Amulets in late Roman Italy

Other

How to cite:

For guidance on citations see FAQs.

https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/

Version: Poster

oro.open.ac.uk
Amulets in late Roman Italy

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.

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.

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.

What evidence is there for protective and fortune-calling objects in late antique Italy?

Bibliography:
Fassone, C. A. 2018. The Transformation of Greek Amulets in Roman Imperial Times, Philadelphi.
Image captions and credits:
1. Inscribed silver foil sheet, containing invocations to angels to heal and exorcise its owner’s headaches. Casas, 6-7 th Ce. Now at Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples [photo mine].
2. Cylindrical case originally contained otus amulet. Casas, 6-7 th Ce. Now at Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples [photo mine].
6. Drawing from, based on part of photo in Manganaro (1994) fig. 7 and readings in Manganaro (1994) and Bevilacqua/Giannobile (2000).

Barbara Roberts (The Baron Thyssen Centre for the Study of Ancient Material Religion, The Open University)

Supervisors: Dr Jessica Hughes; Dr Emma-Jayne Graham

Email/Twitter: barbara.roberts@open.ac.uk; @barbaroberbts

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 vineyard of Peter’.

A) For the harvest, land and holdings, an angel of God, o Kramamilla Phinad Louiel Amegoth Krefiel Phaktoel Anemoul Mou Maokathal looxhanda Eeisdamrel, as for you, Jesus Christ, give the harvest and the tribute from the vineyard from fruit, wheat and oil and of Peter, where there lies the amulet [...] created Michael, Gabriel, Uriel, Raphael, to the Mischotos, the powerful, give favour to the harvest from fruit and grain and wine and oil...

B) …the olive grove, the vineyard of Peter, multiply, multiply, now Lord Jesus Christ, yes Amen.

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 protection or aversion of harm, disease or/and unspecified bad or evil things?
• 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-calling 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?