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Islamic Magical Texts vs. Magical Artefacts

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Throughout the medieval Islamic world, people of all classes and all religions (Christian, Jews and Muslims) had frequent recourse to magical therapy, often turning to the preventive and curative power of talismans and amulets. This is evident from written sources and from preserved artefacts of the material culture. The artefacts present us with a different picture of magical practices than that which emerges from the written sources, and it is this apparent dichotomy that I wish to explore briefly here.

Even if we allow that some of the more elaborate designs proposed in treatises might have been employed on very perishable materials, there is, nonetheless, a noticeable discrepancy between text and artefact as preserved today.

First, let us look at the written sources. A typical example of a talismanic design from an Arabic medieval magical manual is shown

in **Fig. 1**.¹ It is taken from one of the magical manuals written by the acknowledged authority on the subject, an Egyptian writer named Abu al-'Abbas Ahmad ibn Yusuf al-Buni, who died in 1225 AD. Note that it is an intricate design that would take considerable space to reproduce and would require notable engraving or calligraphic skill on the part of the amulet maker. The enclosing text states that if it is inscribed, with some additional magical words, on a ring, or on a gemstone set in a ring, and the ring is worn by a woman, then she will get married. If the ring is placed on the forehead of someone who has fainted, they will revive. If the ring is immersed in rain water, the water, when drunk, will relieve all pains. An impression of the inscription on the ring can be used to remove magic spells and cure poisonous bites.

A subgroup of magical treatises were devoted solely to the use of stones

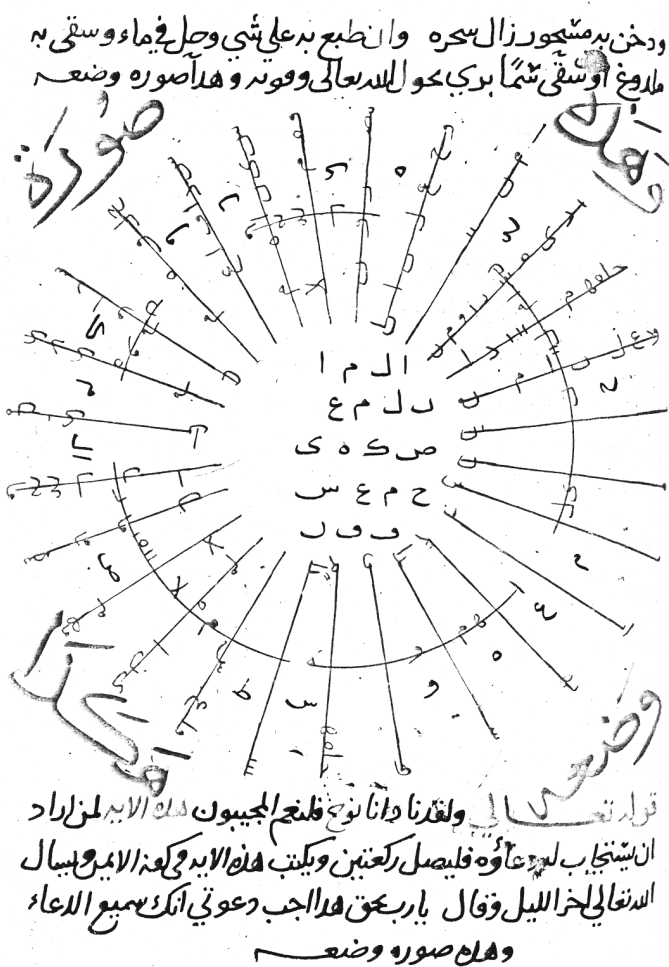


Figure 1

Figure 2

and gems as amulets. Elaborate designs are given in these treatises, and a typical example is shown in **Fig. 2**, taken from a treatise on the occult properties of stones falsely attributed to the 9th-century translator and physician Hunayn ibn Ishaq.² The reader is instructed to engrave the pictorial designs onto the surface of a gemstone set in a ring, with the gemstone usually specified as ruby or another precious stone. Such rings were said to have various powers, such as increasing the pleasure of sexual intercourse, easing childbirth, or warding off leprosy or the plague.

On the face of it, there is a problem trying to engrave these designs on a

small gemstone. Moreover, and very importantly, these recommended designs are not reflected in *any* artefacts known to exist today — neither the abstract designs of al-Buni nor the miniature figures from the stone books. Are we not here encountering a literary tradition, possibly originating in Late Antiquity, that flourished separately from the actual production of amulets?

Various stones were of course used as amulets, some worn simply as pendants and others set in rings. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of small semi-precious or hardstone amulets and amuletic seals in collections around the world, and a considerable number

have been studied and catalogued. Some have amuletic designs such as the common 3x3 magic square, while most have Qur'anic quotations and pious invocations. None, however, have human figures on them, or even the intricate abstract designs given by al-Buni.

The designs in al-Buni's treatises, and those in stone books and other magical design-books, are repeated throughout the subsequent magical literature (with variations, of course), and yet we do not find these elaborate designs on any artefacts recorded today. It is as if they represent a strictly literary tradition. How much actual *use* was made of such magical instruction books is

very difficult to assess, though it is evident that there was much interest in compiling and copying them.

Amulets and magical equipment, on the other hand, sometimes have designs not to be found in any of the medieval written texts that have so far been examined.

1. The most obvious example is that of the fish, which (judging from the artefacts) was a common and apparently early talismanic symbol, curiously lacking in the written texts.

2. A second example is a design that occurs on a number of nearly identical amulets dating from the 10th and 11th centuries, probably made in Iran. An example is illustrated in **Fig. 3**, which shows both sides of such an amulet, along with an enlarged drawing of the distinctive talismanic design.³ This type is made of haematite or other base metal and has a moulded bird on one side, and on the other an engraved animal (a rampant lion or dog) and a scorpion, under a canopy of three stars, surrounded by square frames of indecipherable Arabic-Kufic script. The imagery is probably pre-Islamic

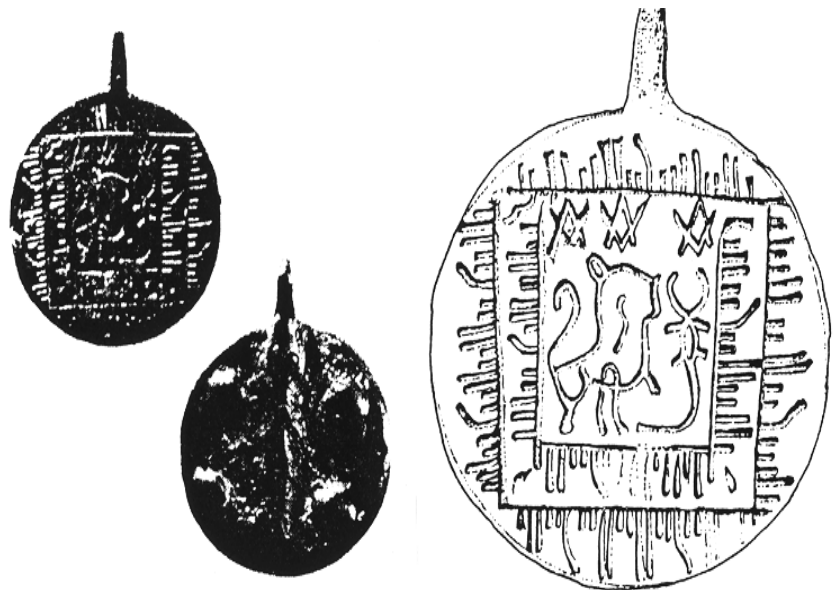


Figure 3

in origin, and it has been suggested that the nexus of Scorpion, Snake, hydrocephalic Dog represents the fear of sudden death. **Fig. 4** shows two other amulets employing the same design, a rectangular one of silver possibly from the 13th century and a small square one of base metal that is probably considerably earlier.⁴ The design is a complex one that nonetheless remains remarkably stable from its first appearance in the tenth century through the 13th century. Yet the design is not an evident part of the magical literature,

there being only one single reference to it so far discovered in written sources, where it is likely to have been simply a rendering of an amulet known to an anonymous 13th-century compiler.⁵ It is not found in the standard 13th-century magical manuals, such as those by al-Buni. Equally curious is the fact that this distinctive amuletic design apparently disappeared completely from the talismanic repertoire after the 13th century. Why such a well-defined design of obvious currency in the early centuries of Islam should suddenly cease to be used is a mystery.

3. Magic shirts, made of cloth and painted with magical symbols and verses from the Qur'an, form an entire category of magical artefact with no counterpart in the written literature. The only ones preserved today are from the 15th century or later and were made in Ottoman Turkey, Safavid Iran, or Mughal India. There was, however, a tradition, traceable to the 9th century, of

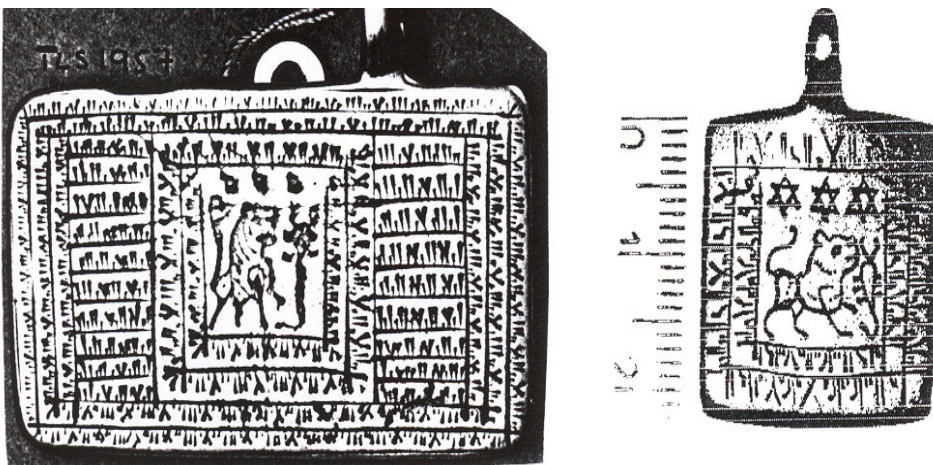


Figure 4

wearing a special shirt for curing fevers or aiding childbirth. It is likely that talismanic shirts were employed for avoiding or curing fevers, and other contagious conditions, and some have suggested, not unreasonably, that they were worn for protection in battle. Nothing written on them, however, details their intended use nor are they described or recommended in the magical manuals.

4. Yet another type of artefact not mentioned in written sources are magic-medicinal bowls. Large numbers of Islamic magic bowls were made, at least since the 12th century, and they continue, in variant forms, to be produced today (or at least until recently). In origin they were probably related in some fashion to pre-Islamic Aramaic bowls, though there are in fact great differences in design and function. The latter are of clay and have spiral in-

scriptions invoking demons, while the Islamic ones are of metal and noticeably lacking in any reliance upon *jinn*s and demons.

Islamic magical-medicinal bowls are distinct among the magical artefacts for a number of reasons: (a) they were not carried or worn by the sufferer (hence not an amulet), (b) they do not function continuously, as a household amulet would; (c) they were employed only when needed, yet they were of a lasting material; and (d) the early examples are far more informative as to their intended use than any other magical artefacts. According to instructions engraved on the earliest examples, the patient was to drink water from the bowl to get the desired result. Sometimes it was said that the afflicted person, or someone acting as an agent for them, was to drink three times from the vessel, occasionally, a specific type of water was specified, such as rain water or saffron water.

In addition to Qur'anic verses and magical writing, the early magic bowls were decorated with schematically, rather crudely-rendered, human and animal forms — scorpion, serpent, horse (or donkey), cross-legged human figure, and dog with a curled tail. A subgroup of Islamic magic-medicinal bowl has been designated by some scholars as 'poison cups', though in fact poisons and animal bites are only some of the many uses that are inscribed on the outside of the dish. These so-called 'poison cups' always have representations of a scorpion, a snake (or serpent), an animal that is probably intended to be a dog, (though some have called it a lion), and two intertwined dragons — imagery reminiscent of the 10th-century haematite amulets mentioned above (**fig. 3**).

On the outside of all the early (12th-14th century) magic-medicinal bowls (both the standard type and so-called 'poison cups') there are engraved statements giving therapeutic uses. These inscriptions present an interesting view of the diseases and afflictions considered particularly prevalent as well as responsive to magic—at least at the time the earliest bowls were designed. Fifty-nine bowls bearing therapeutic instructions have been either published or examined personally, and from these it would appear that there was in the 12th and 13th centuries an overriding concern with scorpion stings and the bites of snakes and mad dogs (mad-dog bites are mentioned 59 times, stings of scorpions 56 times, and bites of snakes 54) – again perhaps simply a nexus of symbols representing sudden death. Regarding ailments, the ones that clearly dominate are

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various gastrointestinal complaints, with the next most frequent use to assist a woman in labour and ease a difficult birth. Headaches of one form or another figure prominently, as well as throbbing pain in general (toothache gets only one mention). Fevers are mentioned on two-thirds of the bowls studied, while the usefulness of the bowls as an antidote to poisons (rather than animal bites and stings) is mentioned 35 out of 59 times.

In later centuries, magic-medicinal bowls became increasingly Islamicized over time, leaving behind the pre-Islamic symbols and eventually evolving into bowls having nothing but Qur'anic verses on them and no instructions for use. Although this type of magical equipment was produced in large numbers over a wide geographical area during more than eight centu-

ries, it was not described or even noted in the magical literature that has been studied.

Conclusion:

By combining the evidence provided by artefacts with that derived from written treatises, a fuller picture of the magical practices in the medieval Islamic world — or any other time period or culture — may begin to emerge. It is difficult to assess the actual use made by talisman makers of the instructions given in the magical treatises. What is evident so far, however, is that virtually none of the artefacts preserved today were actually based on the detailed instructions presented in popular medieval treatises.

Magic bowls and magic shirts are not mentioned in the magical treatises, and, conversely, most of the intricate and complex designs presented in those treatises are not reflected in the preserved artefacts (while one well-defined and complex design on early amulets has almost no parallel in written sources). In yet another way Islamic magical artefacts deviate from texts in that while the pre-Islamic belief in demons and spirits is evident in the magical literature where invocations to *jinn* (shape-shifting spirits) or even *shayṭan* (demons) are occasionally to be found, the artefacts, — to the extent that they have been studied — appear to direct the invocations only to God for protection and cure, with an occasional

mention of angels. They are dominantly supplications to God to aid and protect the bearer, and not invocations to a demon, *jinn*, or lesser God.

Consequently, it would seem that while a magical literary tradition flourished, it may not have impacted upon the production of magical equipment. The makers of amulets and other magical-medical equipment appear to have maintained their own traditions — employing designs unknown (or of no interest) to writers of magical treatises, and at times developing magical equipment of quite new design (talismanic shirts, magic bowls) not to be found in the literature. It would appear that the amulet and talisman makers (as opposed to the magical theorists) maintained a simpler approach to the magical inscriptions and designs, employing a more limited number of designs, and producing a generic product useful for all calamities, while at the same time maintaining a stricter adherence to the Muslim belief that it was only to God to whom one could turn for protection or cure.

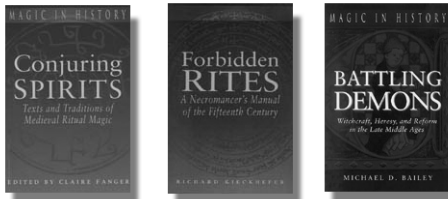
Bibliography:

- Canaan, Tawfik, 'Arabic Magic Bowls', *Journal of the Palestine Oriental Society*, XVI, 1936, pp. 79-127.
- Kalus, Ludvik, *Catalogue of Islamic Seals and Talismans: Ashmolean Museum, Oxford*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987.

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Established at Kalamazoo in 1995 by Richard Kieckhefer, Claire Fanger and Robert Mathiesen, the Societas Magica was created to further communication and exchange among scholars interested in the study of magic during the middle

ages as well as in antiquity and the early modern period. Its range of concerns includes the sociology of magic, magical practices and theories of magic, as well as magical objects, artifacts and texts. For further information and guidelines for membership application see the web page at <http://brindedcow.umd.edu/socmag/>.

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Porter, Venetia. 'Islamic Seals: Magical or Practical?', pp. 135-149 and figs. 8.1-8.13 in *University Lectures in Islamic Studies*, edited Alan Jones, vol. 2, London: World of Islam Trust, 1998.

E. Savage-Smith, 'Magic and Islam', pp. 59-148, in F. Maddison and E. Savage-Smith, *Science, Tools & Magic. Part One: Body and Spirit, Mapping the Universe* [Khalili Coll. Of Islamic Art, 12], London: Azimuth Editions / Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Notes

1 London, The Nasser D. Khalili Collection of Islamic Art, MS 300, fol. 71a; copied in AD 1425 (828 H); see F. Maddison and E. Savage-Smith, *Science, Tools & Magic* (London/Oxford, 1997), vol. 1, pp. 66-69, cat. no. 22)

2 Paris, BnF, MS arabe 2775, fol. 83a; undated copy (16th cent. ?); unpublished.

3 New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Inv. no. 40.170.245, excavated at Nishapur; pendant is 2.38 cm in diameter. Photograph and drawing taken from James Allan, *Nishapur. Metalwork of the*

Early Islamic Period (New York, 1982) p. 69, cat. no. 61.

4 A square base-metal amulet (2.2 x 2.2 cm) in the Sabah Collection, Kuwait (unpublished) and a silver amulet, 4.5 x 2.8 cm in the Nasser D. Khalili Collection of Islamic Art, London, inv. no. TLS 1957; for the latter, see F. Maddison and E. Savage-Smith, *Science, Tools & Magic*, vol. 1, p. 138, cat. no. 80.

5 Paris, BnF MS pers. 174, fol. 35b copied in Iraq about 1273. This single instance cannot be used as evidence for the influence of magical manuals on talisman makers.



The Societas Magica invites proposals for essays to run in future issues of the newsletter.

We are looking for essays of 1500 to 2000 words covering recent research in the history of magic and related topics. Essays may be bibliographic in orientation but need not be. Some of the topics we are considering for future issues include magic in tension or dialogue with other rhetorical and ritual constructs, for example, magic and the law, sorcery trials and accusations, medicine and magic, magic and religion.

We are also looking for smaller pieces for our notes and queries column; news about dissertations in progress or completed, manuscript discoveries or other such items are all welcomed. Proposals for essays, smaller pieces, or notes on all topics of potential interest to members of the Societas Magica will be welcome. Please contact Lea Olsan, olsan@ulm.edu.

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