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Binding Words: Textual Amulets in the Middle Ages (review)

Michael D. Bailey
Iowa State University, mdbailey@iastate.edu

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Binding Words: Textual Amulets in the Middle Ages (review)

Abstract
Textual amulets were among the most common magical devices employed in the medieval period. As Skemer defines them, they were "generally brief apotropaic texts, handwritten or mechanically printed on separate sheets, rolls, and scraps of parchment, paper, or other flexible writing supports of varying dimensions" (p. 1). Always short, they could range in length from just a few words (e.g., the very common amulet consisting of the names of the three kings of the gospel nativity story, thought to be effective against epilepsy) to a text that might fill most of a folio page (then folded repeatedly for portability). They were cheap and easy to produce. Skemer usefully distinguishes them from talismans, which he defines as being more expensive, elite items, typically engraved jewelry, gems, or metal disks that often bore decidedly learned astrological symbols and images, rather than holy names or snippets of sacred texts. The terminology Skemer employs is modern, but it seems clear that some distinction between these two levels of powerful, portable items, each bearing writing or signification of some kind, existed in the Middle Ages.

Disciplines
Cultural History | European History | History of Religion | Medieval History | Other History

Comments

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powers that make humans into powerful agents with the capacity to potentially restructure the system of conventional rankings” (p. 144). She argues that religion does much more than reflect and justify social hierarchies; gods and goddesses empower their devotees by possessing the human hosts and allowing them to voice calls for social justice.

Mines’s gripping prose keeps the pages turning. I highly recommend this book for adoption in undergraduate classes. It will provide a keystone in discussions of South Asia, particularly contributing to the examination of caste identity. It will also fit well in courses on Religious Studies by elucidating the relationship between Hinduism and caste structure and between devotees and deities. Anthropologists interested in the study of place and the cultural construction of power will also find this a fantastic resource.

Michele Ruth Gamburd
Portland State University


Textual amulets were among the most common magical devices employed in the medieval period. As Skemer defines them, they were “generally brief apotropaic texts, handwritten or mechanically printed on separate sheets, rolls, and scraps of parchment, paper, or other flexible writing supports of varying dimensions” (p. 1). Always short, they could range in length from just a few words (e.g., the very common amulet consisting of the names of the three kings of the gospel nativity story, thought to be effective against epilepsy) to a text that might fill most of a folio page (then folded repeatedly for portability). They were cheap and easy to produce. Skemer usefully distinguishes them from talismans, which he defines as being more expensive, elite items, typically engraved jewelry, gems, or metal disks that often bore decidedly learned astrological symbols and images, rather than holy names or snippets of sacred texts. The terminology Skemer employs is modern, but it seems clear that some distinction between these two levels of powerful, portable items, each bearing writing or signification of some kind, existed in the Middle Ages.

Since textual amulets were such a widespread form of magic in the medieval period, it is unsurprising that their development tends to mirror aspects of the history of medieval magic generally. Amulets were used throughout the Middle Ages, as they had been in antiquity. Protective inscriptions are
known to have existed in the earliest literate cultures, so clearly in the most basic sense amulets are a perennial element of magic. Typically employing holy names, sacred phrases, bits of Bible verse, or prayers, amulets thoroughly blur the distinction between magic and religion, and Skemer wisely avoids describing them as “magical” or labeling them “spells” or “charms” as much as possible. From the earliest days of Christianity, church officials had condemned amulets as pagan, superstitious, and demonic. Nevertheless, given the clerical near-monopoly on literacy during most of the medieval centuries, almost all the amulets that existed must have been produced by the clergy. Skemer thus helps to illuminate a tension seen also in other areas of medieval magic between sweeping official condemnations at the level of legal and theological abstraction, and much more nuanced approaches at the level of quotidian practice. Even saints such as Hildegard of Bingen or Francis of Assisi could fashion amulets, creating them as objects of devotion and foci of divine power. The fact that they were crafted by saints added to these items’ power, and other saintly writings not initially intended to function as amulets could be appropriated and used as such later. Meanwhile, the lesser clergy created amulets for their parishioners with some regularity, and Skemer paints a convincing picture of a fairly vibrant low-level trade in these simple but supposedly powerful items.

Skemer notes two significant changes in the production of amulets over the course of the Middle Ages, one illustrative of the larger history of medieval magic, and one illustrative of the larger history of medieval literacy and writing. With the influx of ancient and Arab learning into medieval Europe after the twelfth century, some amulets began to become much more “learned,” incorporating elements of “Solomonic” ritual magic drawn from grimoires like Picatrix or the Sworn Book of Honorius. Condemnations of amulets grew more detailed, reflecting the increasing sophistication of magic itself and of demonology in this period. At the same time, notions of natural magic grounded in these same learned sources contributed new arguments in favor of the legitimacy of potential amuletic power. Slightly later but mainly overlapping with this development, the growth of lay literacy in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries led to an increase in production, as well as an increase in the audience for certain types of amulets. As Skemer points out, amulets were always utilized at all levels of medieval society. People did not need to read amuletic texts to make use of them, but people who could read sometimes wanted texts of a slightly different sort, that they could not only carry with them but read themselves. Unsurprisingly, vernacular amulets began to appear as written vernaculars became more common. Macaronic amulets also
developed, in which vernacular rubrics might indicate to the literate laity at least the general sense of the Latin that followed.

Skemer ends his book with the printing revolution, but one wonders why (aside from the fact that this is a book about the Middle Ages). As it did with genres, printing allowed the mass production of standard, popular amuletic texts. The printed word did not immediately supplant the handwritten, however, and amuletic texts might seem a genre in which particular value would cling to the individually written text over the mass-produced. The Reformation also altered the larger religious context in which amulets operated, as Protestants lumped them together with relics and religious icons as a baleful example of Catholic superstition. Nevertheless, Skemer’s point, insofar as he treats these matters, seems to be that amulets continued to be used in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries largely as they had been in the fourteenth and fifteenth. He appears to end his analysis around 1500 simply because this is the traditional medieval/early modern divide, not because it represents any significant terminus point in his subject matter.

That one wishes Skemer would have given us a book that continued into the early modern period is simply a testament to how good his study is. He has taken an enormous, important, and understudied topic and ranged widely through its history. He deftly interweaves large developments (or large continuities) with detailed examinations of numerous specific amulets (mostly from the later medieval period). He buttresses his points with rich footnotes that show the amazing breadth of his erudition. His book will be fundamental for all future work in this field, and hopefully will inspire more work on early modern and antique amulets as well.

MICHAEL D. BAILEY
Iowa State University


Writing and reading about secret societies, their claims for access to esoteric knowledge, transmitted in mysterious ways from antiquity to a few initiates, their rites, and their symbols could (and often is) extremely tedious. All too often, secret societies exude self-importance and even a degree of pomposity that greatly exaggerates their actual insignificance. Who, except for a few devotees, cares much about this or that specific oath, ritual, symbol, or ceremony? And why should we care at all about a minuscule group of French Freemasons who followed an alleged Egyptian, rather than Scottish, rite, and