Amulets in late Roman Italy

Other

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Version: Poster
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Goals:
1. A study of how amulets were used in a new area (late Roman Italy, i.e. 200-700 CE) that has not been investigated exclusively before, by constructing a database of amulets from this area.
2. Exploring these objects with a particular focus on ‘place,’ from objects used with the living body, those associated with the dead body, and those used on buildings or property.
3. Broadening the definition of ‘amulet’ to include fixed or less portable objects, which reflects Latin and Greek terminology.

What is an amulet? A working definition:
An object is an amulet if it is worn or deposited deliberately in proximity to its desired zone of influence, and is thought to perform any or all of the following three functions:
1. Protection from or aversion of harm, disease, misfortune and/or unspecified bad or evil things (i.e. ‘apotropaicism’).
2. Healing or exorcism or removal of evil from a person or place.
3. Bringing success or good fortune to a person or place.

Methodology - How do we identify an amulet?
The definition above focuses on amulet function, not form, meaning that we cannot automatically identify surviving objects from the period in question based on it. However, many shapes, materials, or inscribed images or words were described as amulets in ancient texts, or found elsewhere in archaeological contexts that suggest amuletic use. If we use this information carefully and cite it clearly, we can build a case for an individual object’s being considered an amulet.

Case study: an agricultural amulet?
Date: 6th–7th century CE.

This stone (detail pictured left) is inscribed with a Greek text (translated below) calling on inventively named angels to increase the harvest in the ‘vinedyard of Peter’:
• It calls itself a φαυλακτήριον (phulaekterion), highlighted on the image, a Greek word commonly translated as ‘amulet’, and implies that the stone had to be close to the area it affected, in this case a vineyard. It was inscribed on both sides, suggesting that it was originally either stood up on its side or that one side was hidden, ‘secret’ writing.
• Titubullus and Virgil (1st-century CE Roman poets) and the 7th–8th century CE compilation known as the Geoponics all mention rituals for purifying and protecting farmland that involved walking around the boundaries of the land.
• This stone might therefore have been one of many sat on a boundary of Peter’s land, or a single example that was carried around it and then deposited.

1. Amulets and the living body:
• What is the evidence for amulets’ interaction with the living body in archaeology and surviving ancient texts?
• Are trends described by other scholars elsewhere in the ancient world relevant in late antique Italy?

2. Amulets and the grave:
• What objects might have been deposited in graves for amuletic purposes?
• Were they used to protect the dead person or protect the world of the living from the dead person?
• Are there any unusual behaviours specific to late antique Italy?

3. Amulets and buildings or property:
• What evidence is there for protective and fortune-bringing objects or decorations in all building contexts?
• Does that automatically make them all amulets?
• What does this mean for ancient concepts of personhood? Might that be distributed between a body and its perceived property?

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Bibliography:
Tarsone, C. A. 2018: The Transformation of Greek Amulets in Roman Imperial Times, Philadelphia.

Image captions and credits:
1. Inscribed silver foil sheet, containing invocations to angels to heal and exercise its own power. Copperas, 6th–7th CE. Now at Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples [photo mine].
6. Drawing made, based on part of photo in Manganaro (1994) fig. 7 and readings in Manganaro (1994) and Bevilacqua/Giammò (2000).