

Amulets and talismans on coins and medals

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On October 12, 1983, exactly forty years from the present congress, I was in the audience here in Florence at the 19th FIDEM Congress when the late John Cook offered a talk entitled 'The amuletic medal as a contemporary art form'. He started out by saying 'I believe that the only real value of the medal as with everything else lies in its human function and its human importance.' He then cited Herbert Read, an influential English art historian, poet and philosopher, who in 1964 had said that throughout history two distinct forms of art emerged – the monument and the amulet, and that sculpture should strive to combine the independence of the amulet with the effect of the monument. John Cook then described his understanding of medallic amulets as portable, personally affective, allowing what he called 'an unparalleled intimacy with its owner.' He then added that this should also be the goal of the medal in general, portability, emotional intimacy, a sense of necessity rather than mere possession (Cook 1983).

Achieving such intimacy, instills the feeling that a medal or an amulet enhances its owner's well-being significantly. In the case of amulets of course the goal is that its wearer feels actually protected, for that is the mission, the very definition of amulets, the quality that distinguishes them from medals, owned more generally. Amulets are thus emotional necessities, rather than aesthetic experiences or historical monuments. That was the point of John Cook's message to the medallic artists gathered at FIDEM forty

years ago... you should strive to make your creations so compelling as to seem magical, to be necessary agents, not just commemorative or clever art objects.

Wearable amulets have conferred a sense of security on their owners since pre-historic times. Gold, as a reflection of the sun's power, silver, the moon's, red stones, hematite or rubies as life's blood, minerals and other natural substances presumed to have magical properties. Jewellery, earrings, necklaces, brooches worn even today, thus descend from this immemorial tradition of gaining reassurance through proximity to materials believed to be potent and protective. Over time, culturally meaningful icons, symbols, and texts have come to supplement these natural substances, though not to entirely replace them, within a hierarchy of modes and materials believed to provide security.

Coins as a means of payment need no definition for this audience. For the past 2,500 years they have been ubiquitous necessities for commerce but have also served as cultural agents disseminating propaganda for and in a real sense representing the powers that be. The imagery impressed on coins has from the beginning reflected current ideas about the sources of authority... with the result that gods and animals, and later the figures of sovereigns, have symbolized the origins or repositories of power. These coin images have frequently been incorporated into the tradition of wearable jewellery and there seems little doubt that this evolved along with the earlier tradition of protective, so-called apotropaic natural substances mentioned earlier. So, on Greek coins, even without the addition of texts, the images of gods or for that matter of sacred or symbolic animals, would have conveyed a protective aura capable of reassuring bearers or wearers that a higher power existed guaranteeing stability, if not perfect security. Roman coins were more explicit in their deployment of both imagery and texts evoking both gods and emperors with the intent of reassuring the possessors of such objects that the general welfare and their personal well-being was in good hands. Many Asian coinages, particularly those of India, conformed to the general



Fig 1. *Touchpiece for The King's Evil 'Angel'* (10 shilling) coin
England, Charles I, c. 1633
Gold, 28 mm



Fig 2. Bedouin amulet (pseudo-Hebrew inscription)
Palestine, c. 1900
Silver, 43 mm



Fig 3. Amulettized coin with the Hebrew letter heh engraved
2/3 Thaler, Brunswick-Lüneburg, George III, 1809
Silver, 34 mm

pattern just described, and Islamic money too, though for the most part eschewing iconography, used holy texts to emphasize the religious tradition upon which authority rested. Christian coins from their beginnings employed the symbolism of the cross, and later the images of saints and of the Virgin, frequently enhanced by epigraphy quoting sacred texts or mottos to imbue ordinary coinage with religious character and authority. Holed specimens of all these coinages are plentiful and there can be little doubt that such coins, otherwise unaltered, were probably worn as personal protective amulets.

One case of a particular coin being used for a specific religiously protective function is that of the touch piece for the amelioration of scrofula, tuberculosis of the lymph glands of the neck (fig. 1). This medical condition was known as 'The King's Evil' because from medieval times until the 18th century the kings of both England and France, asserting a presumptive divinely granted authority, claimed the ability to cure this ailment through the royal touch. The king actually touched the patient after which a gold coin, the 'angel', which showed St Michael slaying a dragon, was hung around the neck of the patient. When in the 17th century angels no longer circulated as coins, the king arranged for gold medals with similar iconography to be struck as substitutes.

Are all of these coins, unaltered as issued but laden with religious content, to be understood as amuletic? The essential nexus of amuletry is in the psychology of the possessor of any particular object or artifact. One cannot know with certainty whether a particular individual would consciously have felt protected when just holding a coin, or whether or it would have been experienced simply as a neutral piece of money. In this regard, John Cook noted that one may feel enhanced or specially protected even while driving a luxury automobile, or when contemplating a particularly well-filled bank account. Clearly, the sense of confidence that one is made more secure by wealth and privilege, but particularly by magical or religious forces, is subjective. But while we cannot be sure in the individual case, it seems reasonable to assume that the general pattern of marking coins with signs and symbols of power and particularly of religious authority, carried some intention on the part of issuers to project reassurance for those users desirous of and susceptible to such feelings.

Beyond coins in their original form, physical alterations and explicit customary usages greatly enhance the probability that a particular coin was in fact perceived by its wearer as protective. Coins with holes or added loops for suspension were certainly meant to be worn, or perhaps suspended over an infant's crib or attached to furniture or a wall. Holed coins might, of course, have been considered mere decoration, 'bling,' one might say. But, taking the example of nomadic jewellery, it is certainly the case that even Christian coins or Jewish amulets were sometimes part of Bedouin or other tribal decoration where the religious content may have been unintelligible, and irrelevant for the user (fig. 2). So, as is the case in interpreting the cultural meaning of all material artifacts, knowledge of the context is often determinative. More specific coin alterations, however leave little doubt about intention or usage. I have a special interest in Jewish artifacts and can therefore refer to many varieties of coin manipulation that had amuletic conversion as the specific goal. The most frequent of these is the addition of a single Hebrew letter, *heh*, to normal coinage by engraving, piercing, or even by adding extra metal. This letter is an abbreviation of the so-called Tetragrammaton, the four-letter form of the ineffable name of God which is especially sacred and potent in Judaism (fig. 3). Such altered coins were hung around the necks of newborn Jewish children as protective amulets, almost exclusively in German-speaking lands, which happen to include 19th century America in addition to Central Europe. Other religious expressions, typically other names of God, were also engraved to amulettize pre-existing coins which



Fig 4. Linen bag containing a coin blessed by a rabbi as a childbirth amulet
United States, 1936
40 x 70 mm



Fig 5. Shekel medal as an amulet with inscription against 'flux and cramps'
Germany, 17th century
White metal, 28 mm



Fig 6. Pestthaler (so-called), amuletic medal against plague
Germany (Erzgebirge), 1528
Silver, 45 mm

were made of precious metal and convenient for such conversion to religious purposes. The term love-token is currently used in the coin trade to describe a much broader custom of coin alteration by engraving, but it's important to understand that while in the 18th and 19th century sentimental love was indeed an exceedingly common reason for coin engraving, the Jewish customs just mentioned goes back at least to the 16th century and probably earlier.

Changing a coin into an amulet does not necessarily require physical alteration. In most religions, faith, belief, blessing is enough to accomplish a meaningful transition. I hope it will offend no one if I mention in this context the Christian tradition of eucharistic consecration of the host which, based on a system of faith, also involves the stamping of symbols upon a disc to convert ordinary bread into something holy and spiritually powerful. Indeed, ordinary coins, otherwise unchanged but that are reputed to have been handled by a priest, saint, or holy person may be understood to have become relics, vehicles of that individual's holiness, and thus objects worthy of reverence and capable of providing meaningful protection or cure. Let me give you an example. A linen bag in my collection that is sewn closed contains a coin, very likely an American silver half dollar to judge by its feel (fig. 4). My mother gave this linen bag to me when she was in her nineties and explained to me that her mother had given it to her in 1936 at the time of her marriage with the instruction to pin it to the bedsheets as a guarantee that the marriage bed would produce the desired result. Well, it did. I am my mother's eldest child, plausibly the direct result of a talisman and hence proof of the potency of the coin sewn into that sack which had undoubtedly been blessed by a revered rabbi.

Another indirect form of what might be termed coin alteration has been the production of fantasy coins which were then considered religious relics and hence protective. False shekels, imitations of an ancient Jewish coin type, associated in Christian belief with the thirty pieces of silver for which Jesus was said to have been betrayed, fit this scenario (fig. 5). As presumptive holy relics of Christ's life, such imitations, though you might think of them as fakes, were frequently venerated, and consequently incorporated into church treasuries and held to have miraculous powers. Such specimens were mounted as pendants, incorporated into birth amulets

and silver chalices and, in an unusual but definitive case, became the basis of a 17th century German amulet specifically created to prevent 'flux', that is abnormal gastrointestinal or menstrual discharge.

The term 'medal' has historically been applied to monetary coinage as well as to what we today differentiate as a medal, medallion or, for that matter, a metallic amulet. The physical appearances and modes of manufacture of all of these species are, of course, scarcely different. So, the evolution of round pendant amulets from the coins associated with a religious character, as previously discussed, and converted into artifacts that no longer served as money but were termed medals is hardly surprising. Wearable pendant metallic amulets are typically much smaller and lighter than the 15th century Italian medallions classically considered prototypical medals. So, despite the commonality of the term medal to both species, medallion amulets may rather have descended either from coins or from pilgrim badges of the Middle Ages which long preceded the development of the Renaissance medal. The recovery of such small, often religious, insignia from the mud of the Thames and the Seine had revealed an enormous variety of shapes, metals, iconography and purposes. In Europe such finds are overwhelmingly Christian, but pagan and occasional Jewish objects turn up as well. In any case, the tradition of small medal-shaped inexpensive amulets, usually of base metals, bearing images of the Virgin and other saints, persisted into the early modern period and indeed continues into our own times. While the images on such small medals may refer to a wide variety of saints, local or otherwise, some saints were associated with the prevention of specific dangers and diseases: St George protected soldiers and travellers, St Benedict offered protection from fevers, St Anastasius from headaches, St Venantius from danger when falling, St Roch from cholera, plague etc.

The exploitation of rich silver deposits in the so-called Erzgebirge, the Ore Mountains, in the borderland between Germany and Bohemia led to the extensive production of large silver coins, including the first Thalers, but also to similarly larger-sized medals (fig. 6). Many of which featured biblical iconography, often depicting a scene from Numbers 21, of the episode where Moses erected a copper serpent to arrest a plague among the Israelites in the desert. This trope usually paired with a reverse image of the Crucifixion is known as a Pestthaler because wearing



Fig 7. Trinitarian amulet with transliterated Hebrew names for divinity, and secondary inscription as a wedding gift
Germany, 1642
Silver, 62 mm



Fig 9. Kabbalistic medal, Jesus as the Showbread, encircled by Hebrew inscriptions
Spain or Southern France, 16th century
Bronze, 38 mm

it was an amulet for the prevention of bubonic plague. Others paired the Crucifixion with other Old Testament scenes, such as of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac, that were seen as a foretelling of Christ's sacrifice. It is of some interest that the area in which such early- and mid-16th century medallic silver amulets were produced was mainly controlled by Lutherans rather than Catholics during the early years of the Reformation. Yet as was also the case with the producers of the false shekels, such products were seemingly disseminated to and accepted by both sides in the ongoing religious conflict associated with the Reformation and Counter-Reformation (fig. 7). One of many medals of the 17th century undoubtedly mounted for use as an amulet, presents a trinitarian godhead ruling the world but it textually identifies this Christian figure using Latinate forms of the Hebrew terms for God –Tetragrammaton, Jehovah, Adonay, Elohim. Syncretism and other forms of religious overlap are common in amulets because since ancient times the invocation of strange gods and alternate traditions was believed to strengthen rather than to contradict their protective efficacy. A further atrotropaic technique is the entrapment of evil influences by luring them into an ever-decreasing spiral (fig. 8).

Another much reproduced pendant medallic format of the 16th and 17th centuries is an object for religious engagement through contemplation, picturing Jesus with a halo, but naming him entirely in Hebrew with many variant spellings and with a magic square on the reverse side with sixteen arrangements of the Tetragrammaton (fig. 9).



Fig 8. Vanishing spiral amulet with transliterated names for divinities, and hexagram
Germany, 18-19th century
Silver, 42 mm

In Middle Eastern countries where the techniques of casting and the striking of medals from dies were less prevalent, an entirely different tradition of medals made of metal was based on engraving, chasing and filigree to produce religiously based amulets. In Judaism and Islam, where human and even animal figuration was discouraged, holy texts were the mainstay of protective artifacts. Pregnancy and childhood being particularly risky phases of life were therefore periods particularly in need of amuletic protection (fig. 10). Thus, a medal depicting three demons to oppose Lilith, Adam's (mythological) jealous first wife, who threatened mothers and newborns alike. The hazards of marriage, travel, and warfare were also deemed occasions for the use of such apotropaic preventives. It is again worth mentioning that while amulets of all sorts were commonly worn as pendants, they might also take the form of bracelets, be attached to garments or carried in a pocket, or hung in appropriate locations within a room where the person to be safeguarded was situated.

In Christian Europe the unusually fluid religious atmosphere of the 16th and early 17th centuries fostered



Fig 10. Childbirth amulet against Lilith (Sanvai, Sansanvai, Sanmangelof)
North Africa, 19th century
Silver, 49 mm



Fig 11. Talisman of Catherine de Medici (alleged)
France, 16th century
Bronze, 44 x 35 mm

another eclectic system of belief that came to be richly expressed by medallic amulets. This was the appeal to and belief in occult systems to engage nature and the cosmos. It involved a revival of ancient hermetic and kabbalistic theories which mingled with Christian, Jewish and even pagan traditions, and also incorporated alchemical and astrological concepts. A classic example of such an eclectic combination is the famed talisman associated with Catherine de Medici (fig. 11). Such systems produced medals which implicitly but often also explicitly provided protection for their owners. Suns, moons, saints and ancient deities; Latin, Hebrew, Greek and 'angelic' alphabets; numerical magic squares; and multiple metallic combinations, including electrum; cast, struck and engraving techniques were all part of the apparatus supporting this genre (fig. 12). While this system seems at first sight more far-fetched than the familiar religious conventions earlier mentioned, it was this very freedom from earlier established guidelines that led to the further development of some of these eclectic but malleable concepts into what later came to be known as science (fig. 13). For example, electricity, ill-defined before the late 18th century was at first more conceptual than experimental, alchemy preceded and evolved into more replicable chemistry, astrology matured into the astronomy of later centuries, herbal remedies were prodrome to modern pharmacology. Interestingly, however, well into the 19th century magnetism and electricity were pseudoscientifically presumed to have specific medicinal effects which came to support belief systems that produced medallic amulets based on combinations of metals – so-called batteries – a format that proved popular in America and Europe (fig. 14).



Fig 12. Alchemical amulet against 'flux, cramps and erysipelas'
Germany, 17th century
Electrum (white metal), 49 mm



Fig 13. Sigillum electrale; alchemical-electric amulet
Germany, 1662
White metal, 49 mm

The modern era of rational scientific investigation with consequent improvement in the efficacy of health care and of safety in general might have been expected to undermine the systems of faith and belief that produced the entire tradition of protective amulets we have been discussing. But taking notice of the wide assortment of neck pendants, charm bracelets, and religious artefacts of all kinds, it is evident that this has been far from the case. Medallic good luck tokens, sometimes with religious texts and imagery, but alternatively with four-leaf clovers or horseshoes, have long been common keychain appendages or pocket pieces, typically gifted to charitable donors of religious and medical institutions as so-called tokens of gratitude (fig. 15). Recent years have also seen a major resurgence of kabbalistic medals whose actual content, nature and basis of authority is obscure or non-existent. In matters of apotropaic protection, obscurity of meaning, even the use of languages unintelligible to the wearer, are often thought by users to strengthen an amulet's presumptive potency.

A study was carried out in a neonatal intensive care unit in Israel twenty years ago. Observers recorded the behaviour of the families of the infants being offered care with the most current medical techniques available. Yet, fully fifty percent of the families of these children engaged in some form of religious or atropaic practice. A substantial number, whether Arabs or Jews, whether rich or poor, whether highly or less educated, employed such methods as insurance to supplement the efforts of the highly skilled physicians and nurses formally responsible for treatments. To conclude, so long as uncertainty exists, threats of danger to life or health, human beings are apt to seek protection beyond rational expectation. What harm, one



Fig 14. Richardson's magneto-galvanic battery
Canada, 1881
Copper, silver, lead, brass, steel, 58 mm



Fig 15. Good luck token of gratitude for a hospital donation
United States, c. 1925
Bronze, 35 mm

thinks, can come from a little extra insurance? Validated by religion, ascribed to superstition, or even accepted as an irrational custom, it seems unlikely that the desire for hedging risk, let's call it as John Cook did, the human need for amuletic reassurance, will ever disappear.

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