

**Marcela A. Garcia Probert and Petra Sijpesteijn,**  
*Amulets and Talismans of the Middle East and North  
Africa in Context. Transmission, Efficacy and Collections,*  
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The need for achieving something and protection has always been prevailing in all societies throughout history, whether it is nature, spirits or a higher deity that have been recourse to. Amulets and talismans are put in use as the mediums for this purpose. Even though their definition and use in practice is not clear-cut, amulets are described as some kind of magical object that can be used continuously and by different users for different purposes the person needs. Talismans, on the other hand, are designed for defined needs and purposes and a specific person. They do not display a monotype characteristic in terms of structure, production, use and perception. However, the fact that their functions are perceived as a way to communicate with the supernatural in the hope of getting divine intervention and help for the specific purpose and need they are being used.

Amulets and talismans reflect the socio-cultural and historical background in which they emerged and developed as objects of religious, medical and mystical practices for protection from evil, diseases, etc. *Amulets and Talismans of the Middle East and North Africa in Context*, a collection of articles focused on various aspects of amulets and talisman and edited by Marcela A. Garcia Probert and Petra M. Sijpesteijn aims to examine these historical objects, their use, interpretation, transformation in time, how people perceived them as well as their functions within the framework of a living religion.

The book consists of three parts, which approach amulets and talismans and their study from different aspects and questions, and 11 chapters in total with a commencement of a brief introduction. The introduction sets out its perspective on the topic, the definition of amulet and talisman, their origins,

sources and functions, and lastly, their location and preservation in the study of amulets. As the volume is a collection of case studies on amulets and their study, the introduction gives general and informative background information that a reader who is unrelated to the topic may need throughout the book.

The first part of the book titled “transmission” is composed of 3 chapters. The main inquiry of these articles in this part is how the practices and knowledge related to amulets transferred among cultures and how this transfer made an impact on their form and application in the culture, and the way people understood them. In the first chapter called “*Specimens of Judaeo-Arabic and Arabic Magical Texts from the Cairo Genizah*”, the author puts forward three processes of textual transmission and adaptation in magical texts in Judaeo-Arabic and Arabic based on his research on Cairo Genizah text fragments. The first process refers to copying, editing and translation of older Jewish magical texts written in Hebrew or Aramaic, which were not used in daily life as a whole or partially. On the other hand, it is seen that the texts related to magic from the Arabic culture were in use by the Jews in Arabic and Judeo-Arabic. These texts were read by Jews in Arabic language or with Judeo-Arabic transliteration. This transfer between the two cultures also forms the second process. A much less common process is Arabic-speaking Jews writing new magical texts in Judeo-Arabic. The chapter is significant to see an example of cultural transmission and its effect through magical textual sources. *Chapter 2, A Twentieth-Century Manuscript of the Kitāb al-Mandal al-sulaymānī (ies Ar. 286, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia): Texts on Practices & Texts in Practices*, discusses “*Al-Mandal al-sulaymānī*” which is a book of exorcism of the twelve tribes of jinn who promised to surrender themselves to invocations formed by Solomonic magic. *Al-mandal* refers to incantations and geometric figures used in exorcism. The book also comprises devices of self-protection while dealing with jinns. The author introduces the book and its chapters in addition to comparing differences and similarities in terms of content and form in different manuscripts from Yemen and Ethiopia. The third chapter, *Arabic Medical-Magical Manuscripts: A Living Tradition*, takes *Kitāb al-rahma fī al-ṭibb wa-l-ḥikma* as its subject of study and examines how the use of the text in clinical daily life shaped and changed the manuscript with its each recension, and interacted with social practices. Even though *Rahma* has two authors, al-Ṣanawbarī and Al-Suyūṭī, attributed to it, the author indicates that the books in discussion are two separate works, and Al-Suyūṭī does some informational additions in terms of medical, pharmacological, and magical practices and adds a

magical dimension to his work while citing al-Şanawbarī's work verbatim. The author focuses on the similarities and differences of these two works to examine the connection of texts to each other and use of them. Al-Suyūṭī provides some additional information such as treatments, items of food, topics and production of amulets for medical problems and substances to be used in magical recipes.

The second part of the volume consists of 4 chapters focusing on the efficacy of the amulets and talismans, meaning how they were believed to work and what they did to make it work. In the fourth chapter, *Casting Discord: An Unpublished Spell from the Egyptian National Library*, the author deals with a manuscript created to cause animosity between six people practicing tafrīq, which is prohibited in Islam. For it to take effect, some partial Qur'aic verses related to fighting and disagreement are mentioned including a drawing of a demon whose help is sought to sow discord. As for the function of the text and the practice, it is indicated that this kind of practice is a continuation of a magical tradition that existed in pre-Islamic Egyptian culture. Even though Islam condemns this magical practice, the practice itself and Islamic culture were integrated and co-existed. As the author indicates, we can understand the people's understanding of magic and their endeavour to change their surroundings through magic spells if only we approach this text in its historical context which integrates its pre-Islamic and Islamic culture. The fifth chapter is *"This Blessed Place": The Talismanic Significance of House Inscriptions in Ottoman Cairo*. The main subject of study of this chapter is epigraphs displayed in four houses of Cairo with the purpose of understanding the meaning and function of inscriptions on the walls of houses in Cairo for people who inhabited them. These inscriptions are located in the houses of elites of Cairo and more public parts of the houses such as reception halls in the form of calligraphy. The most common epigraphs used are the *basmala*, the Throne verse and Surah al-Fatiha as well as some invocations to Allah and Prophet Muhammad. Inscriptions also include commemoration of house owners and descriptions of houses as "blessed place", "place of happiness" and "palace". These epigraphs and others had a talismanic function and were used with the intent of sacralising and blessing the place and household in addition to protecting the people from evil and misfortune. While most case studies of the volume focus on textual materials, this chapter offers interesting findings on how people made of their houses with the effect of religion and culture and how they used epigraphs upon their understandings and talismanic functions.

The author of chapter six called “*A Talismanic Scroll: Language, Illumination, and Diagrams*” studies on an Islamic talismanic scroll to demonstrate how the text, Qur’an and decorative figures have been applied together to establish talismanic power to it. The first part of the scroll includes seven sanctuaries mentioning the request of refuge and protection from God, verses of Qur’an, blessings to Prophet Muhammad and some non-Qur’anic passages. The second part of the scroll refers to issues of daily life such as high court culture and military life. There are also parts seeking healing or protection power for medical purposes and evil eye as well as beautifully illustrated segments of weapons, dangers and so on. The author points out that this and other similar scrolls share commonality of language, decoration and function. As for talismanic function, they include specific Qur’anic verses in addition to a combination of verses, visual and textual elements. Gold headings, blue or white background, red and black Qur’anic text in balance along with magic squares are other things that are in common. The scroll in question in the chapter seems to pass into the hands of different owners who made their own addition to the text according to their purposes of use presenting historical and talismanic layers for us to study. The next and seventh chapter of the volume is “*The Material Nature of Block Printed Amulets: What Makes Them Amulets?*”. Although it is not known exactly the time and place in which block print talismans emerged, block prints began to be used in the Islamic textual amulet and talisman tradition in mediaeval times. The author points out some questions about the difference between manuscripts created by this new technology and handwritten ones in terms of content and form, how effective people thought these talismans were compared to handwritten manuscripts, and what the purposes are that drive people to use print talismans, and tries to give a possible direction for further researches. When examined in terms of content, it is seen that there are quotations from the Qur’an and the *asmā’ al-ḥusnā* in both manuscripts and block-printed talismans along with geometric shapes such as magic squares. On the other hand, it has been observed that mystical numbers and letters are not found in block prints which can be found in handwritten manuscripts. Also, the author concludes that the existing detailed decorative elements in block printed talismans must be addressing specific clientele who are cultured and sophisticated while increasing their visual appeal and meeting the specific needs of customers in terms of visuals and content.

The next four chapters of the volume are placed in the part three titled, collecting and collections. The studies in this part focus on repositories like private and public

collections and study amulets in and through them. The chapter 8 called “*Arabic Magical Texts in Original Documents: A Papyrologist Answers Five Questions You Always Wanted to Ask*” answers five questions related to magical text as the title indicates. The questions are related to nature of documentary magical texts, where they can be found, what they look like and contain, and why they are significant for contemporary researchers and readers. “*Amulets and Talismans in the Earliest Works of the Corpus Bunianum*” is the ninth chapter of the volume. Corpus Bunianum refers to the corpus of a well-known author in the field of occult sciences, al-Būnī. In this chapter, the author analyses Corpus Bunianum in terms of its vocabulary and figures in connection to amulets and talismans. Al-Būnī does not use the word amulet or talisman for the practices he mentions in his works even though their content, application and some references to its use direct us to amulets and talismans. Just like other talismanic texts, the beautiful names of God and Qur’anic verses are crucial in Al-Būnī’s works as well as magical squares and the descriptions of the occult properties of letters relative to their protective powers that they are bestowing to their bearers.

Chapter 10, *Twigs in the Tawfik Canaan Collection of Palestinian Amulets*, differs from previous chapters in terms of its subject of study. The author examines twigs from the collection of Tawfik Caanan and explores what these twigs meant for bedouin and townsmen in Palestine to demonstrate the connection between textual and material cultures. Daily culture does not only involve written material but also other kinds of amulets and the author argues that there is a lack of study on these types of amulets. Parts of plants can be used in various ways such as ingesting, hanging on the body and applying in amulets for different purposes. Their holiness and power may result from their own intrinsic features like healing abilities as well as the place they are brought up. The twigs examined in this chapter were made use of to ward off the evil eye by taking attention from the wearer to themselves. When it comes to their efficacy, the belief about trees in the culture plays an important role as twigs are considered effective when the trees they originate from are related to the life of a saint or an important and holy place. The chapter is intriguing for two reasons; it focuses on twigs which are material culture while examining magical tradition and it gives some interesting information related to understanding of people of nature and how it is related to their perception of amulets. The last chapter, *Arabic and Persian Seals and Amulets in the British Museum: Notes on a History*, is related to the collections of amulets and seals in the British Museum consisting of about 800 objects obtained by collectors who were interested in Middle

Eastern culture. The chapter especially focuses on two important collections of Sloane (d.1753) and Blacas (d. 1866) as well as other similar collections and gives insightful presentations and remarks on the nature of the items.

The volume approaches the amulets, talismans and Islamic magical tradition in addition to their studies from different aspects. As it is stated in the book, the volume approaches amulets and talismans from the perspectives of history, philology, anthropology, religious studies and the study of material culture which helps readers to have a holistic view on the topic. The volume also offers a variety in terms of topics and case studies analysed, from cross-cultural transmission to perception of people who created the magical sources and applied their practices; from textual manuscripts to material elements of culture like buildings and twigs. This variety provides readers with a comprehensive understanding of magical tradition, its perception and application in daily life of people who used them and how it is connected to religion, medical tradition, history, and non-scriptural culture. Within this context, it is truly intriguing to see how people shaped their spiritual and mystical spheres of life through amulets and talismans based on verses of the Qur'an, sayings of Prophet Muhammad and cultural background. Also, they seem to still hold an importance for some contemporary Muslims and in practice as protective objects. In this respect, even though it is not directly, the volume also can give us a rough idea about people's perception and practices of amulets and talismans today when we think of them as continuations of a tradition. That said, it would be interesting to see these items in their historical development connecting to today which can be a study topic for further researchers.

When it comes to structure, the chapters are well divided into topics which make it easier to follow. However, some terms such as amulet and talisman are defined in separate chapters which seem to be repetitive and unnecessary as the introduction deals with some definition and general information and could do more to ensure wholeness and flow of chapters between each other. Also, the pictures of manuscripts and other subjects of study as well as necessary translations are provided in the chapters while longer original texts are given in the annex. This arouses interest for researchers who are interested in the topic as well as curious readers. It is seen that the case studies are chosen from many other texts which wait to be unravelled. The volume sheds light on some of these texts and their context which makes it a crucial work in the field and guidance for future studies on amulets and talismans in the area.