

*Objects of Protection and destruction:
The Material Culture of “Magic” in the Mediterranean*

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The study of ancient and late antique “magic” has developed into a robust academic field over the past fifty years. Several volumes have appeared that provide (re)editions of ancient artifacts (e.g., Preisendanz 1973; Gager 1992; Meyer and Smith 1999; Daniel and Maltomini 1990–1992). Moreover, scholars have published several proceedings from conferences devoted to magic, in general, or to particular themes in ancient magical studies (e.g., Meyer and Mirecki 1995; Mirecki and Mayer 2002; Bohak, Harari, and Shaked 2011; Stratton and Kalleres 2014; Boustan, Dieleman, and Sanzo 2015; Boschung and Bremmer 2015; de Haro Sanchez 2015). We have also increasingly seen over the past few decades general overviews of ancient magic and magical objects (e.g., Graf 1997; Collins 2008; Faraone 2018), monographs about magic or amulets from a particular ethnic/religious tradition, such as Jews or Christians (Bohak 2008; Sanzo 2014a; Jones 2016; de Bruyn 2017; Harari 2017), and major funded research projects devoted to magic (Sanzo 2020–2025; Faraone and Torallas Tovar 2020–2022; Dosoo 2018–2023). These various scholarly endeavors make it clear that the objects, concerns, and rituals we associate with magic (e.g., amulets, demonic attack, exorcisms) represented central and persistent interests for people living in the late antique Mediterranean world. It is likely, therefore, that the study of (late) ancient magic will progressively become a more central topic in the study of ancient history, late antique studies, and adjacent fields of inquiry in the future.

In this essay, I will address a range of late antique objects that are typically associated with the category “magic.” After providing a basic overview of the theoretical and methodological problems associated with the category magic, I will briefly survey the sources typically identified as “magical” in ancient and late antique studies, more generally. I will then highlight

the implications of a collection of ostensibly Jewish and Christian magical artifacts for two issues in late antique studies: inter- and intra-religious contact and body-material entanglements.

1. Magic: Problems and Sources

1.1. Magic, A Problematic, but Necessary Category

The term “magic” is arguably one of the most disputed categories in the Humanities and Social Sciences, including in the study of late antiquity (e.g., Winkelmann 1982; Brown 1997; Cunningham 1999; Sørensen 2007; Otto 2013; Sanzo 2020). Indeed, the term is riddled with several analytical and taxonomic problems: “magic” has been used throughout history to denigrate beliefs outside, *inter alia*, of the social, religious, and gender norms of a given society; it is notoriously imprecise in scholarly usage; the English term “magic” (or its equivalent in other modern European languages) in fact only partially overlaps with ancient terms typically translated as “magic” (e.g., *mageia*, *kishuf*); it is thus difficult – if not impossible – to distinguish many traditions, rituals, and practices that scholars of antiquity have identified as “magical” (e.g., amulets and curse tablets) from those deemed “religious” (e.g., the cult of the saints and healing stories). Such concerns represent only a fraction of the arguments made against the use of magic for the study of the ancient world (cf. Otto 2013).

Yet, at the same time, the terminological alternatives that have been offered, such as religion, have been subjected to many of the same criticisms (Nongbri 2013). Other rubrics, such as “ritual power,” or taxonomic models, such as disaggregating ancient concerns and practices typically deemed “magical” into sub-categories (e.g., healing, exorcism, amulets), are clumsy and, moreover, have likewise failed to capture the perspectives of ancient authors in an accurate way (Sanzo 2020, 30–38). In short, our scholarly lexicon in general has been fashioned in

dialogue with a series of cultural and intellectual assumptions that are anachronistic for the study of the ancient world (Sørensen 2007, 2). Rather than allowing this fact to discourage us from using these terms to understand the ancient world, we should deploy our terms critically, frontally engaging with their inherent cultural biases and their taxonomic limitations. In this vein, although “magic” in the modern sense did not exist in the ancient world, there is evidence that certain practices, symbols, and concerns were viewed as falling with the same category in antiquity.ⁱ More importantly, the term magic evokes a relatively consistent idea of which objects, rituals, and concerns are part of the category and which are outside of it.ⁱⁱ In the section that follows, I highlight some of the main sources that scholars of antiquity have labeled magical.

1.2. Magical Sources: Applied Amulets, Defixiones, Materia Magica, and Unapplied Handbooks

The ancient and late antique sources that scholars typically identify as “magical” vary considerably in terms of their functions, material properties, and written formulas. Although the term “magic” has been used to describe a wide range of artifacts, it is important to distinguish applied or “activated” objects (e.g., amulets and curse tablets), which were designed for actual ritual contexts, from unapplied materials (e.g., the recipes that were collected into the formularies in the Greek Magical Papyri [PGM]), which instruct people how to perform a ritual and/or prepare an applied object. The reader should note that my use of the term magic is purely heuristic – sometimes referred to as *etic* (Ginzburg 2017; Sahlins 2017) – and should not be taken as implying a devaluation of these objects or as suggesting that they are inherently or substantively different from objects typically labeled religious and the like (Versnel 1991). In fact, as we will especially see in the section that follows, these and other objects often challenge our assumptions about the categories magic and religion

The English word “amulet” typically refers to an applied ancient object (e.g., *amuletum*, φυλακτήριον, περίαπτον, περίαμμα), which was primarily designed to heal a client, to protect him/her from sickness or demons, or to remove from him/her harmful or unwanted spirits (e.g., demons) (Daniel and Maltomini 1990–1992; Kotansky 1994; Michel [with Zazoff and Zazoff] 2001; Michel 2004; Kotansky 2006). These ancient ritual objects were made from various kinds of material, including papyrus, parchment, ostraca (broken pottery), metal (e.g., gold, silver, and bronze), and gemstone (e.g., hematite, carnelian, and jasper). Although the textual formulas (where present) on ancient and late antique amulets differ greatly from object to object, common written elements include: divine invocations; the names of deities and/or angels; short narratives (a.k.a. *historiolae*); images of deities, heroes, demons, and/or famous mythic scenes; and artificial scripts/symbols (e.g., *charktêres*) or unintelligible clusters of letters (a.k.a. *voces magicae* or *voces mysticae*). Many of these elements can be found together on a single object. For instance, a red-jasper gem, which might date to the early Roman imperial period, includes, on the obverse, an image of Heracles strangling the lion with a text above (“withdraw colic, the divinity pursues you”) and *charktêres* below (Cabinet des Médailles, LIM 403, with translation by Faraone 2018, plate 19; cf. Gordon 2014). On the reverse side of this gem, one finds an image of the triple-faced Hecate with the name Iaô above and Abrasax below. As this example implies, the elements that are found on the extant magical objects often do not comport with our facile understanding of categories, such as Jewish, Pagan, and Christian, as it relates to the ancient world (cf. Sanzo 2014b; Boustan and Sanzo 2017; Frankfurter 2018).

Since the inscribed Greek amulets begin to proliferate in the late Roman or early Byzantine periods (ca. II–VII CE), the extent to which these amulets preserve ritual practices from earlier periods remains largely unknown. That said, although formulas, such as specifically Christian

expressions and traditions (e.g., Jesus, the Trinity, and New Testament citations), certainly reflect later developments, there are various indications of continuity in the traditions and techniques used (Faraone 2018; Frankfurter 1997). In addition, earlier Near Eastern, Mediterranean, and Mesopotamian objects written in other languages confirm that ancient peoples often turned to rituals (and ritualized material objects) for healing, protection, and the like.ⁱⁱⁱ Of course, scholars should use a great degree of caution when postulating – without concrete evidence – that a given phrase or practice found on a late-antique object was known in early periods.

Another type of applied ritual object, the “curse tablet” (*defixio* [plural: *defixiones*] or κατάδεσμος [“binding spell”; plural: κατάδεσμοι]), was typically made out of lead.^{iv} First emerging in the fifth-to-fourth centuries BCE (in Sicily), curse tablets were used to harm rivals in a wide range of contexts, including love, business, athletics, and law (Gager 1992).^v Based on the extant evidence, curse tablets were used during the Roman period throughout the Mediterranean and beyond, often deposited in wells, tombs, and other dark and dank places.^{vi} The curse tablets also provide interesting insight to the distribution of lead in antiquity. For example, as Jaime Curbera has noted, the Laurion silver mines (60 km from Athens) not only offered an abundance of lead to local practitioners (as a byproduct of extensive silver smelting), but its lead was also part of an exchange of magical materials; isotope analysis of a collection of *defixiones* from Megara and Melos demonstrates that they were made of lead from Laurion (Curbera 2015).

Like their amuletic counterparts, the inscribed formulas on *defixiones* varied considerably, with some consisting solely of the name of the victim or a simple formula and others displaying more complex rituals that might include invocations, litanies of divine names, and lists of the

harms to befall the victim (Faraone 1991; Eidinow 2019). For instance, a Latin *defixio* from Carthage (North Africa), which might date as early as the first century CE, was designed to thwart the efforts of rival charioteers and their horses. After a series of *voces magicae* and invocations, we find the following words on this curse tablet: “Bind their legs, their onrush, their bounding, and their running; bind their eyes so that they cannot see and twist their soul and heart so that they cannot breath” (Gager 1992, 65–66 [no. 12]). The broad temporal and regional distributions of the inscribed *defixiones* suggest that the practice of cursing a rival with these lead objects was common throughout the Mediterranean during antiquity.

In addition to these inscribed objects that have come down to us, we have strong evidence that various other materials, substances, and verbal formulae were used in rituals that we might call “magical.” Andrew T. Wilburn has drawn on archaeological evidence from Karanis, Egypt (Structure 165) to demonstrate persuasively that a certain figurine – previously thought to be a toy – was pierced and burned as part of an erotic magical ritual (Wilburn 2013, 129–39). Wilburn’s careful analysis of this object highlights the likelihood that the extant archaeological record includes a host of other artifacts and substances (sometimes called *materia magica*), whose original magical function is now invisible to us (see also Faraone 2018, 79–101).

The most important collection of unapplied textual materials from the ancient Mediterranean world can be found in the PGM.^{vii} The formularies in this corpus, which come from Egypt and date from the first-century BCE to the sixth-century CE, cover a wide range of concerns, desires, and circumstances related to daily life, including love/sex, illness, knowledge (of the future), and theft. Like the applied objects mentioned above, the extant recipes incorporate a range of ritual and scribal techniques (e.g., drawings, *voces magicae*, *charaktères*, divine invocations, palindromes [e.g., ABLANATHANALBA], and *historiolae*).

Since correspondences between the formularies in the PGM texts and known applied ritual artifacts are uncommon, it is often difficult to assess whether a given recipe was ever applied. In addition, the complex editorial histories of the magical papyri further frustrate any simplistic model of application in antiquity (Dieleman 2019, 283). That said, the instances in which the formularies in the PGM correspond with the applied record are intriguing. Most importantly, several curse tablets – including one from Antinoopolis, Egypt that was found together with an unbaked clay female figurine pierced with 13 needles (Gager 1992, 97–100 [no. 28]) – preserve the text of an amatory spell that closely resembles the recipe from PGM IV, ll. 296–466 (Gager 1992, 94). This spell from the PGM provides instructions to bind a female figurine with 13 copper needles, so that the female victim will fulfill all of the sexual desires of the client.^{viii} In addition to their value for understanding ancient sexuality, the applied curse tablets that are related to this PGM recipe indicate that, at least on occasion, the extant recipes in the PGM reflect actual ritual practices in Egypt. Nevertheless, given the above-mentioned temporal, regional, and editorial considerations and complexities, scholars should approach alleged or potential parallels with the PGM with a great degree of caution.

Such rituals, objects, and substances were not lost on ancient commentators and critics. Although, as noted above, the categories magic and magician do not have exact equivalents in the pre-modern world, many ancient writers discussed or condemned (illicit) practitioners, rituals, practices, or behaviors, using terms that are etymologically related to the English word “magic.” Although a complete survey of such materials is beyond the scope of this essay, it is worth reflecting on some of the associations of the Greek word μάγος (typically translated as “magician”) and its cognates, such as μαγεία (usually glossed as “magic”). The term μάγος derived from the Old Persian word *maguš* and originally denoted Persian priests operating

within the royal circles (cf. Graf 2019, 116–23). According to ancient ethnographic accounts, the primary responsibilities of the μάγος included ritual practices, such as sacrifice (e.g., Xenophon, *Cyr.* 8.23), dream interpretation, and funerary rites (e.g., Herodotus, *Hist.* 1.120, 140). Additional evidence (e.g., Dervini Papyrus [V BCE]) demonstrates that the μάγος-word-family had acquired by the fourth century BCE further associations with chanting, libations, the Dionysian mysteries, and nocturnal activities within the Greek-speaking world. This linkage of the μάγος (and its cognates) with strange, suspicious rites worked alongside two interrelated negative associations with this word group: those of deception and manipulative power. As Fritz Graf has recently noted, Gorgias, *Hel.* 10 connects μαγεία with γοητεία (something like “quackery”) and ἐπωδαί (i.e., “songs,” “incantations,” or “charms”), thereby relegating μαγεία and its cognates to the “power of influential and manipulative acts... that shape the soul and deceive human perception” (Graf 2019, 120). Greek writers from the fourth century BCE onward often emphasized or assumed the morally dubious nature of the rituals of the μάγος. The early Greek associations of μαγεία and its practitioners (the μάγοι) with ambiguous or negative rituals, which extended, *inter alia*, to the social domains of divination, healing, and persuasion, informed the rhetoric about or against illicit rituals found in the works of early Roman writers, such as Pliny the Elder (e.g., Pliny, *Nat.* 25.59, 28.4, 29.20, 30.5–6, 37.75).

But what is the significance of sources deemed magical for the study of (late) antiquity? Although magical objects yield insight into several issues in ancient and late ancient history, I will address a set of late antique Jewish and Christian ritual technologies that speak to intercultural interaction and thing-body entanglements, two topics of great interest for the study of late antique lived religion (see Conclusions). The texts on these magical objects, which further illustrate the wide range of material artifacts that might be labeled as magical, include

citations of the same biblical passage (Psalm 91:1 = LXX Psalm 90:1). In keeping with the scholarly rubric magic, these objects – as a group – engage with the social spheres of sickness, demonic struggle, and cursing, which, as we will see, occasionally overlapped during late antiquity.

2. Case Study: The Magical Use of Psalm 91:1 (= LXX Psalm 90:1) in Late Antiquity

Psalm 91 (and its equivalent in the Greek Septuagint [LXX], Psalm 90) was the most frequently used biblical tradition in late antique magic (e.g., Kraus 2018). The opening line (*incipit*) of this passage was considered especially appropriate within apotropaic and curative contexts; both Jews and Christians incorporated this passage into formularies and applied amulets written in Greek, Coptic, and Hebrew/Aramaic (for the Greek and Coptic materials, see Sanzo 2014a, 107–20; for the Hebrew/Aramaic materials, see discussion below). It is not difficult to see why; this protective passage according to the Masoretic (Hebrew) text reads: “Who abides in the shelter of the Most High shall stay the night in the shadow of the Almighty” (translation by Vreugdenhil 2020, 151). The Septuagint version might be translated as follows: “He who dwells in the help of the Most High will reside in the shelter of the God of heaven” (Pietersma 2009, 593). In many cases, it would seem that the practitioners cited the first line of this passage in order to apply the paradigmatic power associated with the entire psalm (see Sanzo 2014a, 165–71).

Three groups of magical objects incorporate Psalm 91:1 (LXX Psalm 90:1) into their rituals in ways that yield important insight into intercultural contact and body-thing entanglements (see Conclusions). First, there is a collection of twenty-five Christian silver amuletic armbands with inscriptions of this passage (written in Greek) that are placed in-between medallions that don images from the (after)life of Christ (Maspero 1908; Vikan 1984; Kraus 2005/2006; Kraus 2009).^{ix} These objects date from approximately the mid-sixth or early seventh century CE

(Vikan 1982, 41). Although the texts and images found on the extant exemplars vary to a degree, we can get a good sense of their character from one of the best preserved amuletic armbands. This silver armband, which is now housed in the University of Missouri-Columbia (no. 77.246), places portions of LXX Psalm 90:1 on the links between eight medallions that include images of the Annunciation; the Nativity; the Trinity (?) with Chnoubis, *charaktêres*, and the pentalpha with phrase, “*eis theos ho nikôn*”; the Baptism of Jesus; the Adoration of the Cross; the Women at the Tomb; the Holy Rider with pentalpha; and the Ascension (Maspero 1908, 274–75 [no. I]; Sanzo 2014a, 116 [no. 38]). The size of the medallions on this object are relatively large (25.5 x 2.5 cm), but fall generally within the range of the corpus. While exact replicas of armbands are known, not all the objects in this corpus are identical. For instance, the text of LXX Psalm 90:1 on University of Missouri-Columbia no. 77.246 differs from the texts of several other amuletic armbands since it contains the entire first verse (and not only portions of the first verse).^x Moreover, this armband also displays visual elements not necessarily typical among the other objects (e.g., the *charaktêres*).

All differences in images and texts notwithstanding, these armbands make up a relatively coherent corpus of Christian materials that had a wide geographical distribution in the late antique Mediterranean world, with exemplars that were discovered in Egypt, Syria, Palestine, and Cyprus.^{xi} At the same time, these armbands were part of a much broader international trade of Christian pilgrimage tokens, flasks and rings (Vikan 1982). The close relationship these amuletic armbands have with these ostensibly religious objects serves as yet another reminder that the categories magic and religion – at least as we imagine them – do map perfectly onto the late antique world.

The Jewish Babylonian Aramaic magical bowls represent a second corpus of materials that on occasion incorporated Psalm 91:1 into their ritual texts. The extant late antique incantation bowls date from approximately the third- to the seventh-century CE and were principally written in Aramaic, with examples inscribed in Jewish Babylonian Aramaic, Syriac, and Mandaic (Naveh and Shaked 1985; Naveh and Shaked 1993; Levene 2003; Levene 2013; Moriggi 2014; Ford and Morgenstern 2020). The texts on these domestic earthenware bowls are typically written in spiral fashion, usually progressing from the center of the bowl to its rim. When images appear on the bowls, they are generally placed in the center of the bowls – a feature they share with Sasanian amulets (Vilozny 2013, 35). These bowls come from late-antique Mesopotamia (present-day Iraq and Iran), where they were often buried under houses, presumably as “demon traps” (Bohak 2019, 396).^{xii} That said, although many of the bowls have an apotropaic dimension, there are also several bowls that were (also) used for curative or imprecatory purposes (cf. Levene 2013).

A few of the published bowls incorporate Psalm 91:1 into their ritual texts; however, in most cases, this passage appears in an every-other-word alternating pattern with Deut. 6:4.^{xiii} Joseph Naveh and Shaul Shaked have published one of the best-preserved bowls that includes this biblical phenomenon (Jewish Historical Museum, Belgrade, No. 242/1; Naveh and Shaked 1985, 184–87 [Bowl 11]).^{xiv} The relevant portions of the text on this sixth- or seventh- century CE bowl, which was designed to protect a client named Khusrau son of Izdān-dukh from a range of pathological, demonic, and ritual threats, might be translated as follows (with Psalm 91:1 underlined): “Hear/ He who dwells/ Oh Israel/ in the shelter/ the Lord/ of the Most High/ our God/ in the shadow/ the Lord/ of the Almighty/ (is) one/ will abide.”^{xv} This every-other-word juxtaposition follows immediately after another biblical passage, Zech. 3:2, which is likewise common among the published incantation bowls (see Korsvoll 2018). Other

incantation bowls utilize this every-other-word pattern of Deut. 6:4 and Psalm 91:1, written in full (e.g., Geller 1986 [Aaron Bowl B]); however, abbreviated versions of two words each (e.g., Gordon 1978 [ZRL 48]) or four words each (E.g., JNF 207)^{xvi} are likewise attested in the extant record.

A final corpus of materials has recently been collected and edited by Rivka Elitzur-Leiman as part of a catalogue for an exhibition at the Israel Museum, Jerusalem on the *Shema* (Elitzur-Leiman 2021).^{xvii} Elitzur-Leiman presents translations of two silver pendants and two silver rings that incorporate the same every-other-word pattern as we find in the incantation bowls (with one important exception [see discussion below]). For instance, a pendant that is now part of the David and Jemima Jeselsohn Collection in Zurich includes the every-other-word alternation of Deut. 6:4 and Psalm 91:1 (whose text reads “Hear/ He who dwells/ Oh Israel/ in the shelter/ the Lord/ of the Most High/ our God/ in the shadow/ the Lord/ of the Almighty...(is) one”) in conjunction with several other textual and visual features (e.g., Psalm 138:2; Psalm 91: 5–6; the display of six bulbs in a kind of grape cluster; a series of dots that seem to form an *ouroboros*) (Elitzur-Leiman 2021, 48). One of the two silver rings in this collection adds an interesting feature to the every-other-word pattern that we have seen: in addition to Deut. 6:4 and Psalm 91:1, it also incorporates Leviticus 1:1 (“And God called Moses and spoke to him from the meeting tent, saying”) into the alternation (Elitzur-Leiman 2021, 49).

3. Conclusions: Religious Interaction and Thing-Body Entanglements

In this concluding section, I will note briefly how the three above-mentioned groups of objects contribute to our notions of inter- and intra-religious contact and to our reconstruction of thing-body entanglements and, consequently, ancient lived experiences.

4.1. Psalm 91:1 (= LXX Psalm 90:1) and Inter- and Intra- Religious interaction

The magical objects that cite Psalm 91:1 (= LXX Psalm 90:1) allow us to understand better how traditions were borrowed, utilized, and adapted within and across religious communities in lived practice. For instance, on account of their broad dissemination throughout the Mediterranean world, the Christian armbands also seem to have made a direct impact on Jewish ritual practice. Nancy Benovitz has recently published a Jewish armband – written in Greek – that includes the following biblical texts: Psalm 90:1; Deut. 6:5–6; Deut. 11:13–21 (Benovitz 2016; Benovitz 2021b). Since these biblical texts follow the translation of Aquila and were used in rabbinic ritual contexts, Benovitz has appropriately assigned this armband to a Jewish practitioner, who probably lived in either Egypt or Palestine (Benovitz 2021b, 41). On account of its similarities to the Christian armbands (see below), Benovitz concludes:

its owner was probably a Jew...who wished to adapt an apotropaic prestige item used by his Christian neighbors to his own faith by infusing it with the powerful verses of the Shema (Benovitz 2021b, 40–41).

As Benovitz suggests, this armband gives us a unique glimpse into the dynamics of intercultural exchange and adaptation during late antiquity. On the one hand, the material characteristics of this object are similar to the Christian armbands: it was made out of silver and consists of eight medallions – four which are relatively small (dia. 2.7cm each) and four of which are larger (dia. 3.0cm each) – with “lozenge-shaped links” (h. 1.5 each) between them. The likely presence of Psalm 91:1 (= LXX Psalm 90:1) forms still another link with the Christian armband tradition.

Yet, on the other hand, there are important differences between this Jewish armband and the extant Christian exemplars. As I have noted above, the passages inscribed on the Jewish object reflect rabbinic ritual practice and, therefore, with the exception of Psalm 91:1, do not find

parallels among the Christian armbands. Second, and more importantly, this armband does not include any images. This absence of images is curious since the Jewish Babylonian Aramaic incantation bowls often contain images of demons, practitioners, or hybrid entities (Vilozny 2013). Moreover, the extant Jewish amulets from Palestine likewise include visual elements, such as the *ouroboros* (see above). Thus, while one could note general differences between Jewish and Christian artistic habits during late antiquity (Levine 2000, 566–67), it is clear that neither western nor eastern Jewish practitioners were necessarily averse to incorporating images onto their ritual artifacts. Perhaps a more plausible explanation for the state of the evidence is that the absence of images itself was part of the practitioner’s approach to ritual efficacy; given the similarities between his armband and Christian armbands, the inscription of only words – and not images – could function as a visual cue to God and to other humans that this was a pure Jewish ritual practice (i.e., not a Christian ritual practice). If such a tactic were operative in this case, it would form part of a larger ritual strategy in late antique Mediterranean magic of constructing ritual purity through religious differentiation (see Sanzo 2014b; Boustan and Sanzo 2017).

It is also worth noting in passing that the incantation bowls – in conjunction with the silver pendants and rings – add a further dimension to our portrait of religious contacts: the fact that they include the same every-other-word juxtaposition of Deut. 6:4 and Psalm 91:1 (and, in one instance, also Leviticus 1:1) suggests a degree of contact between western and eastern Jewish practitioners. Such evidence for interaction complicates the portrait of separate ritual practices between these respective branches of Jewish magic that the balance of the extant record paints (cf. Bohak 2008, 143–226).

4.2. Psalm 91:1 (= LXX Psalm 90:1) and Thing-Body Entanglements

In addition to their value for understanding the dynamics of inter- and intra-religious relations between and within early Christianity and Judaism, these magical objects also help us think critically about thing-body entanglements and, consequently, lived religious experiences in late antiquity. The recent work in ancient lived religion has drawn particular attention to what some scholars call “mediality,” by which they mean “the roles of material culture, embodiment and group-styles in the construction of religious experience” (Albrecht, Degelmann et al. 2018, 570). For instance, Emma Jayne Graham has recently taken into consider the role of various senses (not just sight) in her analysis of Roman votives:

a votive hand might...be handled, smelled, and viewed in various ways, potentially being gripped with differing degrees of force, and possibly even presented balanced on an outstretched palm, a gesture that because of the model’s weight would be felt in the muscles of the arm and the upper body, as well as impacted upon balance and movement (Graham 2020, 226).

As Graham highlights, religious experiences in antiquity were marked by complex interactions between human bodies and their material surroundings. This line of scholarship thus works in close dialogue with research on the cognitive dimension of body-thing relations. For example, Lambros Malafouris has recently noted that:

...if there is such a thing as the embodied self, then it is a self that constantly projects and extends itself beyond the skin actively engaging and incorporating its material surroundings via the interface of the body (Malafouris 2008, 1997).

For Malafouris (as for Graham), one cannot so easily separate the human body – and, consequently, the “self” – from the material world in which it is found.

The interconnected insights of Graham and Malafouris allow us to consider the diverse thing-body entanglements – and, by extension, religious experiences – oriented around Psalm 91:1

(LXX Psalm 90:1) that the magical objects surveyed above would have engendered. First, the armbands and the incantation bowls required different modes of rotation to read their texts. In short, reading necessitated the physical manipulation of the material objects. Second, the silver material from which the armbands, pendants, and rings were made would have exerted themselves diversely on the human bodies depending upon the weather, the time of day/night, and other environmental factors. Third, the armbands, rings, and pendants were attached to human bodies; if we take seriously the insights of Malafouris, we can presume that they thus served as kinds of biblical extensions of the self. In this way, these suspended objects differed dramatically from the incantation bowls, which were most likely buried. Unlike most biblical manuscripts, magical objects can demonstrate how bodies and objects could work together to create an atmosphere of biblical usage that was multilayered and multisensory.

We have seen how the magical materials can offer unique insight into issues of inter-and intra-religious interaction and thing-body entanglements. Yet, as ritual objects devoted to some of the primary concerns of quotidian life, the magical objects no doubt speak to a range of issues, which still require further study. For instance, recent research has demonstrated how these objects can help us rewrite early Christian religious and ritual boundary demarcation (e.g., Sanzo 2014b; Boustán and Sanzo 2017; Sanzo 2019). Indeed, further work on these interesting materials promises to yield new approaches to – and ways of thinking about – late antiquity.

4. Suggestions for Further Reading

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ⁱ For instance, *charaktères* were rarely – if ever – used in contexts that we would regard as “non-magical” – a point that even critics, such as Augustine, noted (*De doctrina christiana* 2.20.30). On this point, see Sanzo 2020, 35.

ⁱⁱ Brent Nongbri makes a similar taxonomic argument about the term religion (Nongbri 2013, 15).

ⁱⁱⁱ For instance, the “evil eye” has constituted a perennial concern for people from antiquity to today. For a useful treatment of the evidence for the “evil eye” from the ancient world, see Elliott 2016.

^{iv} In addition to these *defixiones*, there are also several Aramaic incantation bowls that date from the third century CE onward that were written to curse a victim. For a recent discussion of these objects, see Bohak 2019.

^v In the realm of law, one should note the differences between curse tablets and prayers for justice (Versnel 2009).

^{vi} Ancient curse tablets have been discovered in a wide range of areas, including Antioch, Athens, Bath, Caesarea, Carthage, Delos, Mainz (Roman *Mogontiacum*), and various parts of Egypt.

^{vii} To be sure, this “corpus” includes both applied amulets and curses and unapplied recipes. For a general discussion of the PGM, which, while somewhat dated, is still immensely useful, see Brashear 1995. Traditionally, the phrase “Greek Magical Papyri” has referred to the materials collected in Preisendanz, *Papyri Graecae Magicae*, which have been translated into English (Betz 1986, hereafter GMPT). GMPT included English translations of additional manuscripts in Greek (for the editions, see *Suppl.Mag.* [= Daniel and Maltomini 1990–1992]) and Demotic (a.k.a. the Demotic Magical Papyri or PDM). The reader should also note that some scholars prefer to talk about the “Greco-Egyptian Magical Papyri” (e.g., Dieleman 2019, 283), which adds to the corpus the objects that are in *Suppl.Mag.*, but not in PGM and GMPT. The PGM have are currently in the process of reedition and retranslation through the project, “The Transmission of Magical Knowledge, Part II” (= Faraone and Torallas Tovar 2020–2022). The first volume has already appeared (Faraone and Torallas Tovar 2022). For the most important collection of Coptic handbooks from late antique Egypt, see Kropp 1930–31.

^{viii} The match between the spell from the Greek Magical Papyri and the materials from Antinoopolis is not exact. For instance, despite the instructions in PGM IV, ll. 296–466, the female figurine has no writing on it and there was no male figurine found in Antinoopolis.

^{ix} The twenty-five armbands belong to a large collection of thirty-four amuletic armbands (Kraus 2009, 141).

^x For armbands that only include portions of LXX Psalm 90:1, see Sanzo 2014a, 117–18 (no. 39–41). It should be noted that, despite its use of the entirety of LXX Psalm 90:1, the psalmic text on University of Missouri-Columbia no. 77.246 contains numerous orthographical oddities (see Sanzo 2014a, 116).

^{xi} Although Gary Vikan appreciates their similarities, he argues that the extant armbands might be divided into three types, with one coming from Egypt and two coming from Syria/Palestine/Cyprus (Vikan 1991/1992).

^{xii} For a rather sustained argument against the demon-trap theory, see Isbell 2008, 13–15.

^{xiii} Matthew Morgenstern has referenced an important exception to this general pattern in the published incantation bowls, highlighting a bowl in which Psalm 91:1 follows Deut. 6:4 (Morgenstern 2021, 51, 53).

^{xiv} The bowl – along with another bowl inscribed in Syriac – was discovered north of Baghdad by a Yugoslav engineer, Janko Milošević, who brought the bowls to Belgrade (Naveh and Shaked 1985, 181–182).

^{xv} This bowl is written from the outside inward (in contrast to most bowls) and includes some non-standard orthographical features (e.g., the frequent use of *matres lectionis*), which most likely reflects the spoken language (see Morgenstern 2013, 40).

^{xvi} James Nathan Ford is currently editing this bowl. I am thankful to Prof. Ford for providing me with the relevant portions of the Hebrew/Aramaic text of this incantation bowl.

^{xvii} As one of the editors of the volume notes, the biblical *Shema* could refer to “all three of these passages [Deut. 6:4–9; Deut. 11:13–21; Numbers 15:37–41], or perhaps only the first of the first and second sections – either alone or in combination with various blessings and liturgical texts. The opening words ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one’ (Deut. 6:4) are the best known by far, and thus ‘the Shema’ can also refer to this verse alone, or part of it” (Benovitz 2021a, 14).