

Amulets and the Supernatural in the Ancient World



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The ancient world during the times of the Roman Empire was a terrifying place. All groups of people, including Romans, Greeks, Egyptians, and Jews, believed in the existence and omnipotence of divine beings and spirits. Sacrifices were made, omens were sought, shrines and temples were erected, and people did anything to obtain some sense of reassurance and security from evil beings, spirits, and other people that wished to inflict harm upon them. Amulets, which are objects believed to possess the power to protect its owner from danger, were widely used in the ancient world, and are even still seen in today's modern religions. Two specific objects housed in the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, including one in the Jackier Collection, can be compared and contrasted in their functionality, but ultimately can be analyzed to shed light upon the widespread use of amulets to suppress the common fear of supernatural powers in the ancient world.

An artifact in the Jackier Collection that must be examined when considering the fear and fascination of ancient people with the supernatural is a magic bowl that was produced between 400 and 600 CE in the Sassanian Empire of Central Asia. The bowl is made of clay and it is covered with Aramaic writing and some drawings. The writing itself comprises the names of evil demons, spirits, and other figures that the bowl is to repel from the owner. The drawings are of some specific demons that the bowl wards off. Many other magic bowls have been found that are very similar in design, date, and region of origin as the one at the Kelsey Museum. According to Alison Miner from the Penn Museum, magic bowls, were produced by "local magicians or scribes" but were "ordered by individuals who hoped to rid themselves of some persistent problem". Some other bowls were designed differently and were inscribed with family members' names instead of evil beings and spirits to protect those specific family members from any harm that could affect them. The bowls were set in homes and other buildings. Many were placed

upside down with the dome of the bowl facing upward to “trap” harmful demons in the bowl. From then onward, the demons remained imprisoned in the bowl. Other bowls were placed facing one another to repel unwanted spirits. Magic bowls were also situated around perimeters to create a closed sphere of protection from any sort of evil. Regardless of the specific manner in which the magic bowls were utilized, many people owned them and they were very popular in the ancient world.

The function that magic bowls have, in a broad sense, is that of an amulet. This practice should not seem outlandish or uncommon, as amulets are still in use today in popular, modern religions. In Christianity, many followers wore a crucifix around their neck to ward off demons. The crucifix provides the protection of Christ and is a symbol of his victory over evil. In Judaism, there is the Hand of Miriam, which is more popular in the Middle East and in North Africa and is displayed in many common places. Christians, Jews, and Muslims alike have applied their respective holy books as amulets in a talisman-like fashion. The presence of holy books is thought by many to bring “good luck” when placed under beds and is utilized in funerary proceedings. Through amulets, one can trace the evolution of human beliefs regarding the supernatural and religion as the purpose and presence of amulets is still prominent today as it has been throughout human history. The ancient magic bowl functions as an amulet in a very similar way as the modern crucifix does. As amulets became common across the ancient world, the magic bowl, itself, became a common amulet between different cultures and groups of people, demonstrating a common belief among different people.

Joseph Naveh and Shaul Shaked published work that shows how widespread these magic bowls were. Other bowls were discovered with inscriptions in various dialects of Aramaic, as well as in Syriac and Hebrew. These are all languages of people that primarily resided in Central

Asia and near the eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea, in the Middle East. Alison Miner noted a frustration in studying the bowls in that they are very inconsistent at times. Some magic bowls have cited evil deities from several different cultures or religions on the same bowl. These findings indicate that very different people were similar in that they believed in supernatural threats. The presence of magic bowls, although remaining mostly concentrated in the Middle East and Central Asia, but in very different cultures demonstrates that these different groups of people in the region believed in evil spirits and beings and sought to protect themselves from even other groups' evil beings by creating magic bowls as amulets. These different groups of people that produced magic bowls believed in different evils and referred to those evils using different names and languages, but they all shared the belief in evil spirits and beings, hence why they shared the custom of producing and utilizing magic bowls and amulets in general.

Interestingly, they also wished to protect themselves from evils that were feared in other cultures and religions, as if they were trying to cover all evil possibilities on their bowl. This mixing of supernatural figures, religious phrases, and languages on bowls likely promoted the spread of magic bowls to neighboring groups of people. The usage of magic bowls across different cultures, with different languages, and with the purpose of fending off different evils confirms the widespread belief that ancient people believed in supernatural evil, regardless of what the people referred to it as.

The people of the Middle East and Central Asia who employed the usage of magic bowls as amulets were similar to the Romans in the sharing of beliefs of the existence of evil spirits and beings because the Romans had their own amulets. Besides offering animal sacrifices and erecting temples and statues to please their gods and goddesses in exchange for their protection, the Romans wore gemstone amulets. The gemstone would be of a color that was associated with

a Roman god. For example, Jupiter was represented with chalcedony. The belief was that the wearer of the gemstones would be inspired with some powers of that specific god, offering reassurance that the wearer is protected from harmful supernatural beings. The Roman gemstones were more portable amulets, but amulets like the magic bowls nonetheless. Magic bowls of the Middle East and Central Europe and Roman gemstones gave these ancient people a secure state of mind. Most people in the Middle East did not believe in Jupiter, like the Romans, but like the Romans, they did believe in spirits and demons. Those spirits and demons were different and went by different names between the different cultures, but their existence was widely believed and feared by all in the ancient world, making amulets, such as the magic bowls vital in many cultures for basic survival and maintaining some comfort in a dangerous world.

The Roman religion seemed more angled towards what the modern world might label as superstition. However, the line between superstition and religion is a blurred one. Personal amulets and original interpretations of signs were common, even among some of the most famous Romans. Gregory S. Aldrete noted that the Roman general, Sulla, carried a miniature statue of Apollo on himself when engaging in battle. If he found trouble, he'd kiss it and pray to it for protection. The emperor, Augustus, kept a slice of seal skin with him because he believed it would protect him from inclement weather. He also believed if he put the wrong shoe on first upon getting out of bed that it was a bad omen for the day and no amulet could prevent it. The man who succeeded Augustus, Tiberius, took a pet snake with him everywhere. The snake was thought to give him good luck. On one occasion, Tiberius was preparing for a journey to Rome when he found that ants had infiltrated the box containing his snake and had eaten his snake. Upon seeing this, Tiberius immediately canceled his journey, as he believed there would be more bad luck along the way. Tiberius was also very interested in astrology. He wouldn't make an

important decision as emperor without first consulting his personal astrologer, Thrasyllus. Romans even joked that Thrasyllus was the man running the empire because of Tiberius' heavy reliance on what the astrologer could interpret for him. Again, some of these practices may come off as superstitious more than religious, but nevertheless, these practices demonstrate the desire people had to gain favor with divine deities, prevent bad luck, and protect oneself from evil. Amulets, such as the magic bowl, were seen as a necessity and amulets were vital for anyone to feel safe and go about their business. One may even go as far as to say that there was hysteria over the believed existence of supernatural evil and bad luck due to the superstitious nature of ancient people.

An unlikely institution that also utilized amulets was the Roman bath house, which is depicted in a display on the second floor of the Kelsey Museum and the second object to demonstrate the widespread belief in amulets and supernatural evil. Before elaborating on the use of amulets in the bath house, it is important to establish an understanding of the bath house because it was a frequently visited institution, which made it important that Romans felt safe from spirits and demons there.

The Roman bath house was an immensely popular establishment, as bathing had become a daily activity for many that living within the Roman Empire. The larger bath houses offered many amenities besides places to bath. There were also libraries, markets, and gardens. The bath houses were complexes that served as inexpensive recreational, communal, and social centers. For this reason, Roman emperors would court the favor of the people with the construction of bath houses. Peter Connolly noted that the bathhouses grew from 170 of them in the year 33 BCE to 856 by the early fifth century, as indicated by the Roman census. There were also 11 imperial baths that were the finest throughout the empire. Bath houses were the result of some of

the more sophisticated architectural advances in the Roman world. For example, the imperial bath houses of Trajan were built on the slope of the Esquiline Hill. Private bath houses within villas and townhouses were the ultimate indication of opulence because they were elaborate, expensive to build, and even more expensive to maintain. The bath houses could best be compared to modern day country clubs or fitness centers. There was a room for one to disrobe and place their clothes in a cupboard, which is the equivalent of the modern locker room. Unlike the locker room, there were no locks and slaves were paid to guard over the clothes. There were rooms of different temperatures, including cold rooms, warm rooms, and hot rooms. Men and women bathed separately, either at different times of the day, or in different wing of the larger bath houses. The busiest time of the day in the Roman bath houses was in the afternoon. For that reason, the warm and hot rooms of the bath houses were built so they'd be situated in the afternoon sun, utilizing the sun to make the rooms as hot as possible. Water was brought via aqueducts from reservoirs. Cisterns with a capacity of 7 million liters were filled with water. The Romans were clever in their design of the bathhouse, utilizing innovative techniques in engineering to control the temperature of the water and provide citizens with a prime bathing experience.

Aside from designing bath houses that placed the hot rooms in heat of the afternoon's sun, the water itself had to be manipulated to maintain the desired temperatures. The display of the Roman bath house at the Kelsey Museum demonstrates the mechanism to control water temperature. The floors in the warm and hot rooms were raised above the water by pili. Underneath the floor, boilers would heat the water. The heat in these warm and hot rooms was primarily generated by water vapor. Walls were made hollow to allow the heat from the vapor to rise and heat the room from all sides. The display at the Kelsey Museum also shows the marble

floors in the bath houses. These floors would become so hot that sandals were often worn by bathers to prevent burns. There was also artwork in the rooms. The Kelsey Museum shows paintings of sea lions and dolphins, as well as turtles and salamanders. There is also a piece that portrays a swan in flight. The theme of much of the artwork is aquatic to maintain a tranquil mood. Other artwork, however, was in bath houses for another reason.

It was believed by the Romans that envy can kill. In a bath house setting where all of the bathers were naked, the gaze of an envious man or woman onto an attractive person would turn what they referred to as the Evil Eye upon the person. The Evil Eye itself is a common belief across many cultures, including modern religions, such as Judaism and Islam. This would emit particles from the Evil Eye onto the attractive person that would enter the body and kill them. This is why it was important to Romans to wear amulets. Amulets that specifically defended against the Evil Eye were of miniature phalluses or hands. Even today, the Hamsa Hand is used to defend against the Evil Eye. To the Romans, and likely to many other groups of people, they believed in evil that was invoked by other people. The Evil Eye is only one example. Like the Evil Eye, these other evils were inflicted upon victims without the victim's knowledge. For example, other sources claim that the Romans had the equivalent of a modern Ouija board, to inflict harm upon their enemies' body parts. Other Romans would write curses on tablets that listed the body parts that they wished for evil spirits to harm. They would send the tablets to those spirits in the underworld by burying them, placing them in a cave, or throwing them down a well. In return for doing their bidding, Romans would offer to make sacrifices for the evil spirits. These beliefs must have made life even scarier for many people of the ancient world. Not only did they have to defend against evil spirits, but against other people who wished to harm them through evil spirits. Concepts, such as the Evil Eye, were especially frightening and

commonly feared among people because of their silent transmission., creating an even greater demand for amulets. Roman amulets, though different from the magic bowls, needed to work against a broader range of believed threats. The amulets needed to be apparent in more places than just on the person or in the home. They needed to be in public places as well and in places where people were the most vulnerable. One of those places was in the Roman bath house.

To defend against the common Evil Eye in the Roman bath house, the Romans placed specific artwork in the bath house. The artwork was designed to evoke laughter. The Romans believed that the best and most effective method to defend themselves from the Evil Eye in the bath houses was to produce mass laughter. The laughter was to repel the evil spirit, but also to occupy the bathers. It would be harder for a bather to focus their envious gaze on a victim if the bather and the victim were both laughing. The artwork used to incite laughter was often of a sexual nature. Raunchy visuals of acts that men and women would never admit to have performed were placed around the bath houses to evoke laughter. Bathers would also be fixated on the artwork and it is thought that the Evil Eye would try to inflict harm upon the subjects in the artwork. But being that the “victims” weren’t real, Romans thought that they were able to play a joke on the Evil Eye spirit in this way. The artwork in the bath houses and the laughter that followed acted as an amulet. Although this amulet was to defend against a different evil, it was still an amulet.

It is interesting to think on the widespread use of amulets and where they were found to be placed. To an amateur historian, one may not have been able to guess that amulets were found in bath houses. In today’s world, people do not usually find amulets in locker rooms of fitness centers. There aren’t portrayals of sexual scenes in artwork around country clubs. But in the

Roman world, there were in their bath houses. And surprisingly enough, those pieces of art served a functional and necessary purpose through the eyes of Romans.

The magic bowl and bath house artwork can be compared and contrasted in many fashions. They both function as amulets to defend people from evil supernatural beings and spirits. They were both very widespread. Magic bowls traversed several cultures, cited spirits and demons of different religions, were inscribed with different languages, and were found in a variety of places, from houses, to shops, to synagogues. Roman bath houses were built in many cities across the empire, affecting a wide range of people. Roman citizen of different cultures believed in defending themselves from the Evil Eye, especially while bathing. They trusted that their laughter and the artwork in the bath houses would serve as a potent amulet. The magic bowl and Roman bath house artwork were different in that they originated in different areas of the world. They were also designed to ward off different types of evil using different methods. Nevertheless, as amulets, they shed light on the infatuation that ancient people had with divine and supernatural beings, evil spirits, curses, and any other invisible forces that could do them harm.

When studying people of the ancient world, one cannot ignore that the people lived at the whim of the gods or whatever divine deities they believed in. The people also believed in powers beyond them, thus seeking the favor of “good” gods and amulets for protection. The magic bowl and Roman bath house artwork are two great and complimentary concepts to study when considering the one thing that everyone in the Roman Empire and the ancient world shared. Everyone believed in the existence of good and evil powers. That is demonstrated through the use of different amulets in very different parts of the world. Though different, the amulets all had the same purpose of protecting mortal people of the ancient earth from harmful spirits and

demons. Though amulets functioned differently and the beliefs associated with them were different, they all were in demand for the same purpose. Amulets, such as the magic bowl, were as routine and common as the Roman bath house. The Roman bath house was visited by many people and the artwork inside them had been seen by those bathers over and over again. The belief of the Evil Eye and the variations of the magic bowls between different cultures, further proves that the ancient people were afraid and wished to protect themselves from any possible supernatural threat possible through amulets. As people have evolved, so have their beliefs and their amulets. Many people in the modern world are religious and believe in both good and evil beyond this world and this life. Amulets can still be seen and used today and the concept of the amulet will forever be a concept shared by people of all different cultures.

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