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Agency: How Manuscripts Affect and Create Social Realities

Edited by Michael Kohs and Sabine Kienitz

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Cover

A 'letter from Heaven', ID no. I (33 J) 176/1963, Berlin, Museum of European Cultures (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Museum Europäischer Kulturen). Written in Ernstroda near Gotha, Thuringia, and dated 1776. The original sheet of paper was folded once, making four pages. Here we can see p. 1 with the title 'Himmels=Brief, welchen, Gott selber geschrieben' ('Letter from Heaven, which God Himself has written') and page 4. The written bifolium was then folded four times. Two words were visible on the two outer sides resulting from this: 'Gottes Brief' ('God's letter'), shown on p. 4. The upper part of the letter has been cropped and part of the illumination has been cut off. Photography: Christian Krug.

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Can Miniature Qur'ans Be Considered Magical Agents?*

Cornelius Berthold | Hamburg

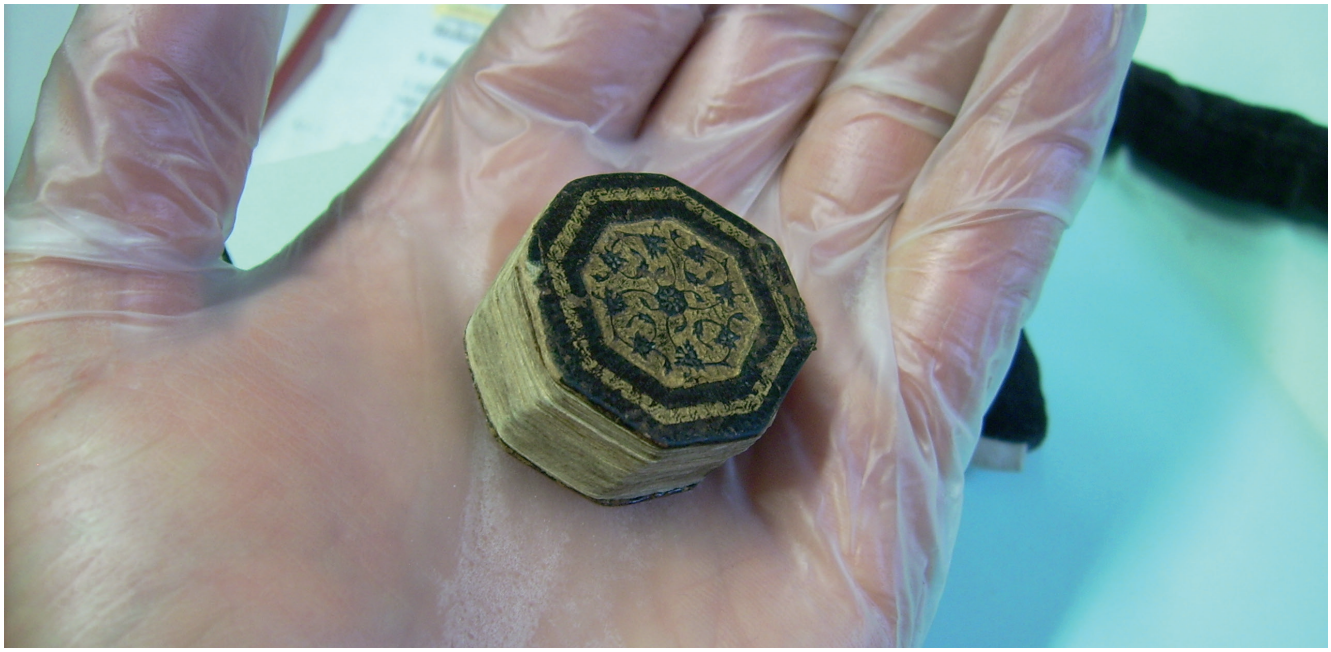


Fig. 1: Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Cod. Arab. 1114 (3.5 × 3.7 × 1.5 cm, 400 folios). An octagonal miniature Qur'an, probably Ottoman, fifteenth to sixteenth century. Printed in its original size.

Copies of the Qur'an in small sizes no more than 9 cm long when the work is closed were made as early as the tenth century.[1] The few early specimens that still exist are sometimes fragmentary and are vastly outnumbered by the extant miniature Qur'ans produced between the fourteenth and nineteenth century. More than half of these[2] are cut to a peculiar octagonal form (see the examples in Figs 1–3), which I primarily interpret as an attempt to achieve a handy roundness of the object.[3] They appear not only as codices,

* The research for this article was carried out at the Sonderforschungsbereich 950 'Manuskriptkulturen in Asien, Afrika und Europa', University of Hamburg, funded by the German Research Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, DFG) and was part of the general work conducted at the Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures (CSMC). The results of my research on miniature Qur'ans have been published in a monograph on the subject (see Berthold 2021). For the sake of simplicity, I shall only refer to dates in the Common Era (CE) here and not according to the Islamic calendar.

[1] On the proposed size limits for miniature Qur'ans, see the section on prerequisites below. Probably one of the earliest examples is from The Nasser D. Khalili Collection of Islamic Art: acc. no. Qur 430. One page measures 7.3 × 6.0 cm and is filled with no less than 30 lines of Abbasid-era script. Cf. Déroche 1992, No. 82.

[2] My corpus contains more than 500 small manuscripts with Qur'anic content from major libraries and collections in Europe and the Topkapı Sarayı Müzesi Kütüphanesi in Istanbul, as well as several pieces sold by the auction houses Sotheby's and Christie's. Approximately 160 of them qualify as miniature Qur'an manuscripts, roughly two thirds of which are octagonal codices. Based on the number of collections not considered here, especially in libraries in the Middle East, I expect that more than a thousand specimens will have survived to this day. The oldest octagonal miniature Qur'an of which I am aware is kept at the Topkapı Sarayı Müzesi Kütüphanesi in Istanbul; its shelf mark is E. H. 450 and it has been dated to 1494. Cf. Karatay 1962, No. 417.

[3] Another explanation of this form tentatively presented by Coffey 2010, 110 n. 12 is that the floorplan of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem possibly served as inspiration. For a longer discussion on the origin of the octagonal shape, see Berthold 2021, 87–94. I have written about the sensory properties of miniature Qur'ans in Berthold 2020.

Fig. 2: Copenhagen, The David Collection, acc. no. 41-1999 (8.3 × 8.0 × 3.0 cm, 300 folios). The first (right) and second (left) surah in a miniature Qur'an on blue paper, surrounded by a frame with floral decoration on a gilded background. The surah titles are written above the main written area and the numbers of verses of each surah are given below. Iran, 1671. Printed in its original size.

Fig. 3: Copenhagen, The David Collection, acc. no. 41-1999 (8.3 × 8.0 × 3.0 cm, 300 folios). The last surahs in the same Qur'an as Fig. 2, their headings in golden panels written in red ink. Iran, 1671. Printed in its original size.

but as scrolls (Figs 4–5)[4] and even as foldable textile sheets (Figs 6–7). These manuscripts were produced in practically every part of the Islamic world, but predominantly in Iran, the Ottoman Empire and India. However, as their minute writing is not appropriate for convenient reading or recitation, they must have served another purpose or even multiple purposes because otherwise their wide dissemination cannot be explained properly.[5] One of those purposes – their involvement with 'magical practices' – is the subject of this paper, although it should be borne in mind that other modes of usage also existed. Going beyond the age of manuscripts, printed miniature Qur'ans are probably even more widespread nowadays than their handwritten precursors in pre-modern times and can be bought at little cost, even in online shops. They are carried or worn close to the body or hung around rear-view mirrors in cars.[6]

After touching upon the question of which manuscripts qualify as miniature Qur'ans, a concept of magic and religion will be discussed briefly that is taken from cognitive science, which will help the reader understand the role that miniature Qur'ans played in the lives of the people who produced and used them in the past. An attempt will be made to demonstrate that miniature Qur'ans were very likely perceived as agents in the sense that they were meant to influence supernatural entities. Their proximity to other talismanic practices in terms of morphology and content makes it highly probable that they were used in similar ways.

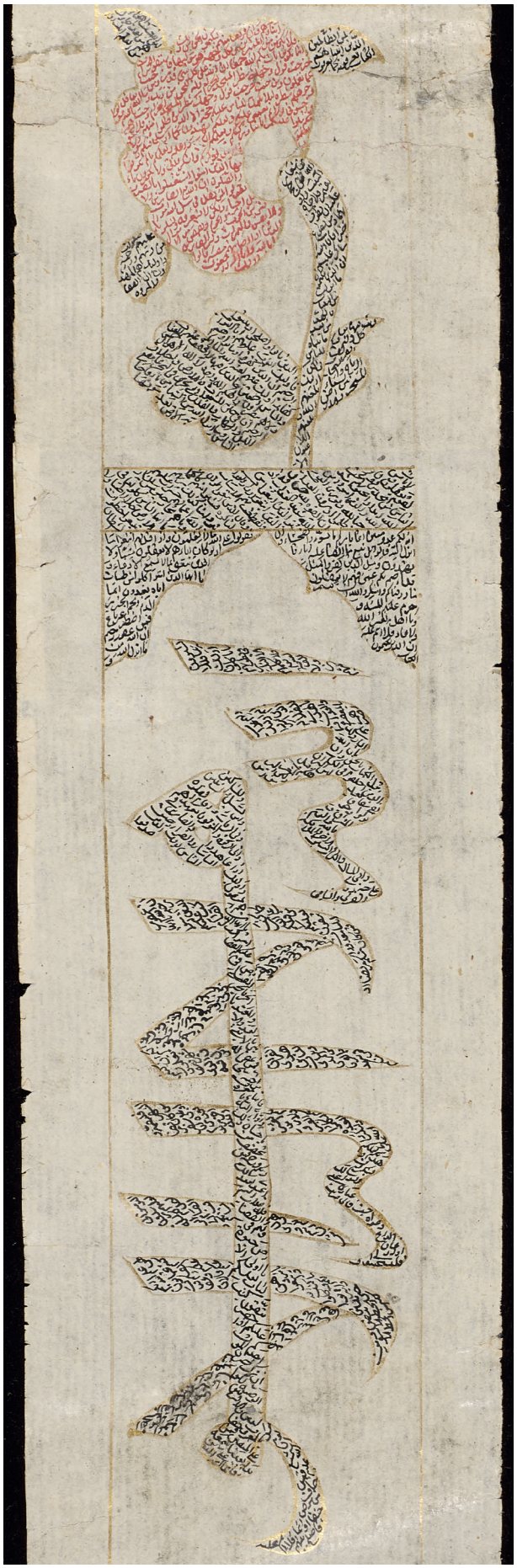
With regard to terminology, a 'talisman' is understood to be an object that is believed to avert evil, heal and/or bring good luck by virtue of its materiality or because of the signs inscribed on it. The term 'amulet', following Hamès 2007, designates a talismanic pendant that can be carried or worn on the body or hung on a wall in the house. Hence, every amulet is a talisman in this paper, but not vice versa.

Fig. 4: Oxford, Bodleian Libraries, MS Arab. G 14. Beginning of a Qur'anic scroll on paper measuring 356.0 × 7.5 cm. The panel filled with larger script contains the first surah and the first verses of the second one, which is then continued below in minute script. Printed in its original size.

[4] A recent study on scrolls, including complete Qur'ans, is in Nünlist 2020.

[5] To the best of my knowledge, the only notable dedicated publication so far (and one from which my own work has greatly benefitted) is Coffey 2010.

[6] For a short study of 1980s car-amulet practices in Jerusalem, see Abramovitch and Epstein 1988. For recent scholarship on printed miniature Qur'ans, see the contributions in Myrvold and Parmenter 2019.



Prerequisites: a matter of size

It is difficult to propose a general definition for miniature Qur'ans. What exactly counts as being a 'miniature'? Should small but not tiny portable Qur'ans intended for private reading – which I will call 'pocket Qur'ans' here for the sake of simplicity – be included? (See Figs 8–10 for example.) Is it necessary for such small works to contain the entire Qur'an? Can other texts like prayers or talismanic symbols be included as well? How relevant are the forms of usage in which miniature Qur'ans are involved and which distinguish them from other forms of book use? After all, an object that was not designed with a magical purpose in mind could still be used as such, and vice versa. On the other hand, objects that are different in nature, but have a similar appearance (e.g. small books with Qur'anic surahs and prayers)[7] might be used in the same 'magical' practice as a miniature Qur'an. It is clear that both morphological and usage-related characteristics would have to be considered in a definition. One convenient but simplified answer would be to say that Qur'ans that are too small for comfortable reading qualify as miniature Qur'ans. How conveniently a text can be read depends more on the size of the script than on its overall dimensions, however, so strictly speaking, a very large piece of writing material covered in small script would still fit this definition, but could hardly be called a miniature Qur'an unless it was folded together. Having outlined these problems, I will refrain from proposing a strict definition here; rather than that, several characteristics will be listed which *indicate* that a given manuscript qualifies as a miniature Qur'an, especially when taken together:

[7] For a brief description of these predominantly Ottoman 'prayer books', see below, Sobieroj 2007, 66–69, and Berthold 2021, 16–18.

Fig. 5: Oxford, Bodleian Libraries, MS Arab. G 14. A section from the same Qur'anic scroll as in Fig. 4. The large script, which is actually made up of minute writing, shows the beginning of the 'Throne verse' Q (2:255), a verse frequently used on talismans. Printed in its original size.

1. The manuscript contains the complete text of the Qur'an.
2. When closed (like a codex) or folded (like a piece of cloth), the longest side of the object is 9 cm or less in size.[8] Rolled-up scrolls can be up to 12 cm wide and 3 cm in diameter.
3. The line spacing is 3 mm or less. The letters without ascenders and descenders may not even be higher than 1 mm.[9]
4. There is evidence of a mode of usage other than reading, e.g. a matching case or metal cylinder for carrying, creases in a textile Qur'an resulting from folding it together, or simply a lack of traces of use on the inside (like the typically stained lower edges on the paper where the user's thumbs held the codex or the pages were turned), perhaps in contrast to worn edges and corners on the outside.
5. The object's shape may be irregular, e.g. a scroll, an octagonal codex or a foldable piece of cloth (see Figs 1–7).

Judging by the data from library and auction catalogues, plus the 20 or so specimens which I had the opportunity to scrutinise, it appears that most miniature Qur'ans in codex form are either single-text manuscripts or contain up to three additional prayers (Arab. sg. *duʿāʾ*) after the Qur'anic text (usually in the hand of the primary scribe). Hence this group can easily be distinguished from the small Ottoman prayer books, for example. Besides Qur'anic surahs and prayers, the prayer books frequently contain magical squares, seals and other talismans as well.[10] Thus they border on miniature Qur'ans as a cultural phenomenon, as do fields like the general treatment of copies of the Qur'an in Muslim societies and, of course, the morphology and use of amulets and other talismanic objects. All of this will be reflected in the following analysis, even though miniature Qur'ans in the narrow sense – scrolls and codices containing the whole Qur'anic text, small enough to be carried around in a little container – are the main focus.

Before approaching the complex issue of what qualifies as 'magical' practice within the scope of this paper, it seems necessary to repeat that miniature Qur'ans cannot be reduced to a purely talismanic function; as a few sources indicate, they served other purposes as well. The German polymath Adam Olearius, for instance, reported that small Qur'ans were worn as part of the festive headgear of men participating in a Shīʿī procession commemorating the death of ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib (d.660), the Prophet Muḥammad's cousin, son-in-law and later caliph. The event Olearius described took place in Azerbaijan during Ramadan in 1637.[11] Two centuries later, the adventurer Richard Francis Burton travelled undercover to Mecca. He stated in his *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to El-Medinah and Meccah* (1855–1856) that small Qur'ans, called 'Hamail' (from Arabic *ḥamāʾil*, denoting the 'things that are worn', e.g. a belt, but also used as a singular term denoting an amuletic pendant among Turkish- and Persian-speaking people[12]), were considered a token of pilgrimage and worn especially by Turkish Muslims. Carried inside a velvet or morocco case, the Qur'an was suspended by a cord so it hung on the right-hand side of the body.[13] Miniature Qur'ans attached to Turkish military flags (sg. *sancak*, the basis for the frequently used term 'Sancak Qur'an' applied to miniature Qur'ans), a practice attested by a few written sources[14] and extant originals kept at Topkapı Palace in Istanbul, indicate that they acted as symbols of the divine sanctioning of Ottoman politics and conquests – besides having possible functions as morale boosters or good-luck charms for the troops.

A model for understanding magical and religious thinking

When pondering the question of whether or not miniature Qur'ans were used in magical practices or were even perceived as magical agents, two major preconditions have to be considered.[15] First, 'magical' practices in the broadest sense – including the use of talismans – were widespread in the Middle East (and elsewhere, of course) long before

[8] The measurements taken from my corpus indicate a subtle but noticeable gap between what I called 'pocket Qur'ans' and actual miniature ones. The former are, on average, no shorter than 10 cm on their longest side (in codex form), while the latter, especially octagonal ones, begin at around 8 cm and are typically even smaller, around 5 cm.

[9] In this respect, pocket Qur'ans differ from miniature ones, too, as their line spacing is approx. 6 mm on average.

[10] Sobieroj 2007, 69–70. One notable exception is preserved in the Indiana University Collections (Lilly Library, Adomeit Miniature Islamic Manuscripts C9). This 4 × 4 cm octagonal manuscript was probably made in eighteenth- to nineteenth-century Iran. Despite its similarity to actual miniature Qur'ans, it only contains Qur'anic excerpts. The words of the verses appear to be randomly arranged on the page. See Coffey 2010, 97–99.

[11] Olearius 1656, 436.

[12] On the term *ḥamāʾil*, see Hamès 2007 and Anetshofer 2018, 189. This term was also used to refer to the prayer books, as shown below.

[13] Burton 1874, vol. 1, 135 and 232–233.

[14] Coffey 2010, 83–84 and Berthold 2021, 149–157.

[15] For a more extensive discussion of 'magic' in Islam with regard to miniature Qur'ans, see Berthold 2021, 105–126.

Fig. 6: Dublin, Chester Beatty Library, MS 1612. An Ottoman Qur'an on linen written in minute script. Total size approx. 68 × 54 cm. The creases indicate that it was just 7.5 × 5.5 cm in size when folded up.

Fig. 7: Dublin, Chester Beatty Library, MS 1612. Detail from the Ottoman Qur'an on a textile, containing the end of the second and the beginning of the third surah. Printed in its original size.

the advent of Islam.[16] Naturally, some of them continued to exist, often in a somewhat Islamicised form. The production and use of amulets and talismans, a plethora of divination practices, interpretation of dreams and omens as well as astrology and alchemy were common in all corners of the Islamic world, and most parts of society were involved in them one way or another.[17] If miniature Qur'ans were, indeed, used for magical practices, as I will argue, they have to be understood as part of this wide and diverse field, sharing features and characteristics with related customs and drawing on the same concepts regarding their function and legitimisation. This leads to the second aspect, namely the discussions among Muslim scholars about which practices were considered irreconcilable with religious law and which could be tolerated. The common denominator seems to have been that only beneficial ('white') magic was tolerable, if at all.[18] The use of Qur'anic words and phrases for talismans was permissible and even encouraged because of its efficacy,[19] even though it could be argued that they primarily acted as a legitimising cover for practices that were neither Qur'anic nor part of the Prophet's tradition. It is therefore to be expected that simply wearing a small Qur'an close to one's body was hardly considered 'practising magic' by Muslims; an emic understanding of the term will therefore not confirm the hypothesis presented in this paper. It has been argued that a substantive definition of magic, i.e. that it encompasses certain phenomena and not others, will not withstand the test of cross-cultural analysis as it could constantly be challenged with formerly unknown examples of magical or religious practices. This approach would also inherit discourses on magic led by authors writing from either an internal perspective (e.g. by practitioners) or – more often – from an external perspective that polemically aims to red-line and condemn magic. This itself would not be very problematic for a study concerned with the Islamic world, seeing as we find similar types of discourse there.[20] Still, the existence of so many phenomena that could simultaneously be explained from a religious and magical perspective suggests that using them to form categories is problematic.[21]

Instead of that, I wish to draw on some concepts derived from cognitive science, as presented by Konrad Talmont-Kaminski.[22] As he argues, a dichotomy between religious or magical beliefs and the knowledge of empirical facts is a modern perspective at best. Both are obtained by the same cognitive mechanisms which allow humans to rationalise the world around them, like problem-solving and agent detection heuristics, in order to improve their chances of survival. Religion and magic are therefore, in principle, no less rational.[23] This helps to explain why religious and magical

[16] Schaefer 2006, 7–20. For the continuation of pre-Islamic amulet practices in Islamic times, cf. Schienerl 1988, 10–18.

[17] An overview of recorded beliefs and practices can be found in Maddison and Savage-Smith 1997 and Leonie 2016.

[18] Fahd 1997, 568–571.

[19] Ruska et al. 2000, 501.

[20] Otto 2018, esp. 526–538.

[21] Bernd-Christian Otto and Michael Stausberg suggest speaking of 'patterns of magicity', i.e. analysing individual phenomena like talismanry; see Otto and Stausberg 2013, 10–11.

[22] Talmont-Kaminski 2013.

[23] Talmont-Kaminski 2013, 9–11 and 39–42. His differentiation between empirically verifiable cognition (which leads to knowing what is 'true') and 'by-products' (which lead to religious and magical beliefs) is based on the assumption that only the former provide a tangible evolutionary advantage;

Fig. 8: Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Cod. Arab. 1116, fol. 3v. Incipit page of an exquisitely made and well-preserved Ottoman 'pocket Qur'an' penned on paper by the calligrapher Shaykh Ḥamdullāh around 1480–1490 (see Rebhan and Riesterer 1998, no. 15). The page measures 13.0 × 8.5 cm. Printed in its original size.

Fig. 9: Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Cod. Arab. 1116, fol. 146r. A page from the same 'pocket Qur'an' as in Fig. 8 showing a section from the eleventh surah. The script is fully vocalised and gold discs mark the intersections between the individual verses. Small red letters indicate where pauses are compulsory, permissible or forbidden when reciting the text. The marginal note in gold ink marks the beginning of the twelfth of 30 parts of the text, intended for reading a section a day in the month of Ramadan, for instance. Printed in its original size.

beliefs mostly mirror the concepts and ontological categories of the 'natural' world, but are 'minimally counter-intuitive',[24] which can be understood as adding a 'twist' to these concepts and categories. Carrying a weapon, for example, increases one's chance of prevailing against physical opponents, but reducing the weapon to a small pendant hanging around one's neck might still help against demons, even though the weapon's small size and the invisibility of the enemy would be counter-intuitive elements.[25] That humans tend to apply already known ontologies and categories to new phenomena also explains why religious or magical practices tend to follow similar patterns through time and in different parts of the world.[26] This will help with inferring the role played by miniature Qur'ans from related beliefs and practices later.

see 79–80. However, he attests religions a significant pro-social function; see 98–99.

[24] Talmont-Kaminski 2013, 53–58. The term 'minimally counter-intuitive' goes back to Pascal Boyer.

[25] Schienerl 1988, 60–62, argues that even iron – the typical material used for blades – would be considered effective against supernatural creatures.

[26] Cf. the term 'pattern(s) of magicity' proposed by Otto and Stausberg 2013, 10–11.

Fig. 10: The slipcase preserved with the manuscript Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Cod. Arab. 1116, made of cardboard covered in leather. Apparently, it was not supposed to be carried by itself as a pouch, but it may have been tucked inside one.

Fig. 11: Hamburg, Museum am Rothenbaum – Kulturen und Künste der Welt (MARKK), inv. no. 13.18:35. An amulet container from East Africa; probably late nineteenth/early twentieth century.

Fig. 12: Two types of *bāzū-band* cases for wearing on the bearer's sleeve; Afghanistan, Iran or India, late nineteenth/early twentieth century. Private collection (octagonal case 5.7 × 5.7 × 2.1 cm, oblong cases 7.3 × 1.4 × 1.4 cm, not counting the hinge and lugs).

Fig. 13: Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, ID no. I. 3618 (4.0 × 3.8 × 2.1 cm, including the hinge). A miniature Qur'an case made of iron with gold inlay; probably Iran, nineteenth century. The construction is slightly different from *bāzū-band* cases, not least because it is higher. Some Qur'an cases also have a loop in the centre of the lid.

In order to distinguish between religious and magical beliefs, Talmont-Kaminski proposes that while the former focus on transcendent ends (e.g. the forgiveness of one's sins by God, guaranteeing salvation after death), magic is mostly supposed to affect the perceivable world (e.g. to protect one from snakebites or win another person's love). Regardless of whether the ends are transcendent or mundane, religion and magic both ask for the help of or employ supernatural entities.[27] Actual established religions, however, are almost always what Talmont-Kaminski – following Ilkka Pyysiäinen – calls 'magico-religious complexes' as they contain beliefs and practices that fall into both categories.[28] Adapting this framework to miniature Qur'ans, it would mean that if it could be shown that these objects were (and are) thought to influence a supernatural entity in order to affect the perceivable world, this would qualify as a magical belief among Muslims. Even more relevant to the topic of this paper, it would also imply that the people using miniature Qur'ans attributed an agency to these objects.

Muslim scholars have used different categories to distinguish between religion and magic. The simple act of praying to God for good health, for instance (a mundane effect) would not be considered to lie outside religion. Ibn Khaldūn (d.1406) even considered miracles (*karāmāt*) like those performed by Sufi saints as being part of religion because in this case humans received divine help, which they would use to affect the here and now. In magic, in his opinion, psychic force and demons would be employed.[29] Ibn Khaldūn was critical of practices like talismanry, however, and considered some Sufis to be exaggerators if they delved into magic too deeply in his understanding.[30] This is interesting to note since, as Liana Saif points out, magic tended to be justified in the Islamic world from the thirteenth century onwards as a power that God granted to devotees of mysticism, such as Sufis. Before that, it was understood as part of the natural universe that could be explored and tamed through study.[31]

Magical practices related to miniature Qur'ans in the Middle East

Before elaborating on magical agency, a few examples from the Islamic world will be mentioned to illustrate the use of talismans carried on the body as amulets.[32] As the magical

[27] Talmont-Kaminski 2013, 63–64.

[28] Talmont-Kaminski 2013, 48 and 64–65.

[29] Fahd 1997, 570.

[30] Saif 2017, 336.

[31] Saif 2017, 297 and passim.

[32] The focus will not be on other talismanic practices here, such as dissolving the ink of a written amulet in water so it can be drunk as a remedy against sickness, a practice basically identical to the one in which inscribed

Fig. 14: New York, Brooklyn Museum, acc. no. 1997.3.37. Portrait of a female member of the Shah's family wearing *bāzū-band* amulet cases on her sleeves; Iran, late nineteenth/early twentieth century.

aspects of miniature Qur'ans are, if anything, talismanic or amuletic (because the Qur'an was worn as a pendant), I consider not only the small Ottoman prayer books but 'normal' talismans made of stone, metal or written paper the closest relatives of miniature Qur'ans.[33] Peter W. Schienerl has convincingly pointed out the unbroken currents in the production and use of amulets from antiquity to the present day. In Egypt, which became part of the Islamic world as early as the seventh century, amulets have been used for millennia. Prayers or apotropaic formulas written on strips of papyrus were tucked inside small metal cylinders which, as Schienerl argues, were miniature versions of tubes to store or transport normal manuscript scrolls.[34] These cylindrical amulet containers were often decorated and had one or more lugs through which a cord could run. Similar containers were used in neighbouring regions like Carthage and Greece, with additional ornamental pendants or even talismanic inscriptions on the outside. Unlike the old Egyptian cases, they could now be carried horizontally due to them being fitted with lugs or be given other shapes and forms such as rectangular boxes.[35] These practices were not abolished with the advent of Islam, a fact to which several strikingly similar amulet containers attest that can be dated to the nineteenth century (Fig. 11).[36] However, the writing material had become paper and the content of the talismanic texts was now based on Islamic formulas: by invoking the names of God, angels or prominent religious figures and by quoting passages proclaiming God's might or prayer-like verses from the Qur'an, these texts were believed to repel evil and call for divine help.[37] The talisman could, then, be considered a constant enunciator of apotropaic texts.

The whole Qur'an, which most Muslims still consider the most important religious text of all on the grounds of

talismanic metal bowls are used. For more information on the latter, see Langer 2013, for example.

[33] Miniature Qur'ans share production-related characteristics with normal-sized copies of the Qur'an, of course, which are equally venerated.

[34] Schienerl 1988, 17–29.

[35] Schienerl 1988, 17–29.

[36] See the examples in Leoni 2016, 85–86. There are also examples of amulet cases from the Sahara region mentioned by Schienerl 1988, 44–59.

[37] Ruska et al. 2000, 501 and Gruber 2016, 38–44.

Fig. 15 (right above): Leipzig University Library, B. or. 193, pp. 1–2 (according to an inked Western pagination; an additional foliation in pencil miscounts leaves at least twice and has therefore not been included here). First double page of an Ottoman prayer book, beginning with the 36th surah, called *yāʾsīn*. A single folio is 10.2 × 7.2 cm in size. Printed in its original size.

Fig. 16 (right below): A double page from the same manuscript as Fig. 15, Leipzig University Library, B. or. 193, pp. 389–390, showing Muḥammad's 'Seal of Prophecy' (*mühr-i nübüvvet*) on the right. Besides the Prophet, the four 'rightly guided caliphs' are also mentioned. The fourth and last of them, ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib, is grouped together with the names of his sons Ḥasan and Ḥusayn, both of whom are important to Shīʿī Muslims. Unlike the double page depicted in Fig. 15, the paper of this double page shows traces of use, almost certainly due to readers touching the seal with their foreheads or fingers in the hope of benefitting from its positive effects (see Rudy 2018 on traces of physical contact in European manuscripts). The diagram on the left is in the shape of the Arabic letter *ʿayn*, which the name ʿAlī starts with, for instance (for a brief explanation of this kind of diagram, see Karolewski 2016 and Gruber 2019). Printed in its original size.

its perfection and inimitability, would have been the most influential or active talisman of all. This can be assumed quite safely, not only because it contains all the verses that were believed to be apotropaic, but because it was believed to be an eternal text containing all the concepts, truths and laws of relevance[38] – it was (and still is) much more than the sum of its verses. This is confirmed or implied by Western eyewitnesses like Edward W. Lane, who observed the 'Manners and Customs of Modern Egyptians' in the early nineteenth century. He wrote that 'The most esteemed of all "ḥegábs" (or charms) is a "muṣ-ḥaf" (or copy of the Ḳur-án)', while other written charms merely contained passages of the Qur'an, names of angels, numerals or diagrams.[39] In a similar vein, in his 1927 travel report, William Seabrook wrote that wearing a copy of the entire Qur'an was 'as if a devout Catholic had the medals of all the saints strung around his neck'.[40]

Were miniature Qur'ans believed to act in a magical way?

Despite the scarcity of explicit evidence, one may safely argue that miniature Qur'ans were believed by many of their Muslim owners to possess apotropaic functions, like a talisman. They were thought to influence demons and even God so as to avert evil or bring the bearer good luck in this world, thus qualifying as objects of magical belief by the modern concept outlined above. Besides relying on reports from outside the Muslim community, like those of the European travellers mentioned above, the argument made here is based on the similarity to other magical practices, primarily the use of written talismans in the Islamic world.[41] Many of these employ Qur'anic text and prayers, be it on small engraved stones or metal pendants, on inscribed 'magical' bowls from which water can be drunk as a remedy for sickness (as the liquid is believed to absorb the healing power of the words), on shirts to provide protection in battle or on paper or a textile which can be rolled up or folded and worn on the body.[42] This degree of intimacy was achieved by sewing them into clothing or tucking them into metal pendant cases. These cases not only demonstrate continuity in the use of amulets from antiquity to the modern age, as described earlier, but they are a prime example of the phenomenological and morphological overlap that exists with carrying or wearing miniature Qur'ans on one's body. Many of the specimens that still exist are made of silver and were produced in the nineteenth century, mostly in Iran, but also in Yemen and the Islamic West. The cases for paper amulets are approx. 7–10 cm long and tubular with either a circular or hexagonal cross-section or have other shapes, such as that of an octagonal box with a diameter of 4–8 cm and a height of 1.3–2 cm (see Fig. 12 for an example).[43] The latter two types thus resemble the cases for miniature Qur'an manuscripts of the scroll and octagonal codex form respectively (Fig. 13). The similarity includes the lugs through which cords or ribbons could run to suspend or tie the cases to the bearer's arms (hence the Persian term *bāzū-band*, meaning 'armband'; see Fig. 14).[44] Although containers for miniature Qur'ans tend to be slightly bigger because of the larger size of the manuscripts and their thickness – both the scroll format in cylindrical containers and the octagonal ones in corresponding cases – there a few examples of *bāzū-band*-type boxes for miniature Qur'ans, thus blurring the line between paper amulet and Qur'an containers.[45] It illustrates just how intuitive it may have been for pre-modern Muslims to transfer their established belief in the efficacy of amulets to that of Qur'an manuscripts in an amulet form – which would then have had the same – or rather, even more – efficacy.

[38] Welch 1986, 402 and 425–427.

[39] Lane 1860, 247.

[40] Seabrook 1927, 48–49. For a longer list of accounts, see Berthold 2021, 135–140.

[41] Maddison and Savage-Smith 1997, 132–134.

[42] For a short overview of magical practices in the Islamic world, see Gruber 2016. One Qur'an written on linen measuring approx. 68 × 54 cm is kept at the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin (MS 1612, see Figs 6 and 7). Based on the visible crease lines in the fabric, I would estimate its size when folded to be approx. 7.5 × 5.5 cm.

[43] The height of the octagonal case of the specimen in Fig. 12 is too low to contain most octagonal Qur'an manuscripts for which I have measurements. The lid is inscribed using a niello technique with the throne verse (2:255), a section of the Qur'an found frequently on talismans. On the sides one can find the names of the Prophet, his daughter Fāṭima, her husband ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib and their sons, Ḥasan and Ḥusayn, all of whom are important figures for Shīʿī Muslims.

[44] Newid and Vasegh Abbasi 2007, 268. Portraits from the Qajar era in Iran (late eighteenth to early twentieth century) suggest that the cases were, in fact, tied to the sleeves of garments. They often existed as pairs and were worn that way as well.

[45] Maddison and Savage-Smith 1997, 144–145. There are octagonal miniature Qur'ans in two volumes, e.g. Khalili Collection of Islamic Art, acc. no. QUR315 (A and B). Even if they were not worn like paired *bāzū-bands* as described in Maddison and Savage-Smith 1997, 145, they at least correspond to them morphologically. Cf. Lot 37 in Christie's, *Sale 6940, London, October 2004, Islamic Art and Manuscripts*, available online: <https://www.christies.com/lotfinder/lot/miniature-two-part-quran-iran-19th-century-4351207-details.aspx?from=searchresults&intObjectID=4351207&sid=fb375025-7e32-4686-8abd-59250bbb34ab>. Originally, however, the cases for this pair of octagonal miniature Qur'ans do not seem to have been made for these manuscripts as they are considerably larger in size. I have since found more evidence of the *bāzū-band*-like wearing of miniature Qur'ans; see Berthold 2021, 96–100, 120–122 and 137.

Fig. 17: Leipzig University Library, B. or. 107, unfoliated. A so-called 'Seal of Solomon' (*mühr Süleymān*), preceded by an instructional text (right-hand page) and the instructions and graphical representation of a magical square (on the left) in an Ottoman prayer book measuring 13.5 × 9.4 cm.

The 'pocket-size' manuscripts[46] mentioned above are mostly of Ottoman origin and serve as a second example of manuscripts acting as agents in a similar way to miniature Qur'ans. These small books typically contain excerpts from the Qur'an (see Figs 15 and 18), prayers with explanations in Turkish, and talismans like the 'Seal of [Muḥammad's] Prophecy' (*mühr-i nübüvvet* in Ottoman Turkish; see Fig. 16),[47] the 'Seal of Solomon' (*khātam Sulaymān* or *muhr Sulaymān* in Arabic; see Fig. 17),[48] depictions of ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib's legendary bifurcated sword Dhū l-Faqār, and magical squares.[49] The selections of surahs differ in detail, but usually centre around surahs 1, 36, 48, 67, 78 and 112–114,[50] which declare God's omnipotence, recount his miracles and describe which benefits He bestows upon His believers, while the non-believers are punished. Surahs 113 and 114 begin with the prayer-like formula 'Say: I seek refuge with the Lord of Daybreak' and 'Say: I seek refuge with the Lord of Mankind' respectively. These multiple-text manuscripts are not only 'siblings' to miniature Qur'ans because of their size and Qur'anic content, though, but were also worn on the body for personal protection. According to paratexts added to them, e.g. by Western soldiers who wrote a note, some of these manuscripts now in European libraries were taken as booty

[46] Again, this data is from my own corpus, which started with a maximum length of 14 cm as a criterion for inclusion. Most of these prayer books, more than 140 of which I have recorded, are smaller than this, typically 8–12 × 7–10 cm.

[47] This is a representation of the mark of apostleship which the Prophet is believed to have had between his shoulder blades. See Gruber 2013, 4, where she also quotes this instruction from a nineteenth-century seal depiction: 'whoever rubs the seal on his face morning and night will be absolved from eighty years of sins; and whoever looks at the seal at the beginning of the month will be safe from all misfortune'. It appears as if the manuscript shown in Fig. 16 bears witness to such practices.

[48] Maddison and Savage-Smith 1997, 60. This seal also serves as a graphical representation of the actual seal that King Salomon is believed to have owned.

[49] Sesiano 2002.

[50] This assessment is based on the contents of some 30 specimens from Leipzig University Library. The following shelf marks are some examples: B. or. 182, 185, 188, 189, 191–196 and 199. The works can be viewed online here: *Qalamos* <https://www.qalamos.net/content/> (accessed 1 November 2022).

Fig. 18: Oxford, Bodleian Libraries, MS Laud Or. 15, fol. 3ᵛ. First page with the beginning of the 36th surah in an unusually small Ottoman (?) prayer book; the manuscript measures 7.1 × 4.2 cm. Printed in its original size.

Fig. 19: Bodleian Libraries, MS Laud Or. 15, fol. 45ʳ. Depiction of the sword Dhū l-Faqār in the same prayer book as Fig. 18. The legendary sword is discernible because of its bifurcated tip; the text simply calls it a sword, Arab. *sayf*. It appears at the end of a short Qur'anic section based on verses 8:45 and 47:4, which tell believers to be steadfast and strike their enemies, before citing from 57:25 that iron was brought to mankind as a powerful and useful gift. At the bottom, a line in Arabic asks for protection for the keeper of this book (*ḥāmil*, etymologically related to the term *ḥamāyil*). Printed in its original size.

after battles with the Ottomans.[51] It is very likely they are the same kind of books briefly described by the Serbian janissary Konstantin Mihailović (*c*.1430s–1480s), a witness of the wars fought by the Ottomans on the Balkans. In his memoirs, he wrote that the 'heathens' have 'small books which they treasure like sanctuaries and call hamâyil, meaning "gospel". They wear them under the arm, especially in wartime, and they are decorated with a depiction of Zülfikâr, the sabre. They claim that the image of the sabre helps them in battle'.[52] One prayer book now kept in the Bodleian Libraries, Oxford actually features a depiction of Dhū l-Faqār (Fig. 19).

This indicates that there was a tradition of small-sized codices with substantial Qur'anic content being carried by Ottoman Muslim soldiers in the hope of them having apotropaic effects. The quality of the preserved specimens themselves is often at the lower end of the spectrum, with little illumination, normal-sized script and thus much less text than in proper miniature Qur'an copies (otherwise they would have become too thick and unwieldy). As they contained sections that were clearly designed to be read (e.g. Arabic prayer texts with Turkish instructions, *şerḥ*),[53] these multiple-text manuscripts were not exclusively talismanic in nature. Their diverse contents also mean that they cannot have merely been a cheaper alternative to complete miniature Qur'ans, even if one assumes the latter would have been considered more effective apotropaia. The fact that they were explicitly regarded as amulets is, however, clear from Konstantin Mihailović's description and the term *ḥamāyil*. A catalogue of the library of Sultan Bayezid II (r. 1481–1512) written in Arabic lists several items called *ḥamāʾil adʿiyya* ('prayer-pendant') and *ḥamāʾil malfūf* ('scroll pendant'), which could denote such amuletic prayer manuscripts.[54] If so, their mode of usage formed the origin of the label, which, in turn, connected them to other amulets or amulet containers called *ḥamāʾil* or *ḥamāyil* respectively and thus to magical beliefs and practices.

As mentioned at the beginning, the talismanic or amuletic capacity of miniature Qur'ans is by no means their only

[51] Such secondary entries can be found in Forschungsbibliothek Gotha, Ms. Orient. A 517 (inserted on a separate leaf) and A 789; Bodleian Libraries Oxford, Ms. Bodl. Or. 194 (fol. 116ᵛ); and Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Ms. or. oct. 181 (fol. 100ᵛ), for example. Further evidence and more information on manuscripts taken as booty which are now in German libraries is provided in Sobieroj 2007, 62–66 and Seidensticker 2017, 76–80.

[52] Lachmann 2010, 69, translation into English by the author.

[53] On average, the manuscripts analysed only had seven lines per page, with approx. 1 cm of line spacing.

[54] Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Oriental Collection, Török F. 59, pp. 45–46.

Fig. 20: Library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Ms Török F. 59, p. 15. Detail from the list of Qur'an manuscripts in the library of Sultan Bayezid II, mentioning a few Qur'ans 'the size of an amulet' or 'in the size of a pendant', next to others in Damascus or Samarkand format.

characteristic and may not even be their most prominent feature. Wearing one could be a sign of personal religious devotion, the token of a pilgrim (following Burton's description), and last, but not least, fashionable if produced by skilled scribes and illuminators and encased in a finely decorated silver container.[55] Nevertheless, they contain the Qur'anic text, which forms the essential message of God to mankind, including declarations of God's might and how he helps those in need, both of which were used in various sorts of talismans. In terms of their material properties, miniature Qur'ans appear in the size of pre-existing types of amulets. The inventory of Sultan Bayezid II's library (Fig. 20) contains entries in which some Qur'ans – most likely miniature ones – are described as 'the size of pendants' (*ʿalā qiṭʿat al-ḥamāʾil*).[56] Their shape, which was often octagonal, made them handy and gave them the quality of a piece of jewellery, which indicates that they were probably worn or carried rather than read as they were also kept in fittingly decorated cases that featured lugs or loops to attach a cord. It therefore seems reasonable to assume that miniature Qur'an manuscripts which could easily be carried on one's body were believed to act as talismans, to avert evil (e.g. the evil eye) and possibly even to bring good luck – just like other common amuletic pendants.

One can go further than that and state that an amulet – and thus a miniature Qur'an as well – can be understood as an apotropaic actor or agent. On the one hand, this can be argued from the presence of the Qur'anic text preserved on or inside the object. It evokes the authority of God, the creator and commander of all beings. By preserving the prayers asking for God's help in the here and now, or the praise of his powers, the object contains the crystallised act of worship. It also acts as a representative of God, whose words are contained in it, thereby asking for or benefitting from God's authority in warding off evil. As this means that the object is supposed to influence supernatural beings and make them intervene in this world, it qualifies as a magical agent. On the other hand, people who use miniature Qur'ans as amulets possibly attributed a form of agency to them, either consciously or unconsciously. After all, it is a natural human cognitive mechanism to look for agents rather than accidents as causes of certain phenomena in the environment. This 'hyperactive agency detection device', as it is called by Talmont-Kaminski (following Stewart Guthrie and Justin Barrett), is in his view one of the main reasons for the development of religious and magical beliefs in the first place.[57] It was probably more than a depreciative remark from the outside when Konstantin stated that the Muslims believed the Dhū l-Faqār talismans in their *ḥamāyil* aided them in battle. The agency ascribed to the small amuletic prayer books was not entirely different to that ascribed to miniature Qur'ans.

Conclusion

Humans, one could summarise, consciously or unconsciously assume living agents to be the cause of certain phenomena. Muslims wearing amulets or miniature Qur'an manuscripts very likely believed that these objects actively influenced supernatural beings by repelling evil spirits or attracting good luck through divine intervention, for example. According to the categories presented above, this would qualify as a magical belief as it is

[55] For a more elaborate interpretation of miniature Qur'ans as a phenomenon, see Berthold 2021, 157–162.

[56] Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Oriental Collection, Török F. 59, pp. 14–16. 'Amulet' might be an alternative translation to 'pendant'.

[57] Talmont-Kaminski 2013, 85–86.

focused on mundane ends. In the terminology of the people using them, it was probably not assumed to be magical as the practice was based mostly on Qur'anic verses, invoking the names of God or of religious characters from Islamic history. Still, the connection between amulet use and wearing both miniature Qur'ans and the small Ottoman prayer books was noted and expressed – at least by Turkish- and Persian-speaking people – by the label *ḥamāʾil* or *ḥamāyil*, which was given to all of these objects as they could be carried on the body. The amuletic functions of miniature Qur'ans could be inferred with some certainty from the widespread use of similar talismanic objects and associated practices in Muslim societies. This assumes that the people would have transferred familiar concepts to new contexts. However, these beliefs are also attested by reports from European observers. If one then considers the animistic tendencies in human cognition, it is no stretch to conclude that miniature Qur'ans, like other forms of amulets and talismans, were assumed to act in favour of their owners or users.

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