

Empire and After

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The Transformation of Greek Amulets in Roman Imperial Times

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Introduction

The Roman Empire, especially in the eastern half of the Mediterranean basin, was marked by an explosion of images and texts in a variety of media—metal, papyri, mosaics, gemstones—all designed to protect, heal, or grant some abstract benefit to the persons who wore them on their bodies or placed them in their homes. By much older scholarly accounts, this proliferation of readily identifiable amulets could best be explained by a sudden need for magic or by a precipitous rise in superstition or anxiety in this period, connected perhaps with the “internal breakdown of Greek rationalism,” the “infection” from or “invasion” of peoples from the east bringing their “ridiculous superstitions,” or the festering of a “rotting refuse heap” of pagan religions.¹ Such tendentious statements have, of course, disappeared nowadays, but their influence lingers, as in the overrepresentation of Egyptian designs in museum corpora of the “magical” gems; the overemphasis on prejudicial literary sources that depict Egyptian, Syrian, or Jewish magicians traveling throughout the empire peddling their wares; or the designation of some amulets as a “Greco-Egyptian” phenomenon—that is, produced at a time when and in an outlandish place where the Greeks were no longer truly Greek.² I will argue that these amulets were not invented in this period as a result of any alteration in the *Zeitgeist* or a tidal wave of “oriental” influence. Rather, they become visible in the archaeological record due to a number of technical innovations and transformations, the most important being the increased epigraphic habit of the imperial period,³ the miniaturization of traditional domestic amulets like the triple-faced Hecate, or the utilization of newly crafted iconography, such as scenes of “gods in action” battling dangerous foes or outright inventions like Sarapis, a god created by the Macedonian king of Egypt. To put it another way, it is only when explicitly protective or curative texts or “weird” images unfamiliar to the classical Greek canon are added to Greek ornaments or doorways that modern observers realize that these objects were thought to have the power to protect or heal. The real



Figure 0.1 Thunderstone from Ephesus engraved with the Pantheos and magical names surrounded by an *ouroboros* (Royal Ontario Museum); drawing after Iliffe (1931).

question, then, is not why we are able to identify so many amulets in the Roman imperial period, but rather why we fail to find them in the preceding centuries.⁴

We can illustrate the problem clearly in the case of the so-called thunderstones: stone axe heads originally created and used as tools in Neolithic times,⁵ that sometimes appear in much later archaeological sites or graves because they were thought to have some special power to protect buildings and people from lightning and fire.⁶ Our clearest literary evidence for the Greek practice, however, is very late: Timotheus of Gaza, a fifth-century CE Greek author, tells us: “You will have an amulet against a thunder blast, if you inscribe a thunderstone with the letters *aphia aphrux* and keep it in your house.”⁷ In the Roman period at least a dozen of these axe heads were engraved with Greek letters, symbols, or images and were used as amulets, the larger ones presumably for homes and the smaller for the body. For example, a thunderstone said to come from Ephesus⁸ was incised in Roman times with the kinds of designs that appear frequently on the amulets discussed in this volume (Figure 0.1): an image of the Egyptian “pantheistic deity” (discussed in Section 5.5) and magical names, all encircled by a serpent eating its own tail, a device that the Greeks called *ouroboros* (“tail devourer”).⁹ Another large thunderstone from Argos (Figure 0.2) was engraved with two different scenes of “gods in action.”¹⁰ The bottom half depicts a gigantomachy, in which a goddess



Figure 0.2 Thunderstone from Argos engraved with a gigantomachy below and a scene of Mithras and the bull surrounded by magical names; drawing after Cook (1925) fig. 390.

(perhaps Athena) is about to stab a tiny snake-footed “giant” with her spear,¹¹ and the upper register shows a simplified version of the well-known Mithraic icon: the god kneels on the back of the bull and stabs it, while three animals surround it from below.¹² And in Roman Pergamum, an enterprising artisan even sliced thunderstones lengthwise—presumably to increase his profit—and inscribed their faces with text and symbols typically found on amulets (Figure 0.3).¹³ Archaeologists can, moreover, surmise that smaller prehistoric axe heads have been reused as amulets, when they are discovered in graves on the neck or chest of the deceased or have been perforated for suspension.¹⁴ In fact, scores of such repurposed axe heads have turned up in graves from the Bronze Age to the Byzantine,¹⁵ of which only thirteen, by my count, were incised with text or images. These engraved versions all date to the Roman period, use the Greek alphabet, and with one exception, probably come from eastern Greece.¹⁶ Thus it seems that only the

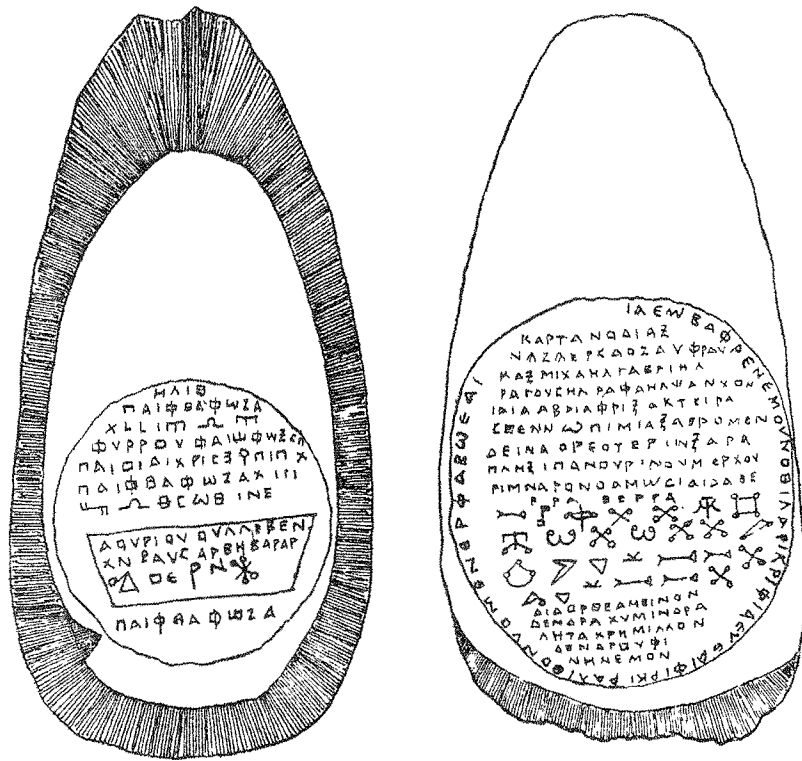


Figure 0.3 Vertical slices of a thunderstone from Pergamum inscribed with magical names and symbols; drawing after Cook (1925) fig. 392.

Greeks in the eastern Mediterranean and only in imperial or late antique times felt compelled to enhance the apparently inherent protective power of these axe heads by adding texts, images, and symbols. Indeed, there are not to my knowledge any extant examples of such thunderstones from Roman times inscribed with Latin, Aramaic, or demotic Egyptian.¹⁷ This pattern cannot be explained by some newly arrived superstition or anxiety, but rather by two important and specific changes in the Greek development of this tradition: (i) the rise in epigraphic habit of the eastern Roman Empire, which encouraged the inscription of incantations or prayers that had previously been recited over the stones; and (ii) the adaptation and miniaturization of powerful images—like Pantheos, the gigantomachy, or Mithras stabbing the bull.

Our failure to recognize these earlier Greek amulets also stems to some degree from a number of scholarly prejudices or practices. First and foremost, perhaps, is the insistence—overt or not—upon the exceptionality of the classical Greeks in comparison to so many of their neighbors, for example, the Egyptians, the Assyrians, the Phoenicians, and the Etruscans, all of whom made extensive use of amulets.

We shall see that the Greeks were already using amulets in Periclean Athens, some of which had indeed been borrowed from the east,¹⁸ as well as others that were home grown. A second problem is the overabundance of Roman-period data from Upper Egypt and the scholarly habit of extrapolating from these data wider conclusions about the use of magic and the activities of professional magicians operating elsewhere in the empire. As we shall see, this overemphasis on the Egyptian contribution simply reifies older ideas and theories about the “oriental” origins and inherent strangeness of Greek amulets in the Roman period, and it allows scholars to ignore a number of other equally important kinds of evidence, at least in the case of amulets, for a more balanced understanding of a wider range of agents—such as jewelers, gem cutters, root cutters, homeowners, and even grandmothers—who created amulets and who passed along traditional recipes both orally and in written form. Finally, there is the wider prejudice that amulets are by definition “magic,” when in fact they perfectly straddle the outdated divide between “magic” and “religion” by including both “magical” images (i.e., *apotropaia*) and texts (i.e., incantations) that aim at automatically driving away diseases and other evils, and “religious” images (i.e., of the gods) and texts (i.e., acclamations or prayers) to invoke or otherwise encourage the presence of beneficial and superhuman helpers to protect, rescue, or heal the person who wears the amulet.¹⁹ In this volume, I follow current scholarly practice in using the adjective “magical” in an extremely limited way to describe types of evidence—for example, “magical names” or “magical gems” in places where one might just as easily have used the adjective “nonsense” to describe such texts or “weird” to describe such gems.

0.1 Scope

Before we begin, it will be good to parse the title of this volume in order to further establish its parameters. “Amulets” refers to any object—plant, animal, or mineral; natural or manmade, image or text—that the Greeks placed on their bodies, domestic animals, homes, ships, vineyards, or cities in the hope of protecting themselves, of curing some illness, or of gaining some benefit, usually understood in the abstract—for example, charisma, prosperity, or victory.²⁰ Body amulets used in healing were popular in all periods, and we can trace their importance through a series of passages that reveal both incantations and/or amulets as essential parts of traditional Greek medicine. The poet of the *Odyssey*, for example, tells us that Odysseus’ cousins know how to bind a serious wound with a bandage and to stop the bleeding with an incantation (*epoidê*), suggesting that both were part of the folk knowledge of Greek hunters, not that of professional

healers.²¹ And in the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*, the disguised goddess, when angling for a job as a wet nurse in a royal house, claims to know “antidotes”—presumably amulets or incantations—effective in keeping disease, demons, or witchcraft away from a newborn child.²² In the late archaic period, Pindar describes in some detail how Asclepius, while still a mortal doctor, healed his patients: “And whosoever came to him afflicted by natural illnesses, or their limbs injured by grey bronze or stones far-flung, or with their bodies ravaged by summer’s fever or winter’s chill, these he frees from the bonds of every sort of pain, tending some with gentle incantations (*epôidai*), giving others soothing herbs to drink or tying on (*periptôn*) herbs to their limbs from every side, and still others he cures by incisions.”²³ Here Pindar neatly summarizes the various curative techniques of his day,²⁴ and in this medical kit we find four procedures: incantations, medicines, amulets, and surgery.²⁵ Pindar, moreover, and all the authors who follow him use the same vocabulary to describe these amulets and incantations. For the former, they regularly use the Greek verb “to tie on” (*periptein*) or the nouns related to it, literally the “things tied on” or “amulets” (*periammata* and *peripta*),²⁶ and for the latter, they employ the verb “to incant” or “chant over” (*epaidein*) or the nouns for “incantations” cognate to it (*epôidai* and *epaismata*).²⁷

In Plato’s *Charmides*, Socrates even combines an amulet and oral charm in a single cure when he describes a remedy for headache that he learned from a Thracian healer: “[The remedy] was a leaf, and an incantation (*epôidê*) was (i.e., sung) over it, and if one sang the incantation and at the same time made use of the leaf, the cure would make the patient healthy in every way, but without the incantation, there was no profit from the leaf.”²⁸ In yet another passage, Socrates gives us a list of curative techniques similar to Pindar’s: until a man learns to behave well, he says, “neither medicines, nor cautery, nor surgery, nor incantations (*epôidai*), nor amulets (*peripta*) will help him.”²⁹ Here we perhaps see the first, albeit subtle, steps taken in the world of philosophy to isolate what we moderns might call “medical” techniques (the first three on the list: drugs, cautery, and surgery) from the remaining “magical” ones (incantations and amulets). The pairing of incantations and amulets indeed becomes in later texts the standard way to summarize “irrational” nonmedical procedures in order to criticize them. The Greek historian Polybius writing in the second century BCE, for example, mentions them both in a metaphor he uses to explain why in times of war, previously sensible men make bad decisions: they are like sick people, he says, who, when the usual medical procedures fail to work, turn instead to an incantation (*epôidê*) or an amulet (*periamma*).³⁰

This binary way of summarizing undesirable healing practices, often as a prelude for banning them, persists throughout later antiquity.³¹ Julius Africanus, for example, an author who lived in the third century CE, is criticized for having

“treated bites from asps and the clouding of the eyes, not with recognized drugs (*pharmaka*), but rather with amulets (*peripta*) and incantations (*epaismata*),” and indeed Augustine, Caesarius of Arles, and Gregory of Tours all complain that their parishioners in North Africa and Gaul were using the same.³² And when Gregory Nazianzus says that Christians had “no need of amulets (*periammata*) or incantations (*epaismata*),” his tenth-century commentator Basilus helpfully explains both terms in great detail:³³

Amulets: the bits of colored thread round wrists, arms, and necks; and moon-shaped plates of gold, silver or cheaper material, which foolish old women fasten upon infants.

Incantations: chants sung over children by the same old women, muttering to avert evil, at the same time licking the babes’ foreheads with their tongues, spitting and blowing to each side.

If we read only the philosophers and the bishops, we might indeed be convinced that by the Hellenistic period, the Greeks had completely dismissed both amulets and incantations as nonsense, but when Basilus twice mentions “old women” as the agents and children’s bodies as the sites of these practices, we can see instead that the use of these allegedly “irrational” practices was still deeply embedded in family life despite the repeated calumnies of some elite males.

It is important to stress, finally, that outright criticism of amulets seems to have been a late phenomenon. Pre-Hellenistic Greek authors who are hostile to other popular forms of healing do not attack the use of amulets, although we might have expected them to so. The Hippocratic *On the Sacred Disease*, for example, a fifth-century BCE diatribe against rival treatments of epilepsy and other spasmodic diseases, criticizes fumigations, purifications, and incantations, but makes no mention of amulets, presumably because in this early period, amulets were not yet used to cure these dramatic types of ailments or because the makers of amulets were not yet perceived by the Hippocratics as serious competitors in the marketplace of cures. And in the fourth century, Theophrastus in his satirical sketch “The Superstitious Man” mentions purifications, omens, and other forms of ritual behavior, but neither incantations nor amulets.³⁴ About four hundred years later, however, Plutarch in his own treatise *On Superstition* does say in passing that when a superstitious man was faced with personal illness, financial or political setbacks, or the death of children, he would allow “old women, as Bion says, to bring whatever they happened to find and tie it on (the verb is again *periptein*), as if he were a peg.”³⁵ This series of passages, then, ranging from Pindar to the Christian apologists, suggests that from at least the late archaic period onward, the Greeks used

two important and sometimes interconnected modes of healing: charms sung over the body or amulets tied on to it.

The second word in the title of this volume—the adjective *Greek*—refers to the common language and culture that begins to flourish in the seventh century BCE in mainland Greece and the Aegean littoral and eventually spreads by trade and colonization to the coastal areas of the Black Sea, Cyprus, Libya, southern Italy, Sicily, and even the mouth of the Rhone River and beyond. By the time these peoples were conquered by the Romans, Greek was the dominant language and culture throughout the eastern Mediterranean basin and even further east, thanks largely to the conquests of Alexander the Great. This now vast Greek-speaking area was, of course, still populated by non-Greek peoples—for example, Egyptians, Syrians, Jews, Lycians, Lydians, Carthaginians, and others, many of whom naturally held onto their native languages and traditions—but as a result of unprecedented mobility and the vast growth of émigré populations in the major cities in the east, Greek language and culture were adopted by many, at least those living in urban centers.³⁶

It is not at all surprising, therefore, that in the late Hellenistic and Roman periods, the Greek language became the most important vehicle for the production of textual amulets and for the collection and transmission of recipes for many other types of amulets—even in Egypt and Italy.³⁷ The importance of the Greek language is illustrated by the fact that the extant amulets in the Roman period are only rarely inscribed with any of the other important languages of the empire—for example, Latin, Aramaic, demotic Egyptian, or Punic.³⁸ On rare bilingual amulets, moreover, although the name of the patient and goal of the amulet are occasionally expressed in the local tongue, the names of powerful gods and other forces are preserved in the original Greek, presumably copied from a Greek handbook.³⁹ It is also notable that, although in the imperial period isolated verses of Homer are repeatedly quoted in Greek as protective incantations or inscribed on amulets, only a single Latin verse of Vergil seems to have been used in this capacity.⁴⁰ Finally, many of the common features of amulets—like the use of the seven vowels or palindromes—are of Greek origin, and even the outlandish symbols (*charaktères*), once thought to have evolved from Egyptian hieroglyphs, are now recognized primarily as distorted letters of the Greek alphabet.⁴¹

As mentioned earlier, the Greeks clearly do borrow a number of curative speech acts and amulets from the east, some of them quite early on, but not solely, as it is sometimes assumed, in Roman times and not solely from the Egyptians and the Jews. This prehistory was not, in fact, unknown to the Greeks. Pliny the Elder, for example, depending heavily, as usual, on Hellenistic Greek sources, complains at length how the Persians invented and spread magic to the Greek world as early as the classical period.⁴² His allegations are for the most part greatly

exaggerated, but as we shall see, he does seem to have access to some genuine Persian lore about stones and amulets, lore that in turn originates much earlier in Mesopotamia.⁴³ It is notable, however, that he makes no mention of any Egyptian role in either the invention of magic or its transmittal to the Greeks.⁴⁴ A few generations later, however, Greek and Roman literary authors create a stereotype of the itinerant Egyptian magician or necromancer, whose appearance coincides with the sporadic appearances of Egyptian motifs on Greek curses in contemporary Athens, Carthage, and Rome.⁴⁵ And finally, in late antiquity, primarily Christian authors complain about the Jews as the foremost experts in magical healing, especially in exorcism, which in its classic form of adjuration does indeed seem to have been the invention of Hellenized Jews living in the eastern empire.⁴⁶ In successive waves, then, Greek and Roman authors living in the empire have complained about the Persians, the Egyptians, and the Jews as the sources and agents of contemporary magic, and in each case these claims are greatly exaggerated or even mendacious, but they do contain kernels of truth.

In the past scholars overemphasized the degree of Egyptian influence, in large part because they gave far too much weight to the so-called Theban Magical Library,⁴⁷ a hoard of papyri rolls and codices from Upper Egypt thought to be the working handbooks of native Egyptian priests struggling in late antiquity to reconfigure their priestly and scribal selves as itinerant specialists who repackage traditional Egyptian magic for Greek and Roman consumption and who, through the process of stereotype appropriation, even assume the stereotyped roles found in Greek novels and satires.⁴⁸ This remains, perhaps, a persuasive hypothesis for the limited area of late antique Upper Egypt,⁴⁹ but the idea that these Theban handbooks primarily aim to present arcane Egyptian rites to foreigners living in Egypt can no longer be substantiated by the evidence of the recipes⁵⁰ or the amulets themselves.⁵¹ This is especially true for the amulets, in part because there is very little overlap in content between the recipes in the Theban handbooks and the inscribed amulets from other parts of the Mediterranean world, and in part because the literary accounts of itinerant magicians do not describe them making amulets or singing curative incantations, but rather performing elaborate erotic curses or divination spells. The extent of Jewish influence on Greek magic has been similarly overstated.⁵² The frequent use of the names and epithets of Yahweh (*Iaô* in Greek) and the angels is no longer understood as evidence of strong Jewish influence and authorship, and it now seems clear that many of the late antique and medieval recipes and amulets written in Aramaic and Hebrew actually derive from Greek handbooks and tradition, rather than the other way around.⁵³ Scholars, in short, no longer support the older view that Greek magic was deeply influenced by Jewish or Egyptian (i.e., “oriental”) practices, but in fact they now see significant Greek influence on magical practices in the east. The widespread use of the

exorcism formula is, of course, a special case, which as we shall see in Section 9.1, first appears in literary texts of the first two centuries CE, which report the exorcisms performed by Jews in Ephesus or “a Syrian from Palestine.” The earliest extant exorcistic amulet is, however, inscribed in Greek, not Aramaic or Hebrew, and was found in Beirut.⁵⁴

In the specific case of amulets, Campbell Bonner, in an influential formulation, argued that prior to the establishment of the Roman Empire there existed a number of “national traditions,” about three of which we are well informed: Greek, Egyptian, and Jewish. He argued, however, that in the early empire, an international tradition of manufacturing amulets developed that freely chose from and often comingled these national traditions for clients of various ethnicities and religions, a process helped by the growing use of Greek handbooks and the appearance of itinerant scribes and magicians.⁵⁵ Bonner’s model has been a productive heuristic tool and will remain so, but it has two serious drawbacks. First, he based his understanding of this international style on two ancient sources that greatly exaggerate the Egyptian elements: the late antique handbooks from the Theban Library discussed above and the modern category of magical gems that includes as its third feature “weird” images, mainly drawn from Egypt (more on this later). Second, Bonner generally ignored or downplayed the fact that the eastern Mediterranean was a place where such national traditions had been colliding and adapting for centuries prior to the arrival of the Romans—first in the Bronze Age, then again in the so-called orientalizing period and even in the classical period. Some Mesopotamian and Egyptian amulets were already being used by the Phoenicians or the Greeks long before Alexander conquered the east, and even more was accomplished under the Ptolemies.⁵⁶

But how, then, do we describe this complicated repertoire of magical amulets produced according to Greek handbooks and inscribed with Greek texts? Indeed, if we decide to call (and many have done so) the Theban handbooks and most of the Greek magical papyri and gemstones “Greco-Egyptian,” then we should probably label the large number of Greek curse tablets from Carthage “Greco-Punic” and those from Rome “Greco-Italic” and even describe the rite of exorcism as “Greco-Jewish.” Such an approach could lead and in fact has led to some excellent fine-grained studies of epichoric ritual activity in which local geography trumps the common language and idiom.⁵⁷ In this study, however, I seek to describe and trace the transformation of the common element in all of these hyphenated categories: the common “Greek” practice shared by all of the subgroups. The word *Greek* in my title is, then, a useful heuristic, albeit not always geographically or culturally accurate, category for discussing most of the amulets used in the eastern Mediterranean from at least the Hellenistic period down to the end of late antiquity.⁵⁸ It is offered here as a corrective to past studies that have, as I stressed

above, been overly reliant on prejudicial Greek and Roman literary sources and the idiosyncratic papyrus handbooks from Upper Egypt. The last four words in the title of this volume—“in Roman Imperial Times”—are far less controversial: they mark this volume as a historical study of the transformations that occur during first three centuries of the common era. As a consequence the word *Roman*, when used in this volume, almost always refers to a time period rather than to a people or culture.⁵⁹

This study is divided into three main sections. The first, “Archaeology,” provides an eclectic survey from the late archaic period onward of the social range, materials, and shapes of traditional Greek amulets, in order to provide a baseline of amulet use in the eastern Mediterranean prior to the establishment of the Roman Empire, although I do draw additional examples from later periods and from the west in order to flesh out our picture of amulets that appear much earlier in the Greek world. In this first section I take special care to discuss artifacts from the entire Greek-speaking world, rather than to let the Athenian evidence dominate the discussion, as is too often the case. In Chapter 1 (“Distribution”), we will examine vase paintings from classical Athens and terracotta votives from Cyprus, southern Italy, and elsewhere for images of the traditional amulets worn by ancient Greek children and women. Chapter 2 (“Shapes”) surveys the use of Greek amulets, in many cases items, like the Gorgon’s head, the crescent moon, or the phallus, that are widely recognized by scholars as amulets and that have forebears in the ancient Near East and Egypt. And in Chapter 3 (“Media”) we turn to the various metals, stones, and other durable materials from which the Greeks in pre-Roman times manufactured amulets, such as gold, tin, hematite, red coral, and amber. We will also see how various handbooks, recipes, and literary sources can alert us to an enormous number of perishable materials, such as cloth or leather containers, a variety of botanical amulets—especially roots and leaves—and soft-tissue parts of animals as well, for example, eyes, tongues, hearts, and skins.

As mentioned earlier, one of the most important transformations of amulets in the Roman world is the addition of new images and text to previously unengraved and uninscribed objects. In the second section of the book, “Images,” we examine how the Greeks beginning in the Hellenistic period greatly enhance the repertoire of their amuletic images—mainly those of gods and heroes—that were thought to protect or heal. Chapter 4 (“Action Figures”) focuses on the use of two-figured scenes in which powerful individuals triumph over dangerous animals or demons, such as Heracles strangling the lion or an equestrian hero stabbing a female demon. Such images provide a persuasive model for the desired cures: the suffocation of painful colic or the demise of a child-stealing demon. In Chapter 5 (“Domestic Guardians”), we turn to a series of pre-Roman protective statuettes from three different cultures—the Greek herm, Roman Mercury, and Egyptian

Pantheos—and show how at least as early as the Hellenistic period such domestic images continue to protect and prosper houses, but are now also used in reduced size as body amulets, in the form either of miniature statues or of intaglios carved into the flat surfaces of semiprecious gems. And in Chapter 6 (“Pharaonic and Ptolemaic Gods”), I argue against the traditional fashion of talking generally about “Egypt” as the source and place of manufacture for Roman-period amulets and stress instead the crucial difference between “Pharaonic” (that is, pre-Hellenistic) images, often depicted in stiff poses with animal heads, which in the Roman period are usually not popular on amulets outside of Egypt, and newly invented “Ptolemaic” or “Hellenistic” ones, such as Sarapis, Isis-Fortuna, and even Aphrodite Anadyomene.

The third and last section, “Texts,” examines how speech acts performed orally in pre-Roman times to protect, heal, or gain abstract gifts are first inscribed on papyri and metal in the Roman period. We begin in Chapter 7 (“Prayers”) with the use of vowels, divine names, acclamations, and prayers to invoke the presence of superhuman helpers, and we then go on to see how a traditional prayer to the Samothracian gods for safe passage through storms at sea is in Roman times inscribed onto amulets used to ward off hail from vineyards and (by analogy) to avert a variety of cloudy or windy ailments from mortal bodies, for example, ophthalmia or headache. In Chapter 8 (“Incantations”), I discuss the evidence from pre-Roman Israel and Greece for famous singers, like David, Orpheus, or Empedocles, who were thought to sing incantations directly against demons and/or diseases. I then discuss a handful of early Greek experiments in inscribing lead and gold amulets and close the chapter by tracing the development of two popular types of Greek incantations from speech act to inscribed amulet: hexametrical verses that compel predatory animals and diseases to depart and iambic charms that stop the forward motion of venomous animals as well as the pathological flow of liquids like bile or rheum. This final section of the volume ends with Chapter 9 (“Framing Speech Acts”), which discusses two other important innovations of the Roman period: the use of elaborate framing devices to embed formerly simple prayers and incantations in complicated hierarchies or divine histories. The first is a relatively new and widespread phenomenon called exorcism, in which a demon is driven out of a host body by fumigations or verbal threats. The second is the far less popular adaptation of short narratives (*historiolae*) of divine miracles or cures, which provide the model for the desired cure for the patient. Like the prayers and incantations, these framing devices were originally oral phenomena, but by the Roman period, Greeks begin to inscribe these as well onto papyrus, metal tablets, and gems.

One important aspect of ancient Greek amulets might have also been treated more extensively in this volume: Malinowski’s famous “coefficient of weirdness,”

which in the case of Greek amulets would refer to the parade of nonsensical words and symbols or strange images that we find on so many Roman-period amulets. These names and images are striking and imaginative and give us real insight into the creativity and worldview of the professional magicians who created and adapted them.⁶⁰ In this study, however, I chose to downplay the nonsensical and the weird in order to stress instead the broad structural similarities between various kinds of amulets and thereby to assess the wider historical changes that occurred during the Roman period in the Greek-speaking eastern Mediterranean. Thus, for example, in the discussion of the transformation of spoken prayer into textual amulet in Chapter 7, we will not concern ourselves with identifying precisely which all-powerful solar god is invoked (Zeus, Helios, Re, Yahweh, Mithras, or some other entity with a long nonsensical name). Often many different names (comprehensible and not) are invoked in the same prayer or exorcism, a practice that suggests that in the Roman period, at least, some believed that such gods were interchangeable or that all nations worshipped the same sun god under different names.⁶¹ We might take as an example a magical recipe for a jasper amulet engraved with the sun and moon and the names Abrasax, Iaô, and Sabaôth and consecrated with the following prayer: “Complete this operation for me so that I may wear this power in every place, in every danger, without being smitten or afflicted. . . . I call upon you as ‘Phno-eai-Iabok’ according to the Egyptians, as ‘Adônai Sabaôth’ according to the Jews, as ‘King of all, ruling alone’ according to the Greeks, and as ‘Ouerto’ according to the Parthians!”⁶² These kinds of equations are not, however, a special feature of “magical” prayers, but typical of the times, as we can see, for example, in a prose hymn composed by the third-century CE writer Menander Rhetor as a model to be imitated by others: “Every city, land and nation do you control . . . as ‘Mithras’ the Persians address you, as ‘Horus’ the Egyptians. . . . The Chaldeans address you as ‘Ruler of the Stars.’”⁶³

We see similar strategies in the case of the lunar goddesses, variously invoked on amulets as Artemis, Selene, Isis, Hecate, Persephone, and Ereshkigal.⁶⁴ The presence on this list of the underworld deities, like the Greek Persephone and Mesopotamian Ereshkigal, might surprise some, but in fact, because in the Egyptian and Mesopotamian systems both solar and lunar deities spend part of each day under the earth, they are also treated as powerful entities of the underworld, in such a way that the usual Greek distinction between the heavenly and chthonian realms is all but effaced and we have the odd situation (for the Greeks, at least) in which solar or lunar gods can be invoked for necromancy.⁶⁵ We find a similar kind of internationalization in the treatment of divine images, whereby the clearly identifiable image of one god can be invoked by the name of another, as seen on a gem engraved on the front with the famous Pheidian image of the seated Zeus at Olympia and on the back with a short prayer: “Yahweh, save me!” or another

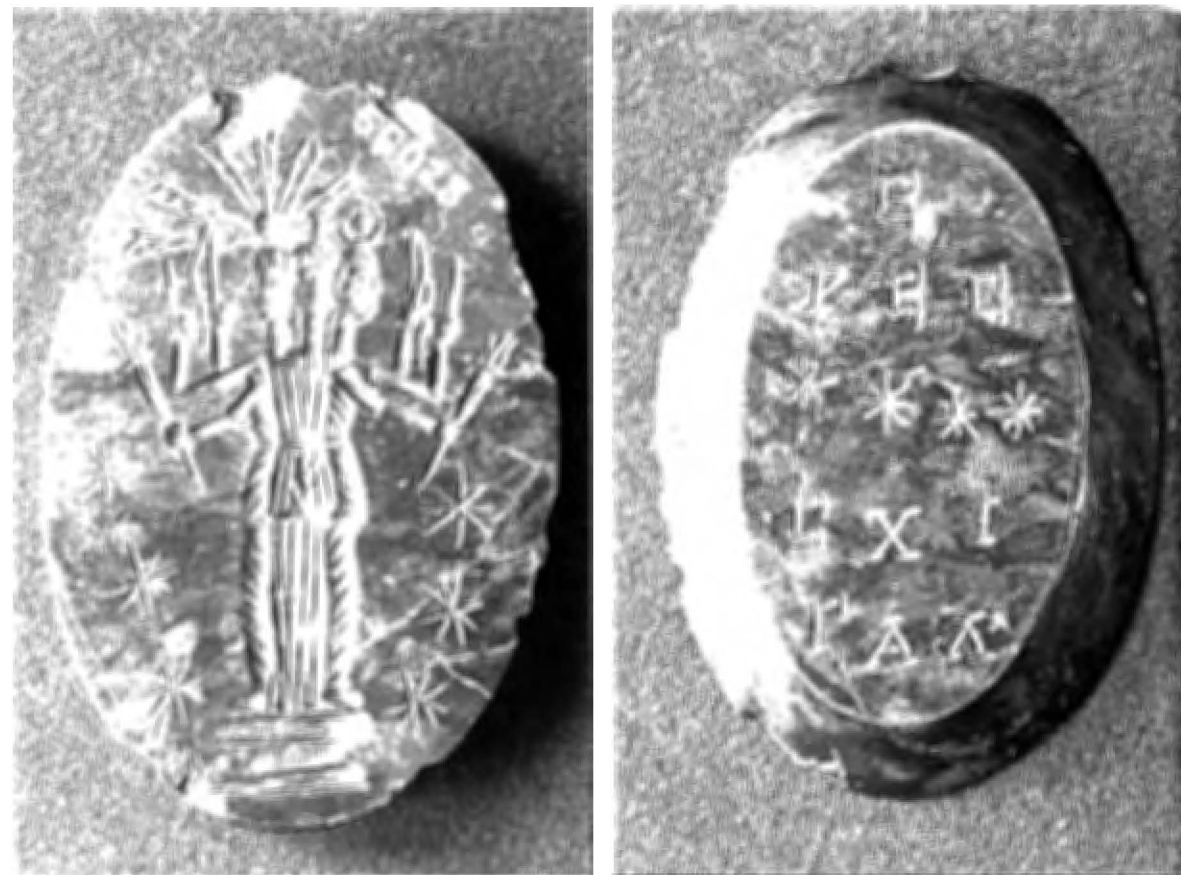


Figure 0.4 Greenish-brown jasper engraved with triple Hecate on the obverse and the name *Ereshkigal* on the reverse (BM 66); author's photographs used with the permission of the Trustees of the British Museum.

with triple-faced Hecate on one side and the name “Ereshkigal” on the other (Figure 0.4).⁶⁶ But we will also encounter completely novel and often hybrid images, the best known perhaps being a rooster-headed, snake-footed individual (Plate 1) whom scholars have named the *anguipede* (lit. “snake-foot”), an image that seems to combine the Egyptian tradition of animal-headed gods who hold flails, the Greek penchant for snake-legged giants, and the Roman cuirass and shield—a shield whose concave interior is inscribed in Greek with the name of Yahweh.⁶⁷ Another example might be the image of the Chnoubis serpent, which combines the radiant head of a lion and the body of a serpent; in Plate 2 it appears on the opposite side of a gem engraved with Asclepius, the Greek god of healing, and his wife Hygeia (“Health”).⁶⁸ The gem cutters do not, however, usually render female deities as hybrid creatures in such manner, although there is a clear tendency on some amulets, as we shall see, to choose the weirdest traditional images

available from the Greek pantheon, such as the previously mentioned triple-headed Hecate (Figure 0.4). But much older images also persist unchanged from each of Bonner’s “national” traditions—for example, the mummiform Osiris from Pharaonic Egypt, Heracles and the Nemean lion from archaic Greece, or Mercury and his money sack from pre-imperial Italy.

0.2 Sources

One challenge to writing such a monograph is the great number and variety of primary sources, which can be divided roughly into two categories. First are the amulets themselves, both uninscribed (for example, crescent moons or animal teeth), and those composed entirely of text (for example, small scrolls of papyrus or metal foil). Second and in some ways more important, because scholars have generally ignored them, are the many recipes for amulets, which tell us why and how they should be made and worn. These recipes date mainly to the late Roman and early Byzantine periods and survive in two forms, directly in the papyrus handbooks found in Egypt or indirectly in other kinds of collections, such as lapidary or medical treatises, or in more erudite encyclopedias, which survive mainly in Greek manuscripts compiled in Byzantine times, but which clearly preserve much earlier material. Pliny, of course, wrote in Latin, but since his chief goal seems to have been to preserve the knowledge of the past collected by earlier Greek authors, his *Natural History* often supplies important details about traditional amulets—mineral, floral, and faunal—known to earlier generations of Greeks.⁶⁹ Other important sources for recipes or descriptions of amulets have already been touched upon: a wide range of ancient social critics, such as philosophers, medical writers, comic poets or satirists, and public officials of varying stripes, including Roman jurists, Talmudic rabbis, and Christian bishops, who beginning in the late classical period sometimes tell us what these amulets looked like and how they were worn. We have already observed the prejudices and limitations of some members of this group as sources for the study of incantations and amulets, and we can likewise anticipate a similar degree of distortion in comic authors, who despite their sarcasm and exaggeration often supply us with the most important and—in the case of Aristophanes—quite early details that corroborate the archaeological and visual evidence.⁷⁰

Each corpus of extant amulets comes with its own distortions or limitations, and scholars who focus solely on a single source run the risk of the blind men in the old story who each take up a single part of an elephant—the trunk, the tusk, or the tail—and end up with widely divergent ideas about the nature of the beast at hand. If we turn, for instance, to the papyrus amulets, which begin to appear

as early as the first century CE in Egypt, we find an emphasis on regional concerns, as seen in the numerous amulets against malarial fever or scorpion sting.⁷¹ But if we, instead, examine only the inscribed metal amulets found all over the eastern Mediterranean (but rarely in Egypt), we might understandably come to the conclusion that fever and scorpions were of little concern amid a much wider array of diseases and dangers, especially demons and sorcery. And the Greeks used gemstones to cure still other complaints, especially gynecological or gastrointestinal ones. In short, none of these sources give us the full picture. Papyri amulets, because they rarely survive outside of Egypt, reveal the fears and concerns of persons inhabiting that distant corner of the Greek-speaking world, and we should not assume them to be typical of amulet production throughout the empire. The metal amulets and the gems, on the other hand, give us a much wider perspective geographically, but a narrower one in terms of economic or social class, because they tend to be inscribed on valuable media, such as gold, silver, or semiprecious stones, and thus probably inform us only about those at the top of the socioeconomic ladder.

The gems are the largest and perhaps the most important corpus of extant amulets from the Roman period, but they are also the most difficult to interpret. They number in the thousands if we take into account those in private collections,⁷² and they attract the most attention, perhaps, because they are sometimes engraved, as we have seen, with strange and startling images (Figure 0.4, Plates 1 and 2). Archaeologists distinguish such “magical gems” from ordinary intaglios by three formal features:⁷³ (i) they are generally engraved on both sides, rather than one; (ii) they are usually inscribed with Greek text that is not retrograde (that is, the gemstone was not used as a signet ring to seal documents); and (iii) they often carry non-standard (that is, weird) Greek words, symbols, or images.⁷⁴ These magical gems, moreover, tend to have flat surfaces and are cut from different and usually opaque media in contrast to the convex translucent gems favored in the earlier periods.⁷⁵ Since the great majority of these gems were either surface finds or purchased on the antiquities market, we almost never know exactly where they were found and in what context.⁷⁶ And when scholars assert that the majority of these gems are “Greco-Egyptian” or that the majority of them were manufactured in Alexandria, they are confusing or combining the categories of “Pharaonic” and “Ptolemaic” (see Chapter 6), and they are ignoring evidence for gem production outside of Egypt, such as a recent study that shows that some hematite “magical gems” were being manufactured in the Levant and in simpler forms that eschew Egyptian additions.⁷⁷ Beginning with Bonner much valuable work has been done, of course, to establish standard types within the corpus—that is, cases where we can see a strong correlation between at least four features: type or color of gem, image, text, and the use to which it was put.⁷⁸ This work is useful, but it is often

complicated by the fact that ancient authors and modern scholars often disagree about or unwittingly confuse the nomenclature for the types of stones and even their colors.⁷⁹

Handbooks and recipes are our second primary source for ancient Greek amulets. They help us in many ways to imagine the full range of amulets used by the Greeks, especially those materials that hardly ever survive antiquity, such as the ephemeral parts of plants or animals, as well as texts and images drawn on less durable media like leather, linen, or even leaves. Despite the late date of their compilation or inscription, many of these handbooks preserve descriptions of amulets and other kinds of information that go back at least to the Hellenistic period, if not earlier. The late antique Greek magical handbooks from Egypt, for example, often collect and replicate amulet recipes from earlier handbooks, whose contours can occasionally be intuited in the surviving materials.⁸⁰ These recipes fall into two categories. First are those designed primarily to protect a solo practitioner while performing potentially dangerous rituals used to summon powerful gods, demons, and ghosts (see Appendix A). Seventeen of the twenty-three examples are found in the Theban handbooks discussed earlier and, not surprisingly, they include the highest concentration of Egyptian features, such as the *udjat*-eye of Horus or the scarab ring, and they do indeed give us a good idea of what Greek amulets may have looked like in a far-off corner of Upper Egypt in late antiquity.⁸¹ The second type of recipe generally shows up in short extracts from handbooks concerned primarily with healing, for example, a contiguous sequence of short curative recipes in *PGM VII*, each introduced by rubrics that specify their use (see Appendix B). Given the uniformity of these rubrics—all are indexed by disease in the same brief fashion (i.e., “For scorpion sting” or “For discharge of the eyes”)—and given the repetition of recipes for the same problem (for example, in the case of cough or migraine), it is probable that this series has been excerpted from an older collection of healing incantations and amulets, which seems to have circulated in different versions.⁸² These ten short recipes are also arranged in a special order that we sometimes find in Greek medical handbooks; they begin with cures for the head and then descend from place to place down the body.⁸³ Series like these give us a helpful glimpse of the range of simple and inexpensive cures someone might use at home to cure scorpion bite, headaches, coughs, or fevers.⁸⁴ Three (nos. 3, 8, and 9) require verbal recitation while performing some kind of ritual with oil or knots, while the remaining seven call for the inscription of Greek letters or symbols on papyrus, parchment, linen, or a leaf. The absence of gold or silver suggests a more modest socioeconomic context, and the divinities invoked clearly reflect the full range of Bonner’s national styles, but without any strong Egyptian presence: Re, Zeus, Abrasax, Sabaôth, and Castor, although the “Castor” here may not, in fact, be one of the Dioscuri. The word appears in a

short incantation (“Castor Thab Thab”) used in a cure “for swollen testicles,” and given the popular ancient beliefs about the beaver (*castor* in Latin) and its testicles,⁸⁵ this recipe may preserve an old Italic prescription, not at all unlike the one preserved in the mid-second-century BCE Latin agricultural handbook of Cato the Elder, who prescribed for a dislocated bone that we manipulate a split reed while chanting *motas uaeta daries dardares astataries dissunapiter* continuously.⁸⁶ One need not, in short, look only to the mysterious east for incomprehensible incantations.

Nearly a dozen other small papyrus fragments of such curative handbooks show the same pattern of rubrics keyed to diseases and the bundling of recipes for the same disease.⁸⁷ We also see recipes for the same disease or the same part of the body in much smaller, nontraditional formularies, such as an ostrakon “handbook” with only two recipes (separated by a horizontal stroke) for curing the poison of a scorpion sting or a small agate sphere that preserves (in a sequence again borrowed from medical treatises) a series of curative magical names or symbols, each designed to heal a different part of the head.⁸⁸ These smaller “handbooks” may have been discrete “chapters” within a larger collection of recipes, for example, a pile of ostraca in a drawer, each inscribed with recipes for a different disease or a bag of spherical stones, each with cures for a different part of the body.⁸⁹ A collection of recipes for protective amulets incised on a copper-alloy plate from Sicily gives us important insight to yet another local tradition heavily dependent on the Jewish tradition about the amulets that Moses wore when he met face to face with Yahweh.⁹⁰ Some papyrus fragments of earlier date and from areas of Egypt closer to the Mediterranean likewise reveal a richer array of patently Greek traditions. For example, a small fragment of a first-century BCE handbook (the so-called Philinna Papyrus) preserves two hexametrical charms, one for headache and the other for some kind of inflammation. Arranged like an anthology of poems, each incantation is introduced with the name of its female author and her home: “Philinna of Thessaly” and “[. . .]a, the Syrian woman from Gadara.”⁹¹ Another important excerpt of a more practical handbook is embedded in Book 18 of a Greek text known as the *Testament of Solomon*; this series of twenty-six recipes seems to have circulated independently, as early as the first century CE, as an independent handbook for curative amulets and incantations.⁹² In addition to treating fevers, chills, and other bodily infirmities,⁹³ this handbook also deals with social or psychological ills, some of which can be remedied by placing amulets or texts on the house door.⁹⁴ We see, however, the same limited range of techniques: of the twenty-six cures, fourteen are written on amulets or house doors, eleven are spoken over the patient—into his ear or over the wine or oil used in the cure—and a single recipe recommends the use of an image.⁹⁵ And again the absence of valuable media like gold for textual supports suggests a lower socioeconomic bracket; there is one tin amulet, four papyrus, and the rest are unspecified.

Equally important sources for amulet recipes are the Greek lapidaries, which first appear in the Hellenistic period and probably draw heavily upon much earlier Egyptian and Mesopotamian sources.⁹⁶ The extant Greek texts usually take the form of encyclopedias: each entry begins with the name of a stone and a description of its physical properties, before finally listing its various uses as a medicine (if ground up) or as an amulet. Pliny is our earliest source for snippets culled from these earlier Greek writers, who range from the third-century BCE writer Sotacus⁹⁷ to Pliny’s contemporary Xenocrates of Ephesus, some of whose fragments are only preserved in later Arabic compilations.⁹⁸ The fragments of the latter are especially important because they confirm the suspicion of many scholars that much of the gem lore reported without citation by Pliny also comes from Greek sources: for example, both Pliny and the later Arabic quotations of Xenocrates give similar accounts of the “eagle stone” that was tied to pregnant women to prevent a premature birth and otherwise to facilitate a timely one.⁹⁹

Contemporary with the Hellenistic author Sotacus, on the other hand, are the equally lost and usually pseudepigraphic works of the “learned magicians” of the east, one, for example, who called himself “Ostanes,” and another who pretended to be the Persian religious leader “Zoroaster” and recommended the power of the eagle stone and other amulets for epilepsy and hemorrhoids.¹⁰⁰ A third author claimed to be the late classical Greek philosopher “Democritus,” and he seems to have been, in fact, an Egyptian priest named Bolus of Mendes, who was educated in Greek and wrote in the first half of the second century BCE.¹⁰¹ Yet another Hellenistic author masqueraded as the last Egyptian pharaoh “Nechepso” and wrote a treatise on curative gems, which Galen quotes in his discussion of a digestive amulet, and a defective copy of which Thessalus of Tralles claims to have studied in Alexandria in the time of Trajan.¹⁰² Pliny also cites two “Chaldaean” authors working in the courts of eastern kings, Sudines, who was perhaps a seer for Attalus I (241–197 BCE), and Zachalias of Babylon, who is said to have lived during the reign of Mithridates IV (120–63 BCE).¹⁰³ Pliny notes with disapproval a book on stones written by this Zachalias, which claimed that jasper was beneficial if worn by litigants or petitioners appearing before a king.¹⁰⁴ He repeats, as well, the claims of the “Magi” that a special kind of “air-colored” jasper was “useful for those who harangue the assembly,” an amulet that also reflects a much older Babylonian tradition.¹⁰⁵ Pliny seems, in fact, to accept the general principle that Magian amulets can cure disease, but criticizes the idea that they can also help their owner persuade judges, kings, and popular assemblies or can protect them from bodily harm in battle.¹⁰⁶

Each of these Hellenistic authors can be traced by name to only a scant handful of fragments, but there is good reason to think that the tradition in which they worked was carried on in the Roman period. When Pliny, for example, reports a

further Magian claim that an amethyst will protect against spells if inscribed with the names of the sun and moon, or that *smaragdus* (a green stone conventionally translated as “emerald”) will provide similar benefits if engraved with an eagle or a scarab beetle, parallels from the Roman world, but not before,¹⁰⁷ suggest that Pliny perhaps encountered these “Magi” not in books, but rather as local magicians (*magi*, not Magi) selling such gems and boasting about their virtues.¹⁰⁸ But the Hellenistic tradition of lapidaries continued as well, in a series Greek and then Latin texts assembled during the late Roman and Byzantine periods. The most important surviving group are closely related and seem to have evolved as follows:¹⁰⁹ (i) the *Orphic Lithica* composed in the first half of the second century CE that takes its information from an earlier source and interlards it with long mythological digressions on the origins of each stone; (ii) the prose *Kerygma*, a Byzantine Greek epitome of the first twenty-five chapters of the *Orphic Lithica*, which jettisons these digressions and adds important new material from earlier sources; and (iii) the continuation of the *Kerygma* (chapters 26–53) by a Greek text attributed to Socrates and Dionysius, which seems, however, to have been penned much earlier in imperial times in the Greek east, perhaps Egypt. This last text is extremely valuable for the study at hand, because it begins with what appears to be a continuous section of entries preserved from an even earlier and more practical handbook (Appendix E). There are fourteen gems in all: eleven carved with images, two inscribed with text, and one that “works well even without any carving.”¹¹⁰ This last comment suggests that the author of this section, at least, expected most amulets to have images. And since elsewhere the extant lapidaries only rarely recommend images for amulets¹¹¹—an important point to which we will return—it appears that these fourteen recipes were excerpted as a group from a different kind of handbook, one that specialized in powerful stones with images and one that was probably arranged by the color and type of stone: greenish stones first, reddish next, followed by generally whitish ones said to be onyx.¹¹² The fourfold repetition of one rubric (“Another onyx”) appears nowhere else in the lapidaries and is, as suggested earlier, a clear marker of a formal handbook.

In this same embedded handbook, we once again see a mixture of Bonner’s “national traditions,” but in this case the images are drawn mainly from the classical Greek repertoire—for example, Poseidon with his trident and a dolphin (no. 1), Artemis with her hound (5), Athena with her helmet (6), and Apollo and Artemis together (8)—gods who are accordingly chosen for their traditional powers or spheres of influence: Poseidon protects at sea, Athena provides victory over enemies, and the presence of the divine twins Apollo and Artemis, themselves the successful product of a difficult birth, ensures the successful birth of the woman wearing the gem. Some Ptolemaic images cluster near the end of the list—they

are almost all in the section on onyx:¹¹³ Isis (no. 1), lion-headed Chnoubis (nos. 7, 10, and 11), a scarab (no. 9), and Aphrodite (no. 12).¹¹⁴ Moreover, the references in this handbook to a reddish “rare stone” worn by the Persian king (no. 3) or the “Babylonian stone” worn by noblemen in the palace (no. 5) may reflect authentic Near Eastern traditions, like those that Pliny and others found in the lost Hellenistic treatises discussed above.¹¹⁵ When compared with the amulet handbook embedded in *PGM VII*, this unique sequence of recipes preserved by Socrates and Dionysius differs in two important ways: (i) only two of the fourteen stones have magical inscriptions, and as a consequence those that depict the Greek gods are to us indistinguishable from many of the gems that our museums treat as mere ornaments or jewelry;¹¹⁶ and (ii) the rubrics in the lapidary refer to media alone and thus would be of little practical use for someone looking for a cure (for example, for headache or fever), but would be helpful perhaps to gem cutters who were collecting or buying materials for amulets.

Medical and pharmaceutical writers, both those who are favorable to the practice and those who are not, provide a third important source for amulet recipes. Some of these authors seem to be reading the same Hellenistic stone books as the lapidary authors. The Greek physician Galen (fl. 2nd century CE), for instance, wrote a treatise on the medical use of minerals in which he mentions that the “foaming-moon stone” is useful for healing epileptics, but says that he has not tried it on any patients, adding that “there are also some other stones that are tied on for such reasons, some that even have certain symbols (*charaktêres*) and letters engraved upon them, just as the falcon-stone is also suitable against hemorrhoids, of which we, too, have made trial.”¹¹⁷ There is little doubt that Galen did test the efficacy of such stone amulets, because a little earlier in the same book, he describes an experiment that convinced him of the power of green jasper in curing digestive problems.¹¹⁸ Galen, in short, consulted earlier Greek treatises that included curative stones, some of which were engraved with images or symbols. He says in a lost work, moreover, that although he originally thought that healing incantations were useless, “like old wives’ tales,” he came to realize that “there was power in them” after he saw that they cured patients stung by a scorpion or with bones stuck in their throat.¹¹⁹ His critical engagement with curative incantations and amulets suggests that he took such techniques seriously and attempted to ferret out the effective from the bogus by experimentation.¹²⁰ Botanical amulets get a similarly mixed reception by ancient pharmacists. Already in the third century BCE Theophrastus disapproves: “What is said about amulets (*periapta*) and in general about aversion charms (*alexipharmaka*) for the body and the house is somewhat foolish and incredible! Thus they say that *tripolion*, according to Hesiod and Musaeus, is useful for every good purpose . . . [and] that the plant called snap-dragon produces fair-fame. . . . The man who anoints himself with this, they say,

wins fair-fame and they say the same result follows, if he crowns himself with the flower of the gold-flower plant.”¹²¹

Despite his negative attitude, Theophrastus provides us here and elsewhere with important details about popular plant amulets and incantations, much of it gathered from interviews with contemporary “root cutters” and “drug sellers.”¹²² His report that some lost poems attributed to Hesiod and Musaeus recommended the use of plants as amulets, suggests a much older Greek tradition that is also hinted at in the Homeric episode in which Hermes gives Odysseus a plant called *môly* to protect him from Circe’s witchcraft.¹²³ Two first-century CE writers, Dioscorides and Pliny, preserve additional information. It has been pointed out how both writers often distance themselves from these botanical amulets by saying, for example, “some people say” or “it is reported,” but it is not stressed enough that such expressions also reveal that these recipes were probably traditional in their own day and thus predate the Roman period.¹²⁴ And when Galen, on his part, criticizes the botanical work of the polymath Pamphilus (ca. 60–80 CE) because he was distracted by silly incantations (used while cutting plants),¹²⁵ his double indictment lets us know that some of the earlier Greek botanicals contained similar details.

The discussion of plants as curative amulets was complicated, however, by their parallel use as internal medicines. Distinguishing the two became a touchstone by which Augustine in a later period attempted to outlaw the use of plants as amulets among his Christian followers: “It is one thing to claim that you will not have a stomachache, if you drink a certain herb after it has been ground up, but it is another thing to say that, if you wear that herb on your neck, you will not have a stomachache. For in the first case there is a healthy concoction to approve, but in the later a superstitious sign to condemn.”¹²⁶ Galen, writing a few centuries earlier, took a somewhat different view. We saw how his experiments with some stone amulets convinced him of their effectiveness, and he came to similar conclusions about plants. For instance, when discussing the amulet recipes of the late first-century CE medical writer Archigenes of Apamea (95–115 CE), who recommended placing a garland of *polygonum* on the head to cure headaches and a peony root on the neck for epilepsy, Galen describes how he experimented with the root by placing it on and then off the neck of an epileptic baby; he concluded in a quasi-atomistic fashion that the amulet worked because particles of the root were inhaled by the child and thus prevented seizures.¹²⁷

Galen is sometimes seen as a key protagonist in the triumphant evolution of rational Greek medicine to the exclusion of “irrational” things like amulets and incantations, but this narrative elides Galen’s experiments with both and ignores the many recipes for amulets still found in the medical books of other Roman-era doctors, such as Aelius Promotus, as well as in the much later treatises of Aetius

of Amida, Marcellus of Bordeaux, and Alexander of Tralles.¹²⁸ There are, however, important differences: Aelius, for example, a doctor alive during the reign of Trajan, prescribes numerous stones, flora, and fauna to be used as amulets, but no oral or inscribed charms,¹²⁹ whereas the later authors include a wide array of incantations and amulets.¹³⁰ In some cases the doctors even admit that these amulets supplement or even replace the medical treatment of difficult diseases. In a telling confession, Alexander says that he appends recipes for amulets to his chapter on gout “because some people, who are unable to persevere in their diet or to take their medicine, force us to make use of (i.e., nonmedical) remedies and amulets (*periapta*) for gout,” and Pliny says that because ordinary medicines are practically useless against malarial fever, he will include a series of other remedies, including amulets.¹³¹ In so doing, both authors echo, of course, the elite view discussed earlier that amulets are the last resort of patients after medicine has failed. But by supplying these recipes, both authors also reveal their tacit approval. Soranus, a doctor in the generation that preceded Galen, may explain one possible motive when, in reference to a popular amulet for uterine bleeding, he says that such amulets, although ineffective, should be allowed because they make the patient more hopeful.¹³² Like Galen, later doctors may have also condoned curative incantations. Indeed, when in the mid-fourth century CE Ammianus claims in passing that uttering an incantation over a malarial patient was something “that even the medical authorities approved,” we should hesitate before disbelieving him.¹³³ The full range of amulet recipes preserved by the doctors of the Roman and late antique periods is underappreciated by scholars of ancient magic, who are often only looking for parallels for single incantations or images that appear elsewhere on extant amulets. Of the thirty-seven amulet recipes collected by Marcellus, for example, only a scant handful have been discussed in detail, such as an inscribed amulet for eye disease that quotes a verse of Homer and a pair of recipes that recommend using the image or symbol of Chnoubis on an amulet.¹³⁴ And although Alexander of Tralles records eight different colic amulets, only two are regularly discussed: a ring-stone depicting Heracles and the lion, and an iron ring inscribed with a hexametric incantation.¹³⁵

0.3 Summary

We have seen how the ancient Greeks as early as the classical period utilized, recommended, and criticized the protective and curative powers of incantations, as well as those of various amulets, and how by the Hellenistic period there had developed a lively tradition of lapidary, medical, pharmaceutical, and other treatises or handbooks that collected, tested, and transmitted this lore for centuries to come.

Some of this information, as in the case of the lapidary handbooks, seems to come from Mesopotamia perhaps by Persian intermediaries, while in other cases the sources may be native Greek root cutters. There is no doubt that the Greeks were using many amulets before the arrival of the Romans, but the question remains why we have so little archaeological evidence for their existence. In the case of the botanical amulets, explaining this absence is quite easy, because such materials would rarely survive to be recovered by archaeologists. In the case of stones, however, we have already suggested one major problem in the evidence: the lapidaries and indeed all our handbook sources only rarely recommend engraving images on amuletic stones, and even when they do suggest images of Poseidon or Athena, only once do they tell us to add an inscription that might call our attention to their use as amulets.

PART I

Archaeology