

A Sicilian Amulet in Madrid and its Tradition

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A SMALL GROUP of bronze amulets, united by similarities in their inscribed apotropaic figures and Greek texts, has been identified among finds from Sicily, discussed in a 2002 study by Sergio Giannobile. Their number can now be increased by an object currently in Madrid (National Archaeological Museum, accession no. 2016/31/7), said to be from the same island, which is published here. Its text in turn suggests modifications to the interpretation of the group and its development in later Roman and Late Ancient Sicily.

Physical description and provenance

The amulet is a circular, flat bronze medallion, with a diameter of 46–48 mm, thickness of 1 mm, and mass of 9.86 g (figs. 1–3). There is a perforation on the top made from the obverse through to the reverse, with the aim of producing a wearable amulet, probably via a suspension ring, now lost, but preserved in one of the parallel objects (no. 1 in Table 1 below). Both sides consist of fields encircled by schematic drawings of snakes coiling with their heads towards their tails, a type of the *ouroboros*, discussed below—more properly with the snake biting its tail—and stippling on the bodies. At the center of the obverse is a roughly executed anthropoid figure surrounded by Greek inscriptions, with crude renderings of a shield in its left hand and a whip in its right, the head of a cockerel, and snakes, in a style similar to those encircling the composition, in place of legs. The leg-snakes bend to the right in a U-shape towards a cruciform symbol and bear markings about the neck that may be highly schematic beards,¹ as does also the *ouroboros* on each

¹ For bearded snakes on magical gems see e.g. S. Michel, *Die magischen Gemmen im Britischen Museum* (London 2001) 70 no. 107, 80 no. 122; A. Mastrocinque, *Sylloge gemmarum gnosticarum* II (Rome 2007) 136 no. Ro18.

side. The identity of this figure is discussed below. The field of the reverse is left open for a combination of Greek inscription and magical signs.

The amulet was purchased in April 2016 by the Spanish Ministry of Culture and Sport, exercising the right of first refusal, and in that same year it was added to the collection of the National Archaeological Museum (Madrid) after a report by the Department of Medieval Antiquities. It can be traced on the international antiquities market in recent years: a London auction in 2015, where a provenance from Sicily was reported, and another in Barcelona in 2016;² earlier movements are unknown, but an ultimate origin in Sicily is confirmed by parallels.

A Sicilian amulet type

In 2002, Sergio Giannobile brought attention to a group of amulets previously published by Giacomo Manganaro, linked by context in Late Ancient Sicily and by content, apotropaic designs, and inscriptions.³ More particularly, Giannobile identified the central element of these five “medaglioni di Salomone” as a representation of that biblical monarch and noted master of demons as a bearded and crowned figure seated on a throne on the reverse and accompanied by the legend *σφραγίς Σολομῶνος*, “seal of Solomon.” This composition indeed appears on four of the five in the group but is notably

² 21 May 2015, London Ancient Coins Ltd, auction no. 43, lot 295; 25 February 2016, Martí Hervera S. L., auction no. 90, lot 145.

³ S. Giannobile, “Medaglioni magico-devozionali della Sicilia tardo-antica,” *JbAC* 45 (2002) 170–201, at 174–176 and 194–196 (the designations “obverse” and “reverse” have been swapped here, as the perforation of the Madrid amulet suggests that the face that would have been the “reverse” in the earlier typology was here felt as primary). G. Manganaro, “Nuovi documenti magici della Sicilia orientale,” *RendLinc SER.* VIII 17 (1963) 57–74, at 67–69; “Documenti magici della Sicilia dal III al VI sec. d. C.,” in *Hestiasis: Studi di tarda antichità offerti a Salvatore Calderone IV* (Messina 1989 [1994]) 13–41, at 22–23; and “Nuovo manipolo di documenti magici della Sicilia tardo-antica,” *RendLinc SER.* IX 5 (1994) 486–517, at 487–488.

absent from the fifth, where the reverse is devoted entirely to inscribed text and ritual signs (*charaktēres*).⁴ A very similar object to the fifth, which was otherwise the outlier, can now be identified in the Madrid amulet. This in turn invites a re-drawing of Giannobile's catalogue (see below) to allow the possibility that the central elements are in fact the figure appearing on the obverse of all six, the cock-headed anguipede, as well as the Egyptianizing *ouroboros*⁵ and the Greek textual formulae, to which Solomon, whose depiction on amulets came to popularity in Late Antiquity, was a later addition. Given the popularity of the Solomonic motifs in Late Antiquity and Byzantium, they are more likely to have been added to than to have been deliberately removed from an existing pattern-book or formulary. The anguipede, by contrast, became widespread as an apotropaic figure with solar associations already in the Roman period, but could easily have raised objections as demonic from Christian inheritors of earlier amulet designs, leading in turn to its deletion. Various connected in modern scholarship with the Gnostic deity Abrasax (*alias* Abraxas) and the Jewish deity Yahweh in a Graecized form $\text{I}\alpha\omega$, its precise origin remains uncertain.⁶ The Madrid amulet published here (no. 2 in Table

⁴ On the signs see in general R. Gordon, "Charaktēres between Antiquity and the Renaissance: Transmission and Re-invention," in V. Dasen et al. (eds.), *Les savoirs magiques et leur transmission de l'Antiquité à la Renaissance* (Florence 2014) 253–300; K. Dzwiza, "Magical Signs: An Extraordinary Phenomenon or Just Business as Usual? Analysing Decoration Patterns on Magical Gems," in K. Endreffy et al. (eds.), *Magical Gems in their Contexts* (Rome 2019) 59–83.

⁵ For literature see R. Kotansky and J. Spier, "The 'Horned Hunter' on a Lost Gnostic Gem," *HThR* 88 (1995) 315–337, at 317 n.9; W. M. Brashear, review of E. Zwierlein-Diehl, *Magische Amulette und andere Gemmen des Instituts für Altertumskunde der Universität zu Köln* (Opladen 1992), *Gnomon* 68 (1996) 447–453, at 452; G. Bohak and C. A. Faraone, "'Pay Heed, O Heaven, and I Will Speak' (Deut. 32:1): A Greek Amulet with Biblical and Angelic Names," *MHNH* 18 (2018) 5–14, at 12 n.23.

⁶ See recently Michel, *Die magischen Gemmen im Britischen Museum* 116–117, and C. A. Faraone, *The Transformation of Greek Amulets in Roman Imperial Times* (Philadelphia 2018) 14 and 295 n.14, with references to earlier literature; for

1) adds support for an at least Judaizing context in the presence of another Hebrew name for the supreme deity, Adonai (Αδωναι, see the commentary ad loc.) in the field surrounding the figure.

The inscribed texts also vary in a way that may be diagnostic for diachronic development. A single formulary can be recognized, as Giannobile saw, among a group that he dated to the fourth/fifth (nos. 5–6) and fifth centuries (nos. 1, 3–4). Placeholders for the names of the bearer and his or her mother have been filled in, and hence the amulets properly personalized, in only two (nos. 1 and 2), while in the other three that present legible text in the relevant place, these have been replaced with *identical* and meaningless letters (nos. 3–5; no. 6 is illegible there). An inversion of Giannobile's date-groups is thus suggested: the most economical explanation is that at a later stage the meaning of the placeholders in the formulary was no longer understood, whether the corruption arose from misreading of a possibly abbreviated placeholder such as τὸν/τὴν δεῖνα ὄν/ῆν ἔτεκεν ἢ δεῖνα or an attempt to work backwards from a finished product already personalized. Further differences in the text on the obverse of the Madrid amulet with respect to the others (omission of A.b in the typology of Table 1, with three substitutions) are consistent with an earlier stage of composition of the formulary, in particular the centrality of the anguipede once again emphasized by its labeling, Αδωναι—only here but possibly underlying the sequence ΑΔΩΝ in no. 1, and possibly ωηι and σε. The Madrid text is also the only surviving witness to the group to make an apotropaic purpose clear, in the imperative δειαφύλαξον apparently addressed to the deity figured by the anguipede itself. The same or a related compound of φυλάσσειν may be suspected to have preceded the sequence reflected as ἐπὶ ἀξίαν in the corresponding place in

an extensive collection of instances, S. Michel, *Die Magischen Gemmen. Zu Bildern und Zauberformeln auf geschnittenen Steinen* (Berlin 2004) 239–249. The figure is common on gems (see recently e.g. *SEG* LXIV 595) but rarer elsewhere, e.g. the bronze amulet *SEG* LXIII 1746 (2).

no. 1, which may join it as representative of a relatively early phase.

Whether the two groups are still to be placed as late as the fourth and fifth centuries at all may also be questioned. The aspect of the lettering would not prevent it, but no features positively identify the central elements as Christian, as might be expected at that time. The cruciform element seemingly confronted by the snakes on the obverse of the Madrid amulet remains ambiguous, as it presents an unusual form for the Christian symbol, with a second crossbar at bottom. The two bars in turn nearly align with the mouths of the snakes, as if the latter aimed to bite or grasp. Even if accepted as Christian, the figure is peripheral to the composition and not above suspicion as a later, space-filling addition. The closest parallel in the Sicilian group (no. 1) presents instead two signs in the form of Greek X, suggesting that the resemblance to a Christian symbol may be coincidental; even the presence of a more recognizable cross is not a sure sign of a Christian amulet.⁷ An earlier dating at least for the Madrid amulet, given its textual treatment of the anguipede and relative purity from textual corruption, may therefore be proposed, in the third or fourth century, while no. 1 might follow at least one generation later, supposing a purely speculative familial transmission of the formulary among artisans, and the rest, including the introduction of the Solomonic motifs, reserved for a later development in the same milieu. Onomastic data, in the names of the bearers and their mothers, present for nos. 1 and 2 only, are also thoroughly Imperial: Marcianus and Lavinia (no. 1); Philasteira or Felicitas (?) and Thermous (no. 2).

The provenances of the amulets in this group are exclusively Sicilian, and when more specific find-spots are known, they cluster along the eastern coast: Hadranon (Adrano), Leontini, Paternò, and Syracuse. This cohesion, and the lack of parallels

⁷ T. S. de Bruyn and J. H. F. Dijkstra, "Greek Amulets and Formularies from Egypt containing Christian Elements: A Checklist of Papyri, Parchments, Ostraka, and Tablets," *BASP* 48 (2011) 163–216, at 171.

for the distinctive combination of text and figures among published amulets from elsewhere in the Mediterranean, make the identification of the work of one or more local, Sicilian workshops tempting. Attribution of groups of comparable amulets to workshops is not uncommon in the literature,⁸ but rigorous criteria for attribution remain to be articulated, and here there are the additional problems of design and textual differences, and possible diachronic separation, among the surviving objects. The artisans in question would, in any case, have been well informed of currents and fashions in amulet-designs from the wider Roman world.

Text

A. (obverse)

top right: Αδωναί

below beak of anguipede: ωηι

below left arm of anguipede: σε

at left: Ιαηω | μα | μω | ων | βαιολ | βαλ | σθηε

B. (reverse)

επηνα

συμαηαο *sign*

σαλαμαξα

σαλαμαξα

5 *signs*

δειαφύλαξον

Φηλαστε ή-

ν έτεκεν

Θερμου(ς) ^{vac.}

10 ^{vac.} *sign*

Translation (B only)

EPĒNA SYMAĒAO (*sign*) SALAMAXA SALAMAXA (*signs*) protect
Phēlaste whom Thermous bore (*sign*).

⁸ E.g. J. Spier, “An Antique Magical Book Used for Making Sixth-Century Byzantine Amulets?” in *Les savoirs magiques* 43–66.

Commentary

A.1 Αδωναι. A transcription of a Hebrew epithet of the supreme Jewish deity common in Greek magical texts: see *P.Oxy.* LXXXII 5305.ii.12–13 n.; here it probably labels more specifically the anguipede, equated elsewhere in its tradition with Ιαω (see the introduction above and the following note), the latter recalled in turn by the sequences ωηι and ισηω below.

A.2 ωηι. Sequences and sub-sequences of the seven Greek vowels are abundant in amulets, but here there may be a more specific relation to the Ιαω (so too ισηω below) sometimes found on the anguipede's shield, on which see Zwierlein-Diehl, *Magische Amulette* 29–30.

A.4–12. Unparalleled outside of the Sicilian group, but for the end compare the Egyptianizing sequence Βαινχωωωχ σθοβαοληβαολ σθοβαλαιαμ σθοαβαη on the reverse of a representation of the Egyptian god Harpocrates on the gem *SEG XLIV* 1738 (5); further the so-called Σθουβαολη-logos (Michel, *Die Magischen Gemmen: Zu Bildern und Zauberformeln* 487).

B.1–2. The sequence is unparalleled outside of the Sicilian group.

B.2 *sign.* The mark, a serpentine curve intersected by a diagonal, resembles a simplification of the so-called “Chnoubis-sign,” on which see the note on B.5 below.

B.3–4. In addition to the context of the Sicilian group, where the Madrid amulet is the only one to double it (the others substituting βαμεαζα for the second instance), the sequence is found on its own: A. Delatte and P. Derchain, *Les intailles magiques gréco-égyptiennes* (Paris 1964) 321–322 no. 472; *SEG XXXIII* 1553, *XLIX* 2334 (4), *LIII* 2101 (45); and as part of a longer one, Michel, *Die magischen Gemmen im Britische Museum* 311 no. 512 (“Aaianagba-Logos,” see further *Die Magischen Gemmen: Zu Bildern und Zauberformeln* 482).

B.5 *signs.* Similarly in one other member of the Sicilian group (no. 1); the additional strokes at right and intruding into B.4 above, consistent with the apices of two triangular letters, may relate to the sequence ΑΔΩΝ read in no. 1. The three-barred, zeta-like signs may be connected to the “Chnoubis-sign” (cf. on

B.2 above), whose form they resemble; the two are occasionally juxtaposed, as in Delatte and Derchain, *Les intailles magiques* 64 no. 74; they also feature in their own right, as here combined with the encircling *ouroboros*-snake, Delatte and Derchain 61 no. 66. The zeta-form sign is known more generally: e.g. C. Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets, Chiefly Graeco-Egyptian* (Ann Arbor 1950) 300 no. 281 (with plate XIII), 301–302 no. 292 (with plate XIV); Michel, *Die magischen Gemmen im Britische Museum* 319 no. 534, with references to further parallels.

B.6 δειαφύλαξον. Unique among the Sicilian group, but probably ἐπὶ ἀξίαν preceding the bearer's name in the accusative in Table 1 no. 1 is a corruption of this or a related imperative. The verb is not uncommon in requests for divine protection: see recently *SEG* LVII 2065.11 (with Bohak and Faraone, *MHNH* 18 [2018] 12–13), LXIII 832.18, LXV 929.5; it is also applied to the protection offered by the god Harpocrates in his first-person speech inscribed on an amuletic figurine of a falcon from Roman Athribis: *Suppl.Mag.* I 6.7.

B.7 Φηλαστε. Unparalleled name, but the reading is clear; the following ἦν at least guarantees the feminine gender. A truncated variant of the rare Φιλάστειρα is tempting as the latter is on record in southern Italy (*LGPN* IIIA s.v.); a single, short vertical far below the line to the right of ε, if not dismissed as a stray mark, could be an unusual sign of abbreviation of the name of a bearer. A relation to the more numerous Latin derivatives of *felix* also seems possible—compare Φηλικίσσιμα (*LGPN* VA s.v.) and Φηλικιτία (IV s.v.)—perhaps in this case *Felicitas*. The initial Φ- might otherwise suggest a transcription of an Egyptian name beginning in Pi- (the definite article), but the latter would be masculine and hence can be excluded here.

B.7–9. For this Egyptianizing formula of identification by the mother's name (metronym), common in Greek magical texts from the Roman period onward, see J. B. Curbera, “Maternal Lineage in Greek Magical Texts,” in D. R. Jordan et al. (eds.), *The World of Ancient Magic* (Bergen 1999) 195–203; J. Dieleman, “What's in a Sign? Translating Filiation in the Demotic Magical Papyri,” in A. Papaconstantinou (ed.), *The Multilingual*

Experience in Egypt, from the Ptolemies to the Abbasids (Farnham 2010) 127–152.

B.9–10. A Greek female name Θερμοῦ for Θερμοῦς, which is on record three times in Roman Crete (*LPGN* I s.v.; cf. also *SEG* XLVI 2170 (49), from Roman Egypt, and Trismegistos Names no. 18437 for three further papyrological attestations, in which context there may be an underlying abbreviation of an Egyptian name Θερμουθᾶς or Θερμουθάριον). The name is followed by what is to be read as a non-phonetic sign, despite its resemblance to the Greek letter P, for substantial vacats appear to separate the two groups at the end of 9 and the beginning of 10. There is a similar disposition in the closest parallel in the Sicilian group (no. 1 in Table 1), in which is clear the division between a female name and two signs, the second resembling the Greek N.⁹

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Figure 1: Late Roman amulet. Madrid, National Archaeological Museum, accession no. 2016/31/7. Photograph courtesy of Ángel Martínez Levas.



Figure 2: line-drawing, obverse.



Figure 3: line-drawing, reverse.

TABLE 1: Text and figures on six Sicilian amulets from Late Antiquity

The artifacts have been arranged in the order of the relative integrity of what, following the argument advanced above, is identified as the central textual motif. For convenience the columns are kept as close as possible to their order in the table presented by Giannobile, but for the reasons explained above (n.3), the designations “obverse” and “reverse” have been inverted.

	Provenance	Publication	Central figure on reverse	Inscription on reverse (B)	Central figure on obverse	Inscription on obverse (A)
1	Leontini	<i>SEG XLIV</i> 771; Giannobile no. 5 [<i>SEG LII</i> 921]	Signs (<i>charaktēres</i>)	επινα συμαηα ο σαλαμαξα βαμεαζα ΑΔΩΝ ἐπὶ ἀξίαν Μιαρκιανὸς ὄν ἔτεκεν Λαβιν(ί)α <i>signs</i>	Anguipede	a: Ιαση ηηω μα μω ων βαλ ολ βαλ σθε b: Ιαωαλων [εἰς πᾶσαν ψ]υ[χὴν]
2	? (Sicily)	(above)	Signs (<i>charaktēres</i>)	επινα συμαηα ο σαλαμαξα σαλαμαξα <i>signs</i> δειαφύλαξον Φηλαστε ἦν ἔτεκεν Θερμοῦ(ς) <i>sign</i>	Anguipede	a: Ιαηω μα μω ων βαλολ βαλ σθε b: omitted c: Αδωναι d: ωηι e: σε
3	Paternò	Manganaro, “Documenti” no. 14 [<i>SEG XLIV</i> 741 (3)]; Giannobile no. 3	Solomon enthroned	a: επινα συμαηα ο σαλαμαιζα βαλμεαζα <i>sign</i> ους αβλυασιμοη ειν ἔτεκεν εηηειδαβ b: σφραγίς Σολομῶνος	Anguipede	a: Ιαση σε ηηω μα μω ων βαλ ολ βαλ σθε b: Ιαωαλων εἰς πᾶσα(ν) ψυχὴν
4	Syracuse	Manganaro, “Documenti” no. 15 [<i>SEG XLIV</i> 741 (3)]; Giannobile no. 4	Solomon enthroned	a: επινα συμαηα ο σαλαμαιζα βαλμεαζα <i>sign</i> ους αβλυασιμοη ειν ἔτεκεν εηηειδαβ b: σφραγίς Σολομῶνος	Anguipede	a: Ιαση ηηω μα μω ων βαλ ολ βαλ σθε b: Ιαωαλων εἰς πᾶσα(ν) ψυχὴν
5	? (Sicily)	Manganaro, “Nuovi documenti” 67–69; Giannobile no. 1	Solomon enthroned	a: επινα συμαηα ο σαλαμαιζα βαλμεαζα <i>sign</i> ους αβλυασιμοη ειν ἔτεκεν εηηειδαβ b: σφραγίς Σολομῶνος	Anguipede	a: Ιαση σε ηηω μα μω ων βαλ ολ βαλ σθε b: Ιαωαλω[ν] εἰς πᾶσαν ψυχὴν
6	Hadranon (Adrano)	Manganaro, “Nuovi documenti” 69; Giannobile no. 2	Solomon enthroned	Illegible	Anguipede	a: Ιαση σε ηηω μα μω ων βαλ ολ βαλ σθε b: Ιαωαλων εἰς πᾶσαν ψυχὴν