

A GRAECO-EGYPTIAN AMULET FROM NYSA-SCYTHOPOLIS (BET SHE'AN)

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In 2007, a magical amulet was found by chance by a casual visitor at the Roman-Byzantine civic center of Nysa-Scythopolis (Bet She'an). It was delivered to the Israel Antiquities Authority by the tour guide, Mordechai Aviam.

Engraved intaglio design (obverse); incised Greek inscription (reverse).

Fair workmanship, linear style.

Right upper third is broken; rest of amulet is well preserved.

DESCRIPTION

Round (diam. 22 mm, Th 4 mm; Fig. 1); the edge of the reverse is slightly beveled. Cobalt glass.

Obverse: Despite the break, the scene can be safely reconstructed on the basis of what remains of the right-hand side, as well as by comparison with similar objects. Delicately engraved insects, birds and reptiles are



Fig. 1. The amulet.

symmetrically arranged in six registers around a central scene depicting the backview of a naked child sitting on a lotus flower. The lower part of his back is incised with vertical lines. The figure is slightly turned to the left, as indicated by the leftward position of the legs and the way the left hand is bent forward. The right hand and head are broken. The fleshy flower of the lotus has six engraved, vertically lined petals (cf. Petrie 1914: Pl. XXVI) and a thick stem. It is placed above a crocodile in the bottom register, advancing to the right with its mouth open. In the top register, scanty remains of a winged scarab can be seen (see Dauphin 1993: Fig. 1). Of the middle four registers, the uppermost figure on the right is entirely missing and only traces remain of the next two figures on that side. Nonetheless, enough survives to indicate four pairs of animals arranged antithetically on either side of the central scene. Depicted from top to bottom were Houbara bustards (*chlamydotis undulata*; Paz 1986:193–196) in profile, scorpions with curled tails and outstretched pincers, crabs (*brachyura*), and upright cobras in profile.

Reverse: Although the first letter is missing, it is clear that the Greek word [Σ]τομάχου (abridged from φυλακτήριον του στομάχου, ‘amulet of the stomach’; Dauphin 1993:145)¹ is incised in two lines on the lower half of the amulet. Each line consists of four letters, 2.6–3.1 mm high.

DISCUSSION

An oval-shaped amulet of the same kind, found in a mango plantation north of Kibbutz Mazzuva, was published by Claudine Dauphin (1993). In her detailed analysis of the amulet, Dauphin relates the obverse design to two connecting themes: “the birth of the sun and the regeneration of the human being.” She states: “According to a Hermopolitan myth, the sun was born in a lotus flower... The child sitting atop a lotus flower is the young sun, the Egyptian child-god Horus or the Graeco-Egyptian Harpocrates.” (Dauphin 1993:146

and see references therein). A naked child on a lotus flower, depicted in the central scene of both the Nysa-Schythopolis and Mazzuva examples, is quite common on amulets and has a wide range of variations (Bonner 1950:140–147). In the amulet from Nysa-Scythopolis, the child is in a somewhat different position above the lotus flower from that in the Mazzuva amulet, although the iconography of both is very similar.

According to Dauphin (1993:146), the composition can be divided into two zones. The central scene and the upper registers represent “the realm of Good and of Life,” manifested by symbols of creation and revival. In our amulet, these include the young sun-child sitting upon a lotus; the winged scarab, identified with the protective sun-god Heper (Petrie 1914:25, Fig. 93); and the Houbara bustard, an Egyptian desert bird known for its sexual potency and courting dance, presumably symbolizing the birth cycle.² In the Mazzuva amulet, the birds are falcons, considered to be apotropaic creatures. The lower zone represents the “kingdom of Evil and Death,” inhabited by the scorpion, associated with Seth; the crab, the sacred emblem of death; the cobra, Apophis, God of chaos; and the crocodile, “prime incarnation of evil.” In the Mazzuva amulet, the crab may also be represented under the lotus, although Dauphin considers the creature to be a scarab.

As stated by Dauphin, amulets related to digestive healing practices were among the most common kind in the Graeco-Roman world.³ Medical amulets of this type were widespread and are generally dated to the second and third centuries CE. According to Dauphin, their Egyptian symbols and Greek inscriptions suggest Hellenized Egypt as their point of origin, presumably Alexandria. I would suggest that they might have been manufactured in Syria-Palestina as well.

A rather similar hematite amulet of unknown provenance, now in the British Museum, was published by Michel (2001:93, Pl. 20:144) and dated to the third century CE. Its obverse

depicts Harpocrates in profile turned to the left, sitting on a crocodile without a lotus flower and surrounded by a scorpion, a scarab and a falcon. On the reverse, the three lines of inscription read: ΙΑΩ ΣΑΒΑ ΩΘ (from the Hebrew אֲדֹנָי צְבָאוֹת, 'lord of hosts'. Three other hematite amulets of the same type present variations on both theme and inscription (Michel 2001:253–4, Pl. 59:401–403). The first has on its obverse a phoenix on a globe above a crocodile surrounded by various reptiles and birds; the two lines of inscription on the reverse read: ΠΕΠΤΕ, 'digest'. The two other amulets have the same obverse, but on their reverse are three-line inscriptions that read: ΣΤΟΜΑΧΟΥ, 'stomach'. All three amulets were dated to the fourth century CE.

A hematite amulet, set in a decorated gold fitting with a hanging ring, was found in the *diaconicon* of the North-East Church at Hippos (Schuler 2005:70–71, Fig. 99:top). It was part of a hoard of gold jewelry dated to the fourth century CE, although the church's latest stratum was dated to the late sixth or early seventh century CE.⁴ On the obverse is a long-legged bird (phoenix?) with rays around its head standing above a crocodile. Above the bird is a winged scarab, and on both sides there are pairs of birds, scorpions and stylized snakes. Two lines on the reverse read: ΠΕΠΤΕ; below them, the symbol of Chnoubis, a stylized coiled snake with a lion's head, is depicted. It resembles one of the above-mentioned amulets published by Michel (2001: Pl. 59:401) that was dated to the fourth century CE.

A magical amulet of hematite was found next to a Jewish mausoleum at Tiberias (Vitto 2008:21*–23*, Fig. 24). The obverse shows a bearded man in profile (a reaper) bent to the right, about to cut stalks of corn with a sickle, while in the left field behind him is a five-pronged fork with some clothes(?) hanging over it, and a tree. On the reverse the word Σχίον, 'hip' is depicted. Vitto discusses the type at length and, following Henig (1988:151), dates it according to its 'incoherent grooves style' to the mid-second century CE (Vitto 2008:23*).

Since the amulet was found in debris after the excavations of the Jewish mausoleum (dated to the late first or early second century CE) were completed, no relation between the amulet and the mausoleum could be positively affirmed.

Among similar amulets of the reaper type, Vitto mentions a fragment of a black steatite oval amulet found in a Byzantine context in Area L at Tel Bet She'an (Khamis 2006). The preserved part of the scene depicts a reaper bent to the right, wearing a tunic belted at the waist. Behind him is a tree. On the reverse, two Greek words read Σχίον Θεραπείας, 'cure for the hips'.

Although the Roman-period dating (second–third centuries CE) for numerous amulets (mostly from private or museum collections and therefore, of unknown provenance) is generally accepted by most scholars, an early Byzantine dating for similar amulets has also found wide recognition. It seems reasonable to assume that magical amulets of the Graeco-Egyptian type were still in use or even newly manufactured, either in Alexandria or Syria-Palestina, throughout the Byzantine period as well. Both the amulets from Tel Bet She'an and from Hippos came from clearly dated strata of the Byzantine period, while those from Mazzuva and from the civic center of Nysa-Scythopolis are random, unstratified finds, the latter from the surface level of the excavated Byzantine-period city. One should therefore conclude that, in spite of Dauphin's early dating of the Mazzuva amulet by style and origin and on the basis of the above-mentioned parallels, both it and the Nysa-Scythopolis amulet may very well be of the early Byzantine period. On the other hand, Dauphin's identification of their type and Alexandrian origin seems to rest on firm ground.

Schuler, while discussing the amulet from the *diaconicon* of the church at Hippos, refers to its ecclesiastical context and states that: "Chrysostom may condemn amulets, but Alexander of Tralles, a practicing physician of the sixth century, condones the therapeutic use of amulets" (Schuler 2005:71).⁵ It would be

reasonable to assume that in spite of its pagan origins, belief in the healing powers of magical amulets was part of the region's Hellenic cultural tradition and therefore popular among the new Christians. Their manufacture may thus have continued well into the Byzantine period. Furthermore, the appearance of an amulet in a Jewish mausoleum in Tiberias may have been accidental, but alternatively, it may indicate

that the phenomenon was also practiced among Jews.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The amulet was cleaned by Olga Shor, photographed by Clara Amit, drawn by Carmen Hersch, and the material was identified by Yael Gorin-Rosen.

NOTES

¹ A fragment of another amulet from Tiberias carries the Greek word ἰσχίον 'for the hips': Amitai-Preiss 2004:188.

² I would like to thank Mordechai Aviam for the Houbara bustard identification and other useful remarks.

³ Bonner (1950) lists 71 medical amulets, about 30 of which are stomachic.

⁴ Schuler (2005:71, No. 12) suggests a fourth-century CE or a somewhat later date for the amulet from Hippos (following Michel 2001: No. 401 and

private correspondence with Michel on 18 July 2005), although not as late as the sixth or early seventh century CE, and remarks that "old magical amulets were occasionally reused in later times." He further discusses its connection to the church and the continued Christian belief in the use of amulets.

⁵ Schuler (2005:71) quotes the following sources for the use of amulets by Christians: Alexander of Tralles, 2:375, 475; Chrysostom, in *epistulam ad I Corinthios* PG 61, col. 38; and in *epistulam ad Timotheum*, PG 62, col. 552.

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