

A JEWISH-GNOSTIC AMULET OF THE ROMAN PERIOD

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A MOST UNUSUAL AMULET has been kindly loaned me from the de Clercq Collection. Two sides of it were published by de Ridder in the catalogue of that collection.¹ I reproduced his illustrations of these two faces in my *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period* and discussed the amulet inadequately.² Now that I have been able to study the object itself, I see that it has much greater interest. I have shown it to several scholars and suggested that they publish it, but since they found the inscriptions an “incomprehensible combination of letters” they did not wish to do so. With no pretense at fully understanding it myself, I feel that the piece should be made available for scholarly discussion.

It is of black steatite, 37x27x14 mm.,³ with the four

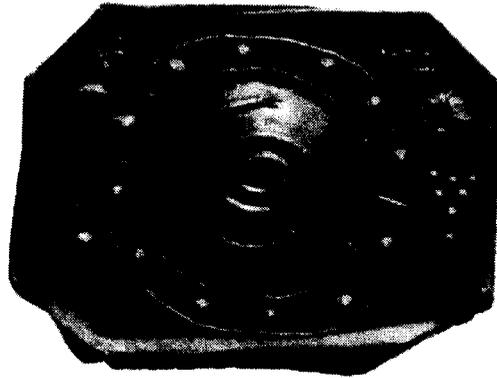
¹*Collection de Clercq, Catalogue*, 1911, VII, ii, plate XXX, no. 3514; cf. 796f.

²See III, fig. 1145, and II, 268.

³The photographs here vary slightly in scale.



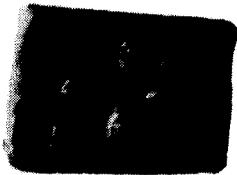
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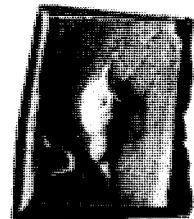
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PLATE 3 — PARIS. DE CLERCQ COLLECTION. BLACK STEATITE AMULET

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corners so beveled off that space is made for four additional little symbols, nine in all. Professor Gershom Scholem wrote me that in the inscription on the amulet the letter *nun* has an early form found in inscriptions of about the second to the fourth century. This is my only basis for dating the amulet, since the untutored work of provincial stone cutters changed little for many centuries. It seems safe to consider it a third or fourth century piece. As to provenance we have no information whatever; presumably it was produced in the Eastern part of the Roman Empire.

One of the two chief sides of the amulet, fig. 8, has a design, well cut, of Adam and Eve on either side of the tree with its fruit. A snake curls up the tree in the usual way, but reaches out its open mouth toward Eve's face, as she plucks an apple and gives another to Adam. A *cheth* stands beside Adams, and a *resh* or *daleth* beside Eve. The action seems to determine which of the two each of these figures represents. Difficulties are at once apparent. The *cheth* beside Adam is Eve's initial in Hebrew, and the gesture of Adam's hand to the abdomen suggests the gesture of Aphrodite and of her eastern predecessors. But the picking of the apple is so clearly the action of Eve that we can make no other identification here. The letters, like those with the other little symbols, may be initials of magical words.

One is also struck at once by another distinctive feature. In the earliest Christian representations,⁴ the couple always stand in shame covering their genitals. Here neither of them makes the slightest attempt to do so. This will seem important for interpretation. I should guess that the distinct shame expressed in the Christian representation is a Christian addition to some such original as we have here. Our amulet probably shows us the original design, and possibly the earliest Adam and Eve in existence.

On the side opposite this stands a design, unique so far as

⁴G. Wilpert, *Le pitture delle catacombe romane*, 1903, II, plates 70, 2; 93; 101; 166, 2; 169; 171; 186, 2; 197, 2; 211, 3; 240, 1; 1, 299-302. The earliest of these are roughly contemporary with our amulet: H. Leclercq in F. Cabrol, *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie* (1907), I, i, 510.

I know, fig. 2. At the center is a band divided into twelve sections, and with a tiny boss inside each section. The band must be the zodiac, represented on so small a scale that the artist despaired of distinguishing the signs and showed by the bosses that the signs should be there. This band encircles a mound, an omphalos, and round the omphalos coils a snake with open mouth and a protruding forked tongue. The snake round the omphalos was a recognized symbol of Apollo.⁵ It appears at least twice in Pompeian wall paintings,⁶ and on Roman coins of cities in Lydia and Thrace.⁷ Karo thinks that the snake in this period would have referred to the medical power of Apollo as father of Aesculapius, rather than to the ancient Python that Apollo killed in taking over Delphi. In the Pompeian pictures the relationship seems more with the Dionysiac and mystic snakes than with either Asclepius or Python. The snake and omphalos are definitely solar symbols, and hence appropriate in place of Helios within the zodiac. The snake has its mouth open in an exaggerated way so that its tongue may be seen. We now notice that, much smaller as the snake of Eden is represented, its mouth is also open and the tongue seems protruding. This, and that it extends its mouth toward Eve's face, will seem meaningful as we continue.

The other symbols on the side with the zodiac are, at the right, a wreath with a *shin* above it, and, at the left, a crescent, with horns down, and with a *cheth* above it. These apparently represent the sun and moon, with the *skin* for *shemesb*, sun, and the *cheth* for *chodesb*, new moon, that aspect of the moon especially important in Jewish life. Below the sun are seven

⁵G. Karo, "Omphalos," C. Daremberg and E. Saglio, *Dictionnaire des antiquités grecques et romaines* (1904), IV, i, 197-200. The most important study is that of Hans Leisegang, "The Mystery of the Serpent," *The Mysteries*, Papers from the Eranos Yearbooks, Joseph Campbell, ed. (1955), 194-260 (Bollingen Series, XXX, 2). This was originally published in *Eranos-Jahrbücher*, VII, 1939.

⁶H. Gusman, *Pompei*, London (1900), 112; A. Mau, "Scavi di Pompei," *Mitteilungen des Kaiserlich Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, Roemische Abtheilung*, XI (1896), 68.

⁷R. S. Poole, *Catalogue of the Greek Coins of the Tauric Chersonese, Sarmatia, Dacia, Moesia, Thrace, &c.* (1877), 89 (Catalogue of the Greek Coins in the British Museum, III); B. V. Head, *Catalogue of the Greek Coins of Lydia* (1901), plates XV, 1; XVII, 3 (Catalogue of the Greek Coins in the British Museum, XXII).

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very small bosses apparently the planets, the bosses arranged to recall the Pythagorean figure of the tetractys of six points, but here with the seventh point below it.⁹ This arrangement of points in an equilateral triangle to represent what the Pythagoreans called a "triangle number" seems an attempt to make the seven resemble the ten, the number more usually shown in this way. Philo of Alexandria frequently tries to make the seven like the ten in being a perfect number. At the left of the zodiac a single little boss stands by itself, and I cannot even guess at what it might represent.

The whole design reflects current syncretism. That the snake-omphalos figure should take the place of Helios, and that the obverse should show the snake with the tree of Eden suggests that the amulet reflects a Jewish gnostic environment. We are used to Helios in the zodiac in the mosaics of Jewish synagogues,¹⁰ but in these he appears in his personal form driving the quadriga. There is presumably some connection between the central snakes of the designs on these two faces of the amulet, and it is in the symbolism of the Naasenes that we have perhaps a slightly Christianized echo of this gnosticism. Of the snake the Naasenes said:

They say that the snake is the damp substance, as did Thales of Miletus, and that of all beings whatsoever, mortal or immortal, animate or inanimate, not a one can endure without it [or him]. And all things are subject to it, and it is good, and has within itself, as within the horn of the one-horned bull, the beauty of all other things; and to all things which exist it contributes their bloom and what is most proper in accordance with their nature.¹⁰

⁹On the tetractys see John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, 4th ed. (1930), 102-104.

⁹See my *Symbols*, III, figs. 640, 644; cf. 992, 994; I, 217, 258.

¹⁰Hippolytus, *Elenchus*, V, ix, 13f. This reference to Thales as one who selected water because of its spermatic symbolism and power may well be based directly or indirectly upon a statement of Aristotle in the *Metaphysics*, where Thales' doctrine is connected with the myth of the Ocean and Tethys and is said by Aristotle to have been inspired by the life-giving and creative power of the damp seminal fluid, since all plants and animals are nourished by water, and, most peculiarly, since heat arises from water.

This idea of the snake as the ultimate source of life expressed itself ritually in having the snake coil about ritualistic loaves of bread:

it is their custom to keep and feed a snake in a basket, which they bring out from its lair at the time of their mysteries. They spread loaves upon a table, and summon this same serpent, which, as its lair is opened, comes forth. And so according to its intelligence and knavery, aware indeed of their folly, it goes up upon the table and coils itself about the loaves. And this they say is the perfect sacrifice. Thereupon, as I have been told, they not only break the loaves about which the snake had been coiled and give it to the communicants, but also each of them kisses the snake on the mouth. This they do after the snake has been tamed by some sorcery, or after the animal has been cajoled by some other diabolic trick looking toward deceit. And they worship the thing, and call "Eucharist" that which came into being through its coiling [about it]. And then, as they say, they offer up a hymn through it to the Father above. So do they celebrate their mysteries."

In this passage the snake consecrates the loaves by coiling about them, with the result that something "comes into being" through its activity—that is, a sort of transubstantiation of the loaves. This is the Eucharist, the perfect sacrifice, the mystic rite. The snake in the basket certainly came from Dionysiac rites, and it may well be that in those rites the snake was used in some such way as is here described. So it is extremely important that on one of the smaller faces the basket appears with the lid typically open, fig. 1. Lehmann¹² has suggested that in Dionysiac representation the emergence of the snake

¹¹Epiphanius, *Panarion*, XXXVII, 6-8, K. Holl, ed., *Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte* (1922), II, 57f.

¹²K. Lehmann-Hartleben and E. C. Olsen, *Dionysiac Sarcophagi in Baltimore*, 1942, 15; in n. 11 he refers to Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, II, 14 (F. Conybeare, ed., in Loeb series, 1, 157).

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from its basket with its forked tongue exposed is a sign of kissing. The exaggerated representation of the snake's mouth on the amulet takes on meaning in the light of such remarks, especially the snake reaching toward Eve's face. The snake round the omphalos as it appears on the amulet may well have inspired the ritual of the snake round the loaves.

The slight "Christian" elements in the Naasenes have obviously been grafted upon an original pagan, or pagan-Jewish, gnostic formulation and ritual. I strongly suspect that this amulet shows the snake as the solar source of light, life, and salvation, and the incident in Eden, which here has no marks of shame or humiliation, as the giving to man of his gnostic knowledge. For the snake could become the savior in Jewish and Christian gnosticism as the one who defied the Creator God and brought man gnosis of good and evil. This gnostic interpretation seems to me much more likely than the other possibility, that the cosmic and solar snake on one side saves one from the bad snake of Eden on the other, since I see no sign of evil in the Adam and Eve scene. The two snakes seem to me identical.¹³

The forms represented on the sides of the amulet present much greater difficulty. There are eight of these narrow faces, one of which, the long side at the tip, has only holes for a metal ring or a string so that the amulet could be worn. The little designs on the other faces, as the Hebrew letters with them show, are some of them carved upside down in relation with the face that bears the inscription. Why this should have been done baffles me completely. To help future students I have reproduced all the designs with what seems to me to be the right side up, but I have indicated in each case when, in relation to the face with the inscription, a design is cut on the amulet upside down.

¹³On the solar snake at this time see my *Symbols*, II, 261-269; Robert Gordis, "The Knowledge of Good and Evil in the Old Testament and the Qumran Scrolls," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, LXXVI (1957), 123-138, has most recently renewed the age old interpretation of the Fall as being the introduction of sexual activity.

Adjoining the face with holes for the ring is one of the small beveled edges having the design of fig. 6, a design of squares or blocks, made into a pyramid which de Ridder seems to have had in mind when he mentioned "a house of three stories."¹¹ A *cbeth* (perhaps a *be*), is above it at the left. That this is a "house with three stories" may be true, but it suggests many other things. It resembles the ziggurat of Babylonian seals which von der Osten tells us symbolized a mountain.¹⁵ It also recalls the way cities are represented on the sixth-century mosaic map of Palestine from Medeba.¹⁶ There is a vague possibility that this may refer to the heavenly city. Professor Robert Grant recalled to me that the same form was used for the funerary pyre by which the Roman emperors of the second and third centuries were apotheosized.¹⁷ It also represented the pharos or lighthouse. The form had from the beginning probably some historic continuity of symbolism. Herodian¹⁸ himself noted that the pyre and pharos looked alike. The pharos was used on funerary monuments to represent the saving light that brings one into immortality.¹⁹ Since fire was associated with both, and both symbolized deification, as indeed did the ancient ziggurat and the heavenly city, an abstract representation such as that on the amulet could have been engraved with any of these in mind. I suspect that the form had become a symbol of access to divine power in its own right, and that it appears on the amulet as such.

¹¹This is upside down with reference to the face having the long inscription.

¹⁵H. H. von der Osten, *Ancient Oriental Seals in the Collection of Mr. Edward T. Newell* (1934), 115; cf. fig. 9, no. 664 (The University of Chicago Oriental Institute Publication, XXII).

¹⁶I. M. Casanowicz, *A Colored Drawing of the Medeba Mosaic Map of Palestine in the United States National Museum* (1915, Reprinted as No. 2111 from the *Proceedings of the United States National Museum*, XLIX, 359-376, with plate). Further bibliography is given there.

¹⁷The pyre is described by Harold Mattingly, *Coins of the Roman Empire in the British Museum*, V (1950), clxxxix, n., and is often represented on coins of the period: e.g. *ibid.*, plates 20, 9; 65, 17f.; 66, 7. See Herodian, IV, ii.

¹⁸*Ad loc. cit.* Herodian notes also that the shape is that of a ladder, which was another symbol of divine ascent. The form probably suggested ascent, if it was not designed to suggest it, from the time of the ziggurat. The ladder as a symbol will be discussed in the forthcoming Vol. VIII of my *Symbols*.

¹⁹Leclercq, "Phare," in Cabrol, *Dictionnaire*, XIV, 671-673. The Christian tombstone in his fig. 10156 with crown and palm leaf is likewise ambiguous. To me it looks more like the pyre on coins than any of his representations of the pharos.

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The next face, fig. 4, shows what at first seems a four petal rosette; but closer examination reveals that the four petals are four masks, their chins toward the center. I call them masks only because they have no necks. Beside each is a letter, a *kaph* beside three and a *qoph* beside one. The letters turn with the faces, except that the *qoph* is upside down as compared with the face beside it. Beyond this a beveled face, fig. 5, upside down, shows a branch with leaves at the left and berries or grapes at the right, and a *kaph* below.

The inscription, fig. 6, stands on the next face, the long face opposite the ring. Scholem wrote me after he had seen it: "The letters do not represent any known magical words, but they might, of course, be an abbreviation of the first letters of a biblical verse or some other combinations." While the inscription cannot be read, the form of its letters not only suggests a date, as we have said, but definitely shows that it is a Jewish piece, although so many pagan elements had been included. One working with charms and amulets is constantly annoyed by strings of meaningless letters, which one usually calls magical vowels, letters, or, in desperation, gibberish. Secret formulas with magical power were thus carried about, and only the initiate was told how to pronounce them.

Beside the inscription, upside down, is fig. 7, apparently a four legged table with a *gimel* under it. The table may or may not refer to a mystic or sacramental meal. Beyond this is a surface having at right angles a female head and neck, with a *kaph* beside it, fig. 9. The head recalls the female heads so frequently shown on the tiles and in the dado of the Dura-Europos synagogue and a head at Dura which Kraeling properly calls "the ubiquitous Demeter-Persephone of the eastern Mediterranean."²⁰ It also appeared in the Palestinian synagogue at Yafa.²¹ The little spike going up from the head is perhaps a reminiscence of a form such as appeared on the head of female heads at

²⁰Carl H. Kraeling, *The Synagogue* (1956), 42 (The Excavations at Dura-Europos conducted by Yale University and the French Academy of Inscriptions and Letters. Final Report VIII, pt. 1). He illustrates many of them: see his plates VIII, XVIII., and 247f.

²¹See my *Symbols*, III, fig. 993.

the Dura synagogue.²² Apparently Jews attached great significance to this head, though what it meant to them there is no basis for saying.

The last face, fig. 1, is the one already mentioned, where, upside down, appears to be the Dionysiac basket with open lid. A *kaph* is cut under it. This basket is in two parts; the upper is cylindrical, with diagonals crossing it, and the lower part is larger, boat shaped, with seven little bosses on it. The Dionysiac basket is very unusual in Jewish remains; I know it only on the unique sarcophagus from the Catacomb Torlonia at Rome.²³ This basket and similar pagan baskets usually have the Dionysiac snake coming out of them. But the snake seems implied by the form of the basket on the amulet, and by the other snakes.

That these forms on the smaller faces of the amulet somehow all belong with the gnostic snake designs must be assumed without question, but I have no guess as to how they do. It seems highly likely that the cosmic scenes of the main face reflect the Deity of a Jewish-gnostic sect, and brought the wearer that Deity's protection. How the other symbols are to be understood is quite as perplexing as the meaning of the inscriptions. We shall indeed know a great deal about ancient Jewish magic when we can fully understand this amulet. Meanwhile it is well to keep such objects, and their challenge, in mind.

²²Kraeling, *Synagogue*, Plate, XXXIX, 3, 4.

²³See my *Symbols*, III, fig. 833.