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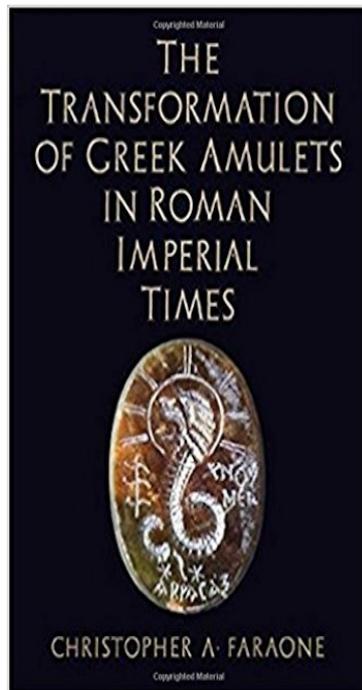
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The Transformation of Greek Amulets in Roman Imperial Times



Christopher A. Faraone

Empire and After

Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, March 2018. 512 pages. \$89.95. Hardcover. ISBN 9780812249354.

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Review

In *The Transformation of Greek Amulets in Roman Imperial Times*—an important historical study of ancient Greek amulets—Christopher A. Faraone convincingly argues that the proliferation of amulets in the Roman imperial period does not signal a rise of superstition, anxiety, and the like, but reflects material, visual, and scribal innovations in Greek amuletic practice that (1) favored the preservation of Roman-era amulets over their pre-Roman counterparts and (2) make it easier for contemporary scholars to identify objects as amulets. To be sure, Faraone is quick to note that these ritual changes—and the concomitant archaeological disparity they largely engendered—worked in concert with additional political, economic, and social developments, including: the Greek and then Roman colonization of Egypt (the main geographical source of amulets on papyrus and other materials rarely preserved elsewhere) and the economic prosperity of the eastern Mediterranean in the imperial age which facilitated the use of more durable materials. In short, the late antique Greek amulets give concrete expression to healing and apotropaic rituals and beliefs long embedded into the fabric of ancient Greek culture(s). The three primary sections of this book—aptly organized around the rubrics of archaeology, images, and texts—are dedicated to these transformations.

After a relatively detailed introduction, in which he discusses the principal terminology (i.e., amulets, Greek, and Roman) and primary sources used for analysis, Faraone details the archaeological evidence for the pre-Roman Greek use of amulets in Athens and elsewhere. The overlapping types of evidence include: visual representations (e.g., on vessels, such as *choes*, *stamnoi*, and *lekythoi*) of boys and women donning amulets; material objects, such as coins, *gorgoneion* pendants, horizontal amulet capsules, and charm jewelry, which were clearly used or reused as healing and protective devices; and literary and archaeological traces of the early Greek uses of shapes, including the *lunula* (crescent moon), the phallus, and the *fica* (an obscene gesture, which represents the vulva) and substances, such as hematite, red coral, and magnetite, which had well-established apotropaic and curative functions.

The second and third sections turn to inscribed phenomena predominantly found in the Roman imperial period, which, Faraone shows, have (oral) antecedents in earlier Greek history. In the second section, Faraone highlights three important transformations in the amuletic use of images during late antiquity: (1) the depiction of gods as active agents against dangers; (2) the miniaturization of domestic guardians; and (3) the use of “Egyptian”—or, better, “Ptolemaic”—images. For Faraone, these Roman transformations reveal latent ideas about the ritual power of media and shapes in the pre-Roman Greek world. The third section focuses on the most significant transformation of Greek amulets during the Roman period, the general shift from oral to inscribed rituals. Faraone cites early Greek literary evidence in coordination with late antique recipes and applied amulets to show that the prayers, incantations, and what he calls “framing speech acts” inscribed in Roman imperial amulets had oral and, occasionally, written precedents in pre-Roman Greek contexts. Such continuities notwithstanding, the scribal emphasis during the Roman period precipitated and/or reflected other ritual transformations, including the prominence of superhuman allies in incantations and elaborate exorcistic formulas, and imbued the text itself with a newfound power.

The book ends with a “Conclusions and Further Trajectories” discussion, which summarizes the Roman transformations of Greek amulets, discusses how amulets engaged civic, domestic, and corporeal contexts, and details the historical development of the purveyors of Greek amulets. Faraone’s robust study also includes nineteen beautiful plates, numerous in-text figures, nine useful appendices (which summarize important recipe books for Greek amulets), an extensive bibliography, a general index, an index locorum, and an index of ancient words.

Faraone ought to be congratulated for producing this thoroughly researched, well-illustrated, and readable study. The book is not only essential reading for the specialist, but it would also make an ideal selection for an upper-level seminar on ancient Greek amulets or material religion. Faraone’s emphasis on the material and visual dimensions of ancient amulets provides a necessary corrective to prevailing scholarly practice and sets the standard for future work on the subject.

This book also carries broader implications for the study of antiquity. Not only does Faraone reveal the important role amulets played in the pre-Roman Greek world, but he also highlights in several places that ancient objects often served multiple functions for their users. Although

Faraone does not frame the issue in this way, his point about the multifunctionality of objects in ancient Greek contexts could certainly be formulated into a more substantive, methodological critique of facile rubrics, such as "decorative" and "ornamental," which frequently serve as analytical or descriptive defaults in the study of ancient material and visual cultures. Readers of Faraone's book will inevitably see that such labels inadequately capture the manifold layers of meaning and significance ancients commonly attributed to quotidian objects and materials.

Despite its vast temporal and thematic parameters, this book has very few shortcomings. Although, for the most part, Faraone does an exceptionally good job balancing general accessibility and scholarly investigation, there are instances in which readers probably would have benefited from more thorough discussions. For instance, some of the theoretical and analytical models Faraone uses to explain the "logic" of ancient amulets or their functions within their ancient contexts (e.g., metonymy and syncretism) could have been more extensively treated in light of recent scholarship.

Such quibbles notwithstanding, I strongly recommend Faraone's excellent historical survey of ancient amulets to both specialists and students alike.

About the Reviewer(s):

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About the Author(s)/Editor(s)/Translator(s):

Christopher A. Faraone is the Frank Curtis Springer and Gertrude Melcher Springer Professor in the Humanities and Professor in the Department of Classics at the University of Chicago. He is author of *Vanishing Acts: Deletio Morbi as Speech Act and Visual Design on Ancient Greek Amulets and The Stanzaic Architecture of Archaic Greek Elegy*.

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