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Agency: How Manuscripts Affect and Create Social Realities

Edited by Michael Kohs and Sabine Kienitz

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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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Article

Malleable Magic: Medieval Arabic Block Printed Amulets and Their Audiences

Karl Schaefer | Des Moines, Iowa

At first, the topic of Arabic block printed amulets seems to fall outside the focus of ‘*manuscripts as magical agents*’. If, by the term ‘manuscript’ we understand an object created and written by hand using a writing instrument then, by definition, block prints are not themselves manuscripts. On the other hand, given the fact that their identity as mass produced magical devices has only been revealed within the last century and a half¹ and that many, until much more recently, had apparently been misidentified as or had been presumed to be manuscripts, then perhaps we should view them as worthy of inclusion in the present discussion. In addition, the means of their production might have involved a handwritten text and if the block prints were produced in such a manner, then they may be seen as *copies* of manuscripts, at one remove from the original but retaining many of the features of the handwritten form.

More precisely, one theory holds that matrices for the block printed texts were created in the following way.² First, the words of a text were written in dark ink on a very thin sheet of paper. A blank printing block – presumably wood – was then coated with glue and the written surface of the sheet pasted face down onto it. Then, with the dark ink of the text on the paper serving as a guide, the block was carved so as to leave the text raised in relief. Finally, the remaining paper was removed and ink was applied to the raised surface of the block; paper pressed against it produced a printed version of the text.

That Muslims in the early Middle Ages (c.700–1000 CE) were producing printed texts, while not a very recent discovery, is one that was for a long time not widely known or accepted. This is true particularly in the West where credit for the invention of printing traditionally has been assigned

¹ Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall may be the first European scholar to see, in two Arabic texts from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, evidence that the Arabs were practicing some form of printing; see Hammer-Purgstall 1852. Since then, evidence for Arabic knowledge and practice of block printing in the early Middle Ages has steadily mounted. See Schaefer 2006, 21–41 and Schaefer 2014 for an overview of modern scholarship on the subject.

² See Bulliet 1987a, 433.



Fig. 1a: Copenhagen, The David Collection, acc. no. 85/2003, 86.6 × 4.5 cm.



Fig. 1b: Copenhagen, The David Collection, acc. no. 85/2003, split into two parts.

to Johannes Gutenberg (c. 1398–1468 CE) whose publication of the Bible and other books using moveable type ushered in an era of widespread literacy in Europe. As we now know, the creation of multiple copies of texts by mechanical means had been practiced for quite some time before Gutenberg in East Asia.³ It was long thought that Muslims in the Middle East, despite their early adoption of papermaking from the Chinese, had either rejected printing technology or somehow remained ignorant of it in spite of its clear close relationship with papermaking farther east. We now know the situation to have been rather different.

A majority of the surviving examples of Arabic block printing are amulets, texts on paper that were believed by their owners to provide them protection from danger or to secure advantages in navigating their way through the world. In terms of size, most have the dimensions of a modern bookmark, being rectangular strips of paper longer than they are wide. Some examples are larger, resembling in dimension a column of text in a newspaper. A few exceptional examples are more than a meter long and are composed of several strips of paper pasted together end to end (Fig. 3). Others may be square (Fig. 4) or round (Fig. 5). The script styles that one finds also vary. The simplest forms have one script style with the text running horizontally across the paper. More elaborate examples may have two or more script styles. A composition frequently found combines a heading using the monumental Kufi script⁴, either in relief or as negative space surrounded by the inked surface, followed by a simpler, more angular style of lettering.⁵ Some block prints are comprised only of text while others include decoration in the form of frames surrounding the text or sections of it, geometric designs, vegetal designs (leaves or flowers), or some combination of such things. Most of the block printed amulets are printed using black ink but occasionally red or – very rarely – green ink⁶ is used for some parts of the text (Fig. 1). In other

³ Tsien 1985 is a good starting point for learning about the history of printing technology in Asia. See also Barrett 2008.

⁴ Kufi script is the earliest literary Arabic script and in character resembles Gothic black letter script. It evolved over three centuries (700–1000 CE) into ever more elaborate forms and is eventually replaced by other script styles. For examples, see Jazayeri 2017 and Khan 2017. Also very useful is Blair 2006.

⁵ On calligraphy and the use of Kufi script, the oldest calligraphic style of the Arabic script, in Arabic magic see Schaefer 2006, 41–51 and Porter 2010.

⁶ I am aware of only one example of the use of green ink in a block print. This amulet is currently to be found in Davids Samling/The David Collection in Copenhagen (accession number 85/2003) (Fig. 1). An illustration of it also appears in the catalog *Islamic Calligraphy* (Catalogue 27) from the antiquary dealer Sam Fogg (London, 2003). It was apparently acquired by



Fig. 2: Cambridge University Library, T-S NS 306.27, 16.8 × 11.1 cm.

instances, red ink has been added by hand to small sections of the text or its design elements (Fig. 2).

Did their users think that the amulets were imbued with certain powers over or influences with unseen, supernatural or divine powers? If so, what features of the amulets marked those powers? And what has changed in their agency over time? Do they still possess ‘magical’ powers? In this paper, I shall explore how the agency of the block prints, magical and otherwise, has altered over time and suggest some ways in which their agency has acted upon different audiences in different and unexpected ways.

Object oriented ontology (O.O.O.) tells us that all objects have their own histories, their own biographies, their own

relationships.⁷ Certain proponents of O.O.O.⁸ (also known as ‘triple O’) hold that some objects exist independently of humans. However, objects do interact with or upon humans to varying degrees, while others may owe their existence to human actions – either intentional or unintentional. Here, I am specifically addressing members of this last category that, once set loose in the world, become actors in their own right. Viewed in this way, objects possess agency, the capability to affect or interact with other objects in a variety of manners.⁹

As a sub-set of the objects operating in the world, manuscripts belong to a group of objects created by humans for specific reasons and, one might argue, with particular intentions in mind. Like other objects made by humans, however, manuscripts sooner or later act in ways that their creators never intended. For example, a text describing the solution to a mathematical problem quickly changes from an announcement of a scientific breakthrough to a document of historical interest and then perhaps even to evidence for erroneous reasoning. Magic manuscripts constitute an even smaller group of objects within this sub-set and have the distinct characteristic of being intended to elicit action from entities which are and are not of this world or which are, at any rate, thought to exist outside the range of the five human senses – except for rare instances when, according to some belief systems, they may assume shapes that are perceptible to people.

I have in mind here powers thought to be divine and supernatural in form. In Islamic terms, such powers are exercisable only by Allah or, through Him, by His agents (i.e. angels) or by the Jinn. The Jinn, whose existence is attested in the Qur’an, are inhabitants of an unseen world – a mirror of our own.¹⁰ They are conceived of as beings capable of interacting with and altering human affairs but their interactions may be controlled or directed by the employment of magic. The magic could be worked on the actions of both humans *and* the inhabitants of the unseen worlds. For this reason, among others, magic in Islam has, since its beginning, been a subject fraught with danger and

The David Collection in that year. Its provenance is unknown but both the museum and the Fogg catalog ascribe to it an Iranian origin and date it to the eleventh or twelfth century CE.

⁷ See Martin Heidegger’s *Sein und Zeit* (Heidegger 2001; first published 1927, with many subsequent editions and translations). Also, more recently, Harman 2002 and the sources given there.

⁸ The primary developer and proponent of this philosophical outlook is Levi R. Bryant. See his *The Democracy of Objects* (2011). It has been taken up by others as well including the authors cited here.

⁹ On this idea, see Bennett 2010 and Shaviro 2011 and the works cited therein.

¹⁰ See MacDonald et al. 2012.



Fig. 3: Mainz, Gutenberg-Museum, GM 03.1 Schr, 124.6 × 7.4 cm; left: whole; right: split into two parts.

viewed with suspicion.¹¹ Ultimately, it was decided – by consensus – that the use of magic in Islam was valid only if it were used for the *benefit* of humans. The use of magic to cause harm was not permitted. White magic and not black magic, in other words, was acceptable. Arabic amulets are the embodiment of ‘white’ magical practice in Islam.

At this point I must interject some definitions so that it is clear what I am talking about. Let me draw a distinction, first of all, between amulets and talismans, both of which can be considered to possess magical powers, or agency. For this paper, I define a talisman as an object which, by its nature or form, is believed to contain or provide access to a specific power. A lucky rabbit’s foot for Americans or the *cornicello* or *cornetto* for Italians are examples and they fall outside our area of interest here. Amulets, on the other hand, carry supplications in verbal or symbolic graphic form seeking specific outcomes in a person’s life.¹² As such, and under the accepted Muslim rules¹³ for composing a valid amulet, one or more passages from the Qur’an, a prayer or prayers containing specific wording or phraseology, and a list of at least some of the so-called ‘Beautiful Names’ of Allah¹⁴ ought to be included with any supplication. In addition, they may include mystical letter combinations, and so-called ‘magic numbers’, a series of numbers understood to embody – or able to call forth – certain powers.

One such example is held by the Gutenberg Museum in Mainz (Fig. 3).¹⁵ This is an exceptional specimen of the art for several reasons. First, it is one of the few complete block

¹¹ On magic in Islam, see, for example, Savage-Smith 2004 and Fahd 2012. In Islam, seeking assistance or special favor from any being other than Allah is believed to constitute polytheism (*shirk*) so asking one of the Jinn or a Muslim Saint (*wali*, pl. *awliya*) is technically forbidden. However, in practice this prohibition has been enforced only among the most orthodox or ‘fundamental’ practices of the faith. In the present day, the Wahhabis are among the strictest adherents of this view.

¹² In point of fact, often a converse terminology is to be found: Strictly speaking, amulets are objects or collections of objects to which special powers are attributed. Talismans, on the other hand, are objects (including paper) onto which characters or figures are carved or engraved. However, to avoid confusing the reader, the word ‘amulet’ is here used in the narrower sense of talisman.

¹³ The standard ‘handbook’ of rules for amulet composition is Aḥmad al-Būnī’s *Shams al-Ma’ārif* which is now recognized to be a compendium of treatises on amulets dating to the thirteenth century.

¹⁴ In Islamic tradition, Allah has ninety-nine names which convey a sense of His powers and attributes. In Arabic these are known as *al-Asmā’ al-Husnā*, ‘the Beautiful Names’. Interestingly, there is no universal agreement on what the ninety-nine names are. Several variants exist. See Gardet 2012 and Akkach 2015.

¹⁵ Mainz, Gutenberg Museum, GM 03.1 Schr. See Schaefer 2006, 103–110.



Fig. 4: Cambridge University Library, Mich. E.33 (magic square), 18.4 × 11.5 cm.

printed Arabic amulets to have survived; second it is one of the largest in size; third it is unusual in that it contains Qur'anic citations (*Sūrat al-Baqarah* [2:225]), ll. 11–21 on the amulet), mysterious letters (l. 21) and 'magic numbers' (l. 81).

The so-called 'mysterious letters' (*al-muqaṭṭa'āt* or *al-ḥurūf al-muqaṭṭa'āt*) are constituted by fourteen disconnected Arabic letters that appear in various combinations and numbers (as few as one, as many as five) at the beginning of twenty-nine of the Qur'an's 114 suras. Their meaning and significance has been debated since the Qur'an was first written down.¹⁶ Moreover, the Arabic can be used as an alphanumeric system in which each letter has a numerical value (so A=1, B=2, C=3 and so forth). In the amulets, the sums of the numerical values of these letter combinations have mystical or magical significance. Sometimes they appear as multiples of the same letter (e.g. TTTT); at other times words themselves are given numerical significance. The letters of the name of God,

¹⁶ On this, see Massey 2003.



Fig. 5: New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, acc. no. 1978.546.37, 7.4 × 7.0 cm.

Allah, for example, have the numerical value of 66. Words with the same numerical value are considered to have special esoteric powers. Numerals are also used and, together with the alphabetic letters, are said to constitute 'magic numbers'.¹⁷ Most block printed amulets contain one or two such features, but very few exhibit all. This example from the Gutenberg Museum is a complete amulet containing 83 lines of text. A handwritten line of vertical text is found at the top. The characters in the printed text range from 0.2 to 1.0 cm in height. This piece is composed of three separate strips of paper joined end to end. The topmost strip bears a partial watermark showing three crenellations, a mark which can be traced to early fifteenth century Italy (1436–1444).¹⁸ Since we have almost no historical sources which describe these artifacts, this example provides us with a possible *terminus ad quem*, a date for the latest production of such block prints. In addition to the three features mentioned above, many of the block printed amulets contain other features commonly found in handwritten amulets. In so doing, they follow in the tradition of amulet-making that preceded the use of mechanical means of production.

¹⁷ A full discussion of this subject is beyond the scope of this article. For a clear and fairly thorough explanation of the topic of numbers and alphanumerics found in amulets, a good starting point is Canaan 1937. Also useful is Savage-Smith 2004, xxxv–xxxvi and the sources cited there.

¹⁸ The watermark resembles no. 3984 ('Cloche très allongée') in Briquet 1923, see Schaefer 2006, 103f.

There are for example, ‘magic squares’, grids of square or rectangular cells comprised of equal numbers of rows and columns, as found in the amulet Mich. E.33 (Fig. 4)¹⁹. Presumably having been part of the contents of the famous Cairo Genizah or an Islamic Genizah²⁰, this amulet, though only partially preserved, shows a rather elaborate decoration at the top. The square frame contains a circle inside of which is a double trefoil design whose conjunctions create a six-pointed star. Inside this is a second smaller circle containing a so-called magic square comprised of nine cells, each containing a number from one to nine. Nine-cell squares in which the sums of the integers when totaled horizontally, vertically or diagonally is fifteen are believed to be connected to fertility or pregnancy.²¹

Other amulets show designs thought to have particular protective powers. Examples of these designs would include circles, frequently containing text (Fig. 5), stars or interlocking quadrilaterals (Fig. 6), or ‘teardrop’ shapes (Fig. 7). All of these shapes were believed to enhance the power of an amulet. Aḥmad al-Būnī’s (d. 1225) *Shams al-Ma’ārif wa-Laṭā’if al-‘Awārif* (‘The Book of the Sun of Gnosis and the Subtleties of Elevated Things’), a major source for information about constructing amulets in the Muslim tradition, is replete with illustrations of circles, squares and other geometric forms to be used in conjunction with specified amuletic texts.²² One of the most extensively decorated block printed amulets known to us, the amulet in Figure 5 exhibits several design elements.²³ An outer ring of elliptical lozenges and diamonds

¹⁹ Cambridge University Library, Mich. E.33. See Schaefer 2006, 76–79.

²⁰ The provenance of this piece, and of the Michaelides collections in general, is unclear. However, this block print is similar to others found in the Genizah. See Clackson 1994. In Judaism, the term *genizah* denotes a depository for books and manuscripts that are worn-out or are taken out of use for other reasons. As the sanctity of the Hebrew script prohibits the mutilation of written material, such items are instead collected in a *genizah* and later buried ritually, see Beit-Arié 1996. The vast material found at the now so-called Cairo Genizah of the Ben-Ezra Synagogue in Fustat (Old Cairo) constitutes one of the most important manuscript discoveries relating to pre-modern Mediterranean Jewry and its Muslim majority society. On the Cairo Genizah see Horowitz et al. 2007, Reif et al. 2010 and Reif 2000; on Islamic Genizah-like practices see Sadan 1986.

²¹ Mathematically, 15 is the smallest possible ‘magic constant’ or ‘magic sum’ in the simplest magic square of a 3×3 grid. On magic squares in the Islamic context see e.g. Needham 1980, Sesiano 2012, Ahrens 1917, and Ahrens 1922.

²² Available in numerous versions. For this paper, the edition al-Būnī 2005 was consulted. But see now the transcription and translation into Spanish by Coullaut Cordero 2009. On al-Būnī and his magical-esoteric works see also Gardiner 2012.

²³ New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1978.546.37. See Schaefer 2006, 209–212.



Fig. 6: New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, acc. no. 1978.546.32, 23.0 × 8.2 cm.

surrounds a circle containing a line of text in simple script. Inside this is another ring containing a line of text in Kufi script in reverse (bas relief).²⁴ Finally, there are eighteen horizontal lines of text in the innermost circle. The characters of the center text range from 0.1 to 0.2 cm in height, a remarkable technical achievement.

Figure 6 shows the top of a longer amulet.²⁵ At the center of the decorated area is a six-pointed star, a hexagram, often called the ‘Seal of Solomon’,²⁶ containing two lines of text. Surrounding this is a line of text in Kufi in reverse reading: ‘Glory to Allah, Praise be to Allah, there is no god but Allah’. It appears that this section of the amulet was created using a separate printing block because the design is skewed slightly in relation to the rest of the text. This may be a clue to the way in which such amulets were created.

Figure 7 is an amulet composed of two pieces of paper pasted together end to end.²⁷ A teardrop design contains a line of Kufi text in reverse running around the inside perimeter of the form. Four lines of simple text are at the center. The rectangular form below this shape contains a spiral line of text running from the outer edge to the middle and constitutes a portion of verse 255 from sura two (*al-Baqarah*) of the Qur’an. This arrangement of text is similar to that found in so-called ‘magic bowls’ or ‘incantation bowls’ which feature inscriptions of sacred text on their interior surfaces.²⁸ Water or other fluids drunk from such bowls were believed to carry the curative effects of the holy words into the body of an ill person.²⁹ The complete amulet comprises 116 lines of text. We must consider the agency of the amulets when attempting to explain their survival. That these objects had agency³⁰ at the time of their creation can only be deduced through indirect evidence.³¹ For many – if not for most – Muslims in the

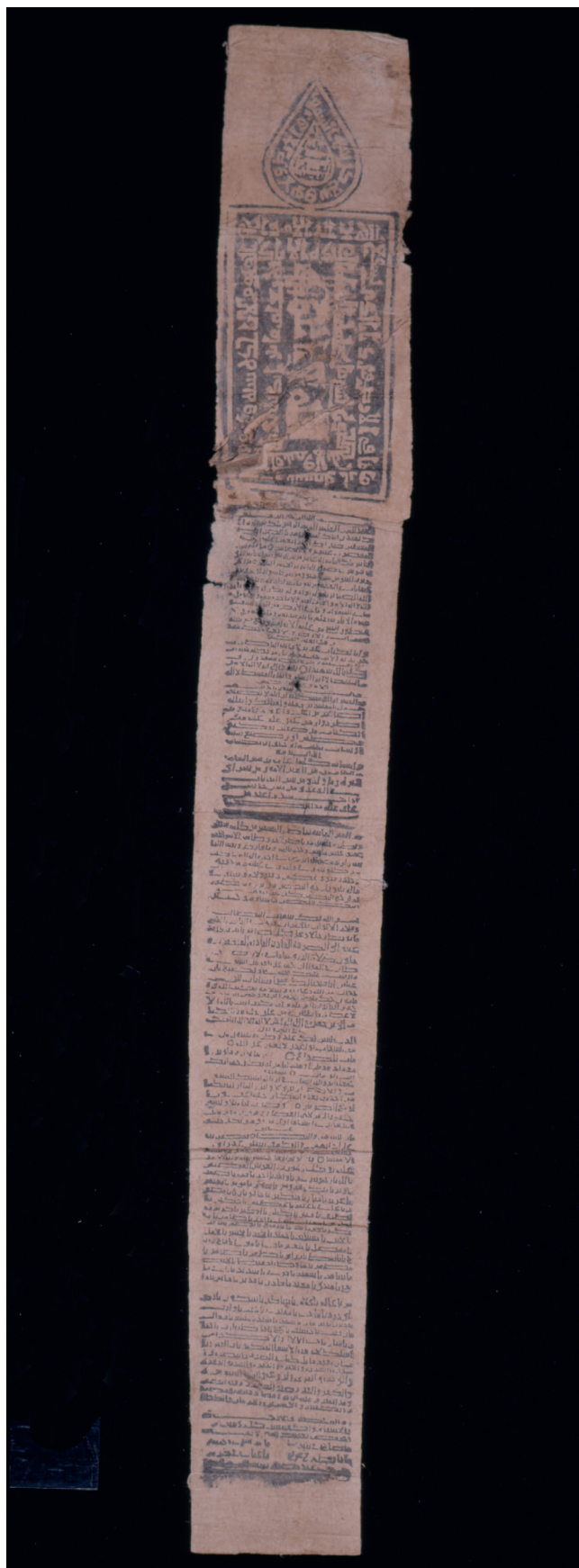


Fig. 7: New York, Columbia University, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, P. Col. inv. 705b, 42.5 × 5.5 cm.

²⁴ See Porter 2010.

²⁵ New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1978.546.32. See Schaefer 2006, 193–196.

²⁶ On the magical use of the Seal of Solomon, see Winkler 1930, 119–132, Porter 1998, 145–146, Porter 2011, 166–169 and Fernández Medina 2012, 175–187.

²⁷ New York, Columbia University, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, P. Col. inv. 705b. See Schaefer 2006, 169–176 and Bulliet 1987b.

²⁸ Cf. now Giunta 2018 and already Spoer 1935, and Canaan 1936.

²⁹ See the discussion on this topic in Zadeh 2009, 464–465.

³⁰ What Jane Bennet calls ‘thing-power’. Bennett 2010.

³¹ This is to say that, to my knowledge, there are no recorded medieval testimonials from amulet owners regarding the efficacy of the extant block printed amulets. That the block printed amulets (or at least some) exist today

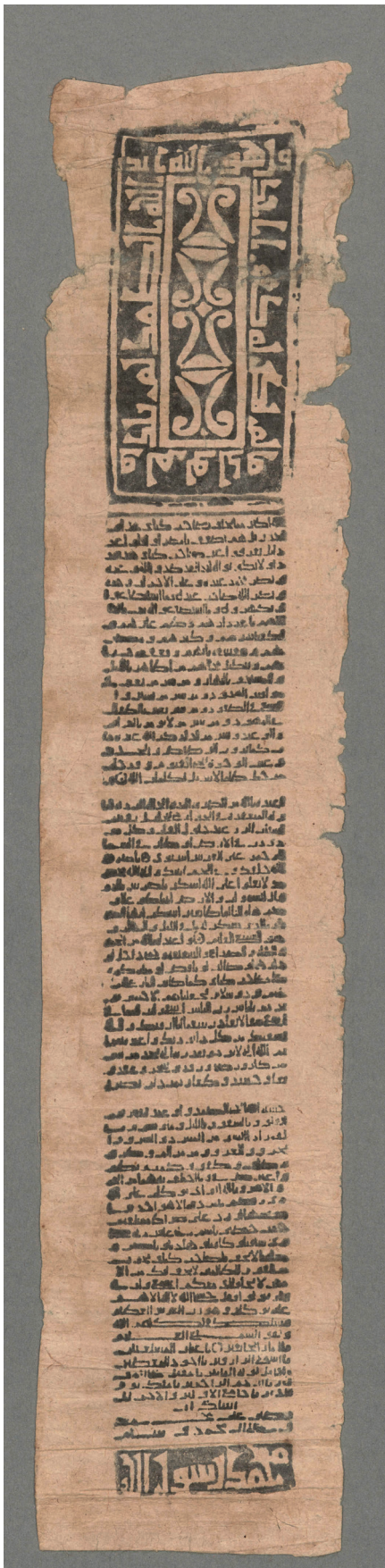


Fig. 8a: Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Res/A.or.88.2023, 31.5 × 6.4 cm.



Fig. 8b: Salt Lake City, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah, Or. P.1563', 32.8 × 5.9 cm.

medieval period, magic was a real force in the world, a force that originated in a realm beyond the five senses.³² Many Muslim religious authorities as well as popular beliefs reinforced the idea of the influence of magic in the human world. In order to secure benevolent intercession or to prevent malevolent action by the inhabitants of the unseen world, one had to know how to address them. Amulets, properly constructed, could do this. Steven Shaviro³³ tells us that objects often interact with one another *aesthetically* and that this aesthetic interaction depends on affect. The definition of ‘affect’ that seems most well suited to this context is that of ‘... a non-conscious experience of intensity; ... a moment of unformed and unstructured potential.’³⁴ In this sense, a prospective customer might understand the appearance in an amulet of certain characteristics as embodying the proper, permissible, and relevant magical powers. They would in turn influence him or her to trust its promise of efficacy, and to purchase and use that amulet. If the buyer then perceived that the amulet actually produced the desired effect or effects, then the amulet would increase in value and it would be more likely to be preserved and protected from damage or destruction. The *affective* power would be increased and this would lead to a greater effort on the part of its owner to protect it. In other words, the perception that an amulet’s agency – the perceived effectiveness of its advertised intent – was successful probably enhanced its chances of survival; those that failed to protect their bearers were more likely to be lost, discarded or destroyed – although the element of serendipity cannot be eliminated entirely. There was, in brief, an affective aspect to the human-amulet relationship.

However, over time the agency of the surviving amulets, the nature of their affect, evolved due to the changing context of their existence and their relationship to the humans to whose attention they came. Their value to us as protective devices is arguably less than it was for those who wore them six or seven hundred years ago. Our attitudes toward magic have changed significantly. Magic is now relegated to the status of entertainment, as sleight-of-hand, and to the venues of film and

literature, its practice limited to the likes of Harry Potter and the denizens of Hogwarts, for example. How, then, does the amulets’ agency exert itself upon us? Certainly, their aesthetics continue to appeal to us, but probably for different reasons than they did for the original purchasers. For us, they are evidence for certain practices and beliefs in a particular culture at a particular time in history. We value them for what they might tell us about people who lived centuries ago, whose actions, interactions, and modes of living were governed by a different understanding about how the world functions. They surprise us in that they force us to change our own understanding of what knowledge and technology was available to Arabic speaking people living in the Middle East in the tenth, eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Because they have rested in museum and library collections, often for hundreds of years, masquerading as manuscripts or, in many cases as manuscript fragments, they were neglected or overlooked, perhaps regarded as ephemeral, insubstantial or insignificant. In the archives or collections, they joined a different assemblage of objects, their survival dependent more on what they were – or were perceived to be – than on what magic power they were thought to hold.

Jane Bennett prefers the term *assemblages* for such collections of objects: ‘... ad hoc groupings of diverse elements of vibrant materials of all sorts’.³⁵ Bennett would characterize this new way of being for the amulets, that is, objects residing in an archive and preserved because of their socio-historical importance, as ‘entering an *assemblage*’, a more complex body or mode. As a mode, she says, it (i.e. the archive or collection) ‘... suffers the actions on it by other modes ...’ and, ‘... if it is to persist, [it] must seek new encounters to creatively compensate for the alterations, or affections it suffers’.³⁶ These *assemblages*, Bennett continues, possess an ‘... ability to make something happen ... [that] is distinct from the sum of the vital force of each materiality considered alone’.³⁷ At the same time, because each member of the *assemblage* maintains its own idiosyncratic energy, it tends to create instability in the *assemblage* that allows for – or even demands – that the *assemblage* change or even ‘die’.

If we look at the block prints in this light, then we find them at a point where they have emerged from hiding, thrown off their disguises as it were, and revealed themselves to be something other than manuscripts. This, I would argue, is

may be because people thought they were effective enough to preserve them so that they might enjoy their protection for as long as possible.

³² Belief in supernatural powers and the human potential to influence them is known to have existed in cultures predating Islam. On the role and place of magic in Islam itself, see Savage-Smith 2004, ‘Introduction’ and Dols 1992.

³³ Shaviro 2011.

³⁴ Shouse 2010. For further reading on this idea, see the sources listed there as well as Massumi 2002 and Gregg and Seigworth 2012.

³⁵ Bennett 2010, 23.

³⁶ Bennett 2010, 22.

³⁷ Bennett 2010, 24.



Fig. 9a: Salt Lake City, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah, Or. P.1561', 26.0 × 12.5 cm.

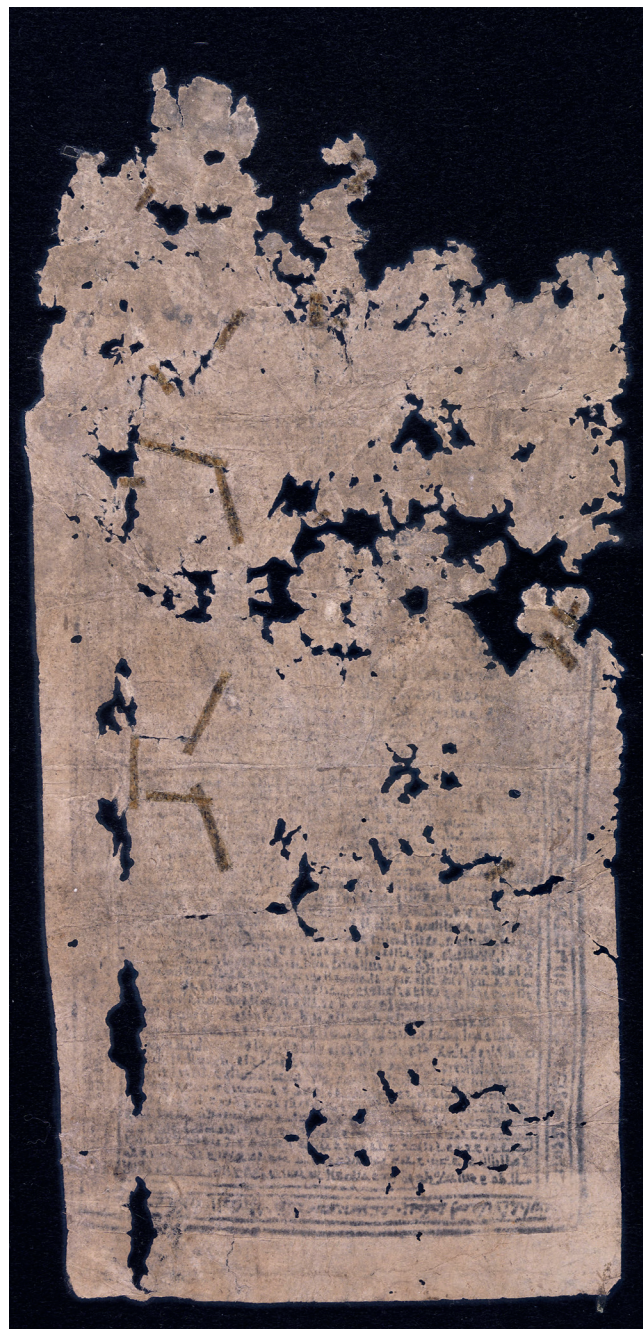


Fig. 9b: Salt Lake City, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah, Or. P.1561' (backside).

because their affective power was finally strong enough to attract the '*assemblage* of people' interested in manuscripts, or manuscript-like objects and to interact with them. This is clearly a different group of people from the one that would have been interested in the amulets at the time they were created. What has been the result of this new set of interactions?

Aside from providing us with a new and exciting perspective on the historical evolution of printing technology,³⁸ the block printed amulets also exert their agency in other subtle ways. One way they do this is by re-establishing previous relationships with other block prints.

³⁸ On this see e.g. Schaefer 2014.



Fig. 9c: Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, P.Vindob. A. Ch. 12.145, 5.1 × 6.9 cm.

Figures 8a and 8b display two copies of the same amulet probably made from one printing block.³⁹ After a few hundred years, they have ended up in two different collections several thousand miles apart. They clearly have had different experiences in their ‘journeys’. The paper of the Munich example on the left is more tattered along its edges and shows more wear. The example from the University of Utah, on the other hand, is better preserved, but notice that there is a ‘ghost shadow’ of the decorative heading at the top on the bottom part of that example. The location and form of the ink imprints indicate that it is very likely that they

³⁹ Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Res/A.or.88.2023 and Salt Lake City, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah, Or. P.1563r. On the latter see Muehlhaeusler 2008, 544–550.

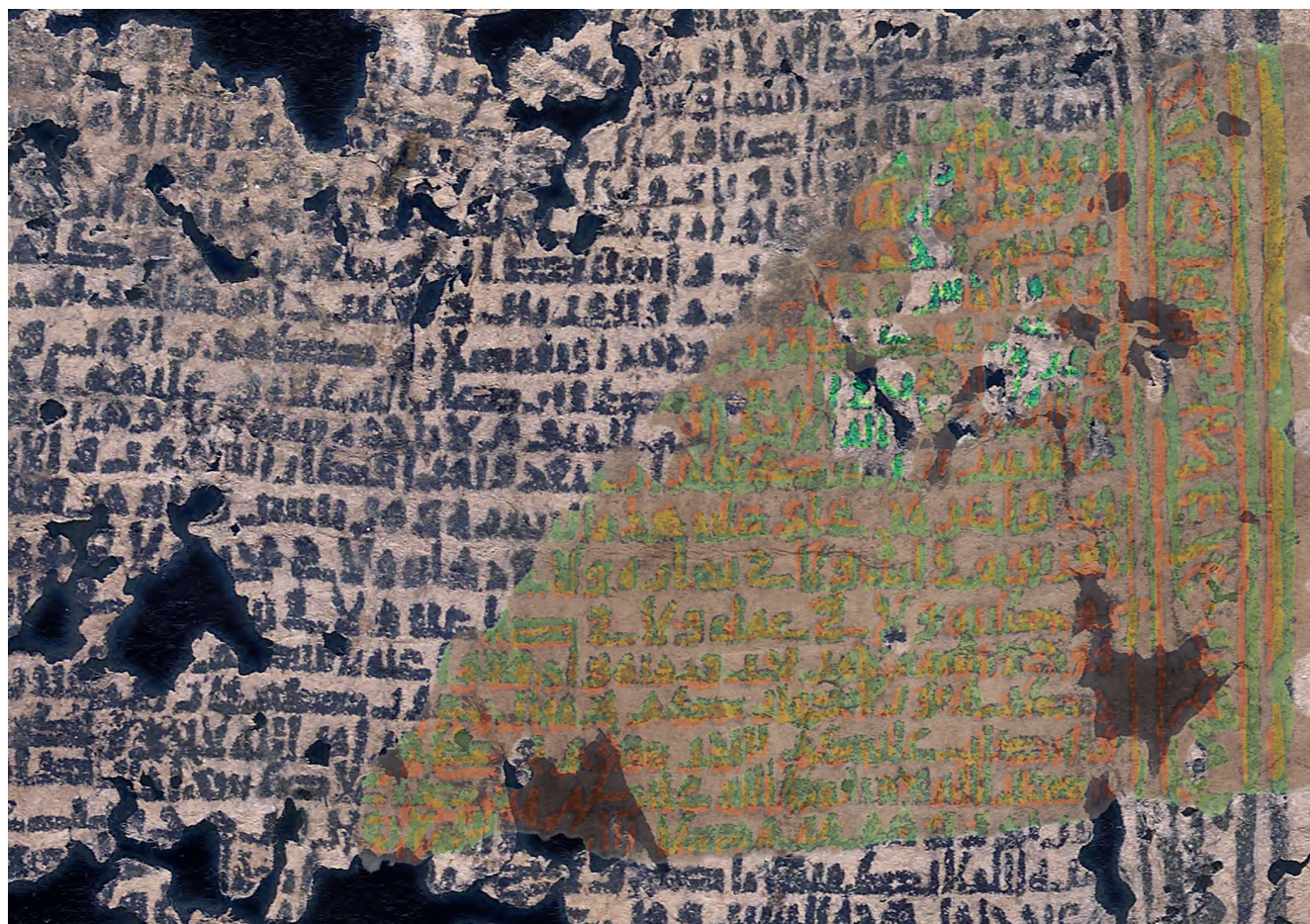


Fig. 9d: Photographs of the two amulets mounted above one other that show they are two different prints from the same printing block.



Fig. 10: Stamp bearing the name of the *Qaysariya* (a sort of warehouse) of Almería in Spain.

originate from folding the amulet.⁴⁰ In the case illustrated here, two copies of the same block print, long separated and residing in archives on two different continents, are now re-united, at least conceptually, for the first time since they were peeled from the matrix that gave them their form. Figures 9a, 9b, 9c and 9d show another example of two copies of the same Amulet printed from the same printing block that have clearly experienced a different trajectory of materiality and are brought together here once again.⁴¹ The piece from the Austrian National Library, while much smaller, is clearly in better condition. This amulet is multi-lingual, containing a text in Hebrew, Syriac, Arabic and Coptic running around the perimeter of the piece inside the frame created by the two sets of parallel lines. This seems to suggest that the appeal of these amulets extended beyond the Muslim Arabic-speaking community to Jews and Christians.⁴²

The lower right-hand corner of the University of Utah amulet exhibits faint wrinkles across the center and on the lower right margin (Fig. 9b). Wrinkles like these often appear in the block



Fig. 11: Toronto, Aga Khan Museum, AKM 508, 7.2 × 5.5 cm.

prints and may be related to the printing process or to the amulet being folded to fit into a container, as is probably the case here. Once having exercised their affect, the block prints interact with us in ways that they never have before. They are no longer simply objects imbued with or accorded magical powers, they are now elements of a collection of manuscripts, historical, cultural texts, thus emerging into a new and different *assemblage* of objects with a new affective agency.

We now speak of block print collections, at once removing the individual pieces from their previous associations and reconfiguring them into new groupings. Their images are reproduced, their texts copied out, translated, studied and puzzled over. The amulets are joined with other block printed Arabic texts – commercial stamps, for example (Fig. 10)⁴³ – and by their ‘thing-power’,⁴⁴ to use Bennett’s term, assure their continued existence as objects valued for their aesthetic appeal, their affective agency, as well as for their capacity to tell us something of importance about the circumstances of their creation. Their ‘magic’ as an element of their agency has less appeal for us insofar as their perceived effectiveness

⁴⁰ See Muehlhaeusler 2008, 544.

⁴¹ Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, P.Vindob. A. Ch. 12.145, see Schaefer 2006, 140–142, and Salt Lake City, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah, Or. P.1561r, see Muehlhaeusler 2008, 541f.

⁴² See Muehlhaeusler 2008, 541; see e.g. Meyer and Smith 1999 and Mößner and Nauwerth 2015 for Coptic magical rituals and texts.

⁴³ Figure 10 presents a stamp bearing the name of the *Qaysariya* (a sort of warehouse) of Almería in Spain. It shows the Islamic year 750 (1349–1350 CE) and so can be dated precisely. It was first published by Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall in 1852 as an example of Arabic printing technology, but caused a scholarly debate about the validity of such a claim. The current whereabouts of this object are unknown. See Schaefer 2006, 27, Schaefer 2014, 2f., and Hammer-Purgstall 1852.

⁴⁴ Bennett 2010, xvif.

against danger is concerned and more for the kind of magic they embody. Their *abracadabra-alakazam-simsalabim*-ness appears quaint but their form, the language and images they bear, and their aesthetic appeal stir our interest nonetheless. As Peter Miller recently noted, we ‘... approach objects today with very different expectations ... [W]e expect them to have biographies, even agency and influence. When we talk to them, we assume they will answer with affective, human echoes.’⁴⁵

They tell us stories and they help us to perhaps better understand our place among the larger assemblage of objects that make up our world. The block prints, like all other objects, are neither immutable nor inert; they change and transform both in material terms and in the power they exert. They once constituted elements of *assemblages* which included a human ‘host’ upon whose well-being their own survival depended as much as their ‘thing-power’ protected those who wore them. Produced with an intention of reassuring their bearers of divine protection or guardianship in the then future, a forward-looking agency, they now are protected by us. They urge us to discover their origins by looking back toward the past. In a sense, their current agency echoes the means of their creation: the pieces of paper that bear their texts were pulled from a mirror-image of that text and we are guided by them to seek out those matrices, their mothers so to speak. In addition, just as they were once

reproduced in multiples, they (or their images, their avatars) are reproduced in print and electronically, entering different *assemblages* in altered forms. Is this what they want? Is their aim to reproduce and thus survive or even propagate?

Of course, their biographies are incomplete. We cannot know for certain what *assemblages* they have joined with or parted from over the intervening centuries and each, as the two cases I have shown here indicate, has its own ‘life story’. Was one found to be inadequate in what it had claimed it would do? Did it travel to Mecca for the annual pilgrimage? Was it then discarded when its owner suffered a misfortune the amulet promised to protect him or her against? Was it stolen and sold or traded to someone who was more interested in the metal case that enclosed it (Fig. 11)⁴⁶?

Or was it treasured and protected, handed down through generations until some desperate need drove its owner to sell it to a collector who, curious to see if the case contained an amulet, had it opened and found a block printed text? What agency can we ascribe to an *assemblage* of objects with such varied histories? We must keep in mind that we, too, are *assemblages*, also with agency and that like all *assemblages*, we are fluid and ultimately transitory. What meaning there may be in this grouping of block printed amulets and the people who are interested in them will in turn be debated and transformed by other future *assemblages*.

⁴⁵ Miller 2016, B12.

⁴⁶ Toronto, Aga Khan Museum, AKM 508. Here the amulet, composed of eighteen lines of text in the style of script one frequently sees in the block prints, has been removed from its lead case. The relationship between amulet, case and person has thus been altered irreversibly. On this specimen see Leoni 2016, 42f., D’Ottone 2013, and Regourd 2007.

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