given a Roman name that signified his personality or his membership in the family. The infant was then accepted as a member of society. At that moment, the child wore amulets for their protection.

Crescent-shaped amulets were common amulets used to protect children in the Roman world. They were often made of bronze or silver and worn around the neck, either alone or with other amulets, to harness the power of the moon. See figure (3)

The Romans also used a specific set of amulets associated with teething, an important stage of childhood that occurs in the sixth or seventh month of life. Teething is accompanied by a change in the child's diet and condition, as the infant begins to enter society and begin eating. This stage does not begin until the amulet is worn, and it continues to be worn for up to three years, after the teething process is complete. It was believed that it relieves gum ulcers, lowers fever, and reduces cramps and diarrhea. Amulets made from animal teeth, such as wolf's tooth, mole's tooth, and dolphin's tooth, are considered of great value in this case and should be attached to the body to serve their purpose appropriately.

Precious stones, papyrus and metal were used. Lamellae, for writing magical amulets from the 2nd to the 5th century AD in the Roman Empire, became a thriving business throughout the empire. The use of uninscribed gemstones in amulets dates back to the Old Babylonian era, and was also used by the Egyptians, and continued in later times until the beginning of the Ptolemaic period. The Romans used pure gemstones based on the value of the stones themselves, and after they began to be engraved with names and spells to give the stone the necessary power. Papyrus amulets were composed and used in public life and often bore the name of the person who wore them. At the height of the Roman Empire, small amulets made of beaten gold or silver sheets, called lamellae, were used and engraved with protective spells, most often written in Greek.

The use of tubular amulet capsules for packaging the Phylacteria, magical, were regularly used in the late Roman Empire to protect the dead and the living, and were often colored with wax crayons, showing the sophistication of the artist who made them, as the Aramaic inscription on the outer tube of the amulet shows.

In the same context, amulets were associated with magic during the fifth century AD, as a statue was found in Egypt depicting two people embracing. The statue was made of wax with a folded papyrus containing a spell in Greek. The bundle was found inside a clay pot, and the amulet was related to Theon. Theon, who was trying to ensnare Euphemia, remembered the amulet:

"Seize Euphemia and bring her to me, Theon, to love me with mad desire. Bind her in chains so she cannot free herself from my love, do not allow her to eat, drink, sleep, or laugh, leave her unwilling in every corner of her house so that she will leave her father and mother, her brothers and sisters until she comes to me. Burn her limbs and her liver until she comes to me, to love me, Theon. Let her love and embrace none but me, the holy names here, the powers here, let this spell impose itself and bear fruit now, now, quickly, quickly." See figure (4)

Conclusion

Research Summary:

- The Romans were influenced by the civilizations that preceded them, especially the Egyptian and Greek civilizations, and amulets were an important part of their public life.
- Infant mortality was a problem facing Roman society, so amulets protecting children from birth to adulthood occupied an important part of their traditions.
- The Romans used amulets for protection from disease, treatment, and good luck, in addition to their use in magic, summoning spirits, and communicating with the dead.
- Roman amulets witnessed the presence of amulets containing incantations after they were devoid of them in previous eras.
- The Romans used gold, silver, and precious stones to make amulets.



Shape (1) A Coin Containing the Image of Constantine I.

Source

www.starttime.com



Shape (2) A Bone-Shaped Amulet Used for Teething.



Shape (3) Crescent-Shaped Amulet to Protect Children

Source:

<https://vatican.com/4/Roman-Roman-Amulet>



Shape (4) An Amulet Used for Magical Purposes.

Source:

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