Chapter 10

Twigs in the Tawfik Canaan Collection of Palestinian Amulets

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In 2015 when I first visited the Tawfik Canaan Collection of Palestinian Amulets at Birzeit University, I got surprised by the different kinds of items comprised in it. From elaborate jewellery pieces, to apparently unaltered organic material, Tawfik Canaan collected and categorised all the objects as amulets. For him, amulets functioned, just as medicine, to reestablish well-being through their healing and protective power. Most of the objects that he collected have clear signs of human intervention: they are shaped, carved, inscribed or moulded. Other objects were used in their raw or natural shape, such as flowers, seeds, and leaves, but they were ultimately arranged in bracelets, necklaces, or sometimes combined in the preparation of herbal mélanges used for infusions or fumigations, such as the qishret el-khamīs (qishrat al-khamīs) or the arbaʿīn.1 There are a few objects in the Collection, however, that were used as amulets as they were found in nature, with almost no visible intervention. Among them, there are some twigs of various lengths and widths obtained from different kinds of trees. This paper revolves around this particular group of items. It explores the materiality of the twigs and the process through which they became to be considered meaningful and powerful by people that used them. They were the fellāhīn (fellāḥūn),2 bedouin and townsmen in Palestine in the early twentieth century, and it is from them that the Palestinian physician and anthropologist Tawfik Canaan collected the amulets.3

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2 I use the term *fellāhīn* (peasant) and other terms to refer to the amulets as they are used in the Palestinian dialect. No nominative case is used in this paper. For accuracy, a MSA transliteration is provided in parenthesis next to all Arabic terms.

3 Tawfik Canaan was a Palestinian physician who studied tropical diseases, particularly malaria, which was among the most common infectious disease in the early twentieth century. He also carried out a lot of ethnographic research and contributed to the knowledge on Palestinian customs and beliefs among the rural population. He formed the largest collection of amulets from Palestine and the Levant.
The aim of this paper is to show how the study of material culture is complementary to textual sources because objects offer alternative visions of the past that are not written. The analysis of the materiality of the twigs is based on the careful observation of their physical features, which serve as indexes of the way they were used. Interpretation comes later and derives from the written records that Dr. Canaan left for each one of the twigs. Based on his ethnographic research, the notes about the twigs are compared with his systematic studies about Palestinian folklore, where twigs are mentioned as part of a wider, more complex, articulation of elements. For a more accurate assessment of the use and meaning of the twigs, I have compared Canaan’s written records with the information provided by other scholars who also carried out research on Palestine’s culture, and with contemporary practices and beliefs surrounding trees and twigs.

Venetia Porter points out that collecting activities do not only disclose the kinds of objects circulating in the market, but also the stage of knowledge of such objects. The majority of amulets collected in the Middle East and North Africa during the nineteenth and twentieth century were inscribed objects showing that collectors and scholars considered the text a central feature for the study of the people in the Arab colonies. This is explainable in a scholarly tradition that has paid so much attention to texts in the study of culture and that considers the textual tradition key to understand it. If we go through the literature about amulets manufactured and used in the Muslim world, it is easy to notice that studies have been much more concerned with textual amulets than with un-inscribed amulets. An example of this is shown in this volume, where most scholars focus on the textual aspect of amulets and analyse inscribed amulets and talismans. Inscriptions, of course, are key in deciphering the meaning and use of amulets and talismans. Through analysing inscriptions it is possible to track influences and forms of transmission, from one culture to another such as Gideon Bohak’s analysis of the Cairo Genizah amulets, or within one same culture as Jean-Charles Coulon shows in his paper about the circulation and re-use of al-Buni’s texts. However, I argue that the focus on inscriptions has led to

neglect the existence of other kinds of amulets that do not bear any writing and lack traces of manipulation and manufacture, which have also been part of a lively culture for centuries, have been transmitted for generations and deserve further exploration.

Uninscribed amulets in the Middle East and North Africa are as diverse as the different communities living there. Their material, shape and forms of use usually respond to local practice. However, when amulets are taken out of their context as collections tend to do, the study of such objects becomes difficult. So, how can we approach them? The study of objects through their material qualities is a useful approach to understand amulets without writing, but also textual amulets benefit from such an approach. Analysing the materiality of things requires shifting our attention from the meaning of the text to the physical features of the text, the style of calligraphy, the consistency of the handwriting, the ink employed, the inscribing techniques, as well as the features of the object such as the size, the material, and any trace of how it was made and used. The material features may disclose aspects of the context and history of the object, and may bring awareness of the different stages which an object goes through during its lifetime. This approach or state of knowledge requires a shift from analysing one particular feature, the text, to an approach that considers the entirety of its features. Moreover, it requires changing our engagement with the object, from seeing it as complete, finished, and distinct from the rest of the objects, to seeing it as only one part of a wider fluid human phenomenon, in which objects are interconnected with the rest of the material world. The study of materiality demands considering the intrinsic properties of materials, but also the rituals in which they have been embedded. Hazem Hussein Abbas Ali shows in his contribution,8 that the performative aspect of the rituals while manufacturing, activating, and using an amulet disclose that the same amulet can be used in different ways. As I mentioned before, the documentation of collected objects is particularly important for those coming from distant cultures or from the past. Moreover, for some amulets, the knowledge about them was only transmitted orally. For most collections the act of retrieving the oral tradition to study the objects is a difficult task. The twigs analysed in this chapter come from a collection that was well documented from the beginning. Tawfik Canaan was one of the pioneer ethnographer-collectors in Palestine, who showed interest in the ritual background and in the materiality of the amulets, and described how amulets articulated with other elements of Palestine’s folklore.

Using the land for agriculture, and engaging with the diverse components of the agricultural landscape has been one of the foundations for the use of natural ingredients in traditional medicine. In the last two centuries, the way Palestinians engage with their landscape has experienced many transformations. The first reason was the land-tenure reforms of the Tanzimat (starting in 1830) that led to the privatisation of land and the displacement of many peasants to the urban centres. The second, due to the Israeli occupation, which led to the drawing of new political boundaries and an internal displacement of Palestinians. The land, that had been mainly used for agriculture for centuries, has acquired a political meaning from the moment it was confiscated in 1947 and onwards. Moreover, since the 19th century, modern physicians first educated in Ottoman schools, and later in missionary institutions, started introducing new/modern forms of medicine, trying to replace traditional forms of healing that had been a component of the agrarian way of life.

Nowadays, as we approach the few fields that are still cultivated, we notice a particular relation between man and nature that has survived from the agricultural and pastoral life. Outcome of a daily engagement of the people with their surroundings, this relation lies underneath the use of natural ingredients in amulets. Many elements of traditional cures are still in use in the everyday life of contemporary Palestinians, however, they have adapted to the historical circumstances. The twigs analysed in this chapter are part of this tradition that has been adapted to the new conditions.

Twigs contain wood, and wood is a widely used material in Palestine’s autochthonous medicine. The virtue of wood is that it is easy to carve, to burn and to use in fumigations. It is sometimes used in infusions where it is boiled to bring out its medicinal properties. Wood is used alone or in combination with other parts of the plant, such as the leaves, flowers or fruits. Healing and protective remedies may include one type, or a combination of different woods. In the same way, when used as an amulet, wood might be combined with other materials.

The twigs analysed in this article come from trees, not from bushes. Trees are very important in Palestinian popular culture for many reasons. Endemic or not, trees have made their way into the core of Palestinian culture. One rea-
son is that they provide shade to humans and animals. For people working the land, this is crucial since working days are long and most of the year the temperatures are very high. Being a spot to rest, the shade of the trees also provides a space to gather during the working hours of the day. It is a space for social interaction outdoors. Even in villages where houses could be used for gatherings, to sit under the trees is the preferred option as it offers a cooler place and welcomes more people to join.

The second reason of the importance of trees is that some kinds are connected to the stories of prophets and saints, therefore they are considered holy. Travellers and missionaries in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century saw the reverence for trees as a trace of an ancient veneration. In the pre-Islamic period trees were considered to be sacred or places where gods dwelled, and therefore, they stood as sites of pilgrimage (ziyâra) from which baraka, could be obtained. During the days of Muhammad’s prophetic activity, they were considered safe sites where pacts could be made and allegiances could be pledged. The Qur’an says: “laqad raḍiya allah ‘an al-mu’minîn idh yubâyi’ūnakta tahta al-shajara...” Their neutral and protective nature was a reminiscence of the sacrality attributed to in earlier times. In the cosmology of Palestine’s inhabitants, trees became conceptualised as part of God’s creation and appeared frequently in the Qur’an and hadith. Remarkable is the case of sidrat al-muntahā (Lote tree), a kind of tree that became very highly esteemed since it is the same species as the one Prophet Muhammad encountered during his mi’raj, which marked the end of the seventh heaven.


Plants and trees made their way into Palestinians’ popular imagination not only through textual references in the Bible and the Qur’an, but also through the stories of local village saints. Based on an everyday engagement with the natural surroundings, people in different locations, articulated stories about the trees and other elements of the landscape, with stories of the saints. The trees acquired special status since they were somehow connected with saints that had lived there or visited it. In this way, as stories about the saints flourished and circulated, so did different explanations of the efficacy of the vegetal world in amulets. Trees also made their way into popular imagination through Sufism, which in the Levant had developed in many ways through the different ṭarīqāt. Shukri Arraf mentions that in Palestinian Sufism, the tree is a symbol of renovation and endurance. This symbolism comes from the direct observation of the life and cycle of trees, whose change throughout the year symbolise cyclical renovation, while evergreen trees are symbols of eternity.

Nowadays, trees are still considered to be sacred landmarks. They are called manāhil or pools/springs/water reservoirs, pointing to the presence of underground water. In Palestine water is obtained from the rainfall during the rainy season, from early November until April, the rest of the year, water is subtracted mainly from the ground. Therefore, when a tree stands out marking a water reservoir, it is possible to approach it, take water from it and use it to satisfy the needs of a thirsty passer-by.

The holiness of trees depends on the species but also on the particular story behind each tree. Some species of trees are always holy such as the Olive (Olea europaea), Storax or Snowbell (Styrax), and the Cedar (Cedrus libani). These belong to the type of evergreen or perennial trees, whose natural quality to stay green throughout the year has a very important place in popular imagination, as they symbolise eternity. Other kinds of trees more commonly found across the country are the Oak and the Terebinth, which usually mark some ancient sanctuary. Either in groves or standing alone, these trees are

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15 Canaan, Mohammedan Saints and Sanctuaries, 30; Stories of trees associated to village saints still circulate. One example that I encountered during my fieldwork in the Palestine in 2017, are the stories of al-balūṭ tree in Bil’in, which tell the connexion of the trees to the local saint Abu Laymun.
16 Canaan, Ibidem.
18 ibid.
believed to be inhabited by a welî (walî). The sanctity of other kinds of trees depends on their location, they are considered holy if they are inside the abode of a saint.

Next to the positive associations, there are also negative aspects associated with trees; it is believed that most of them attract evil spirits and thus, should be avoided. So a tree that does not belong to one of the always-holy species or does not lie within the abode of a saint, might be inhabited by evil spirits. Evil spirits choose to reside in these trees when they grow in the middle of nowhere, far away from any kind of human settlement. Also, it is often the case that these trees grow because they get water from a nearby well where evil spirits like to dwell. The trees that evil spirits like the most are the Christ’s thorn jujube or sidr (Zizyphus spina-christi), carob tree or kharrūb (Ceratonia siliqua), fig or tīn (Ficus carica) and sycamore fig or jamīz (Ficus sycomorus), therefore these trees should be avoided. Only the pomegranate (Punica granatum) and European Nettle Tree (Celtis australis) or al-mēs as it is known in Arabic, are known to be immune to this evil presence. Their power and holiness is based on the fact that no evil spirits can dwell in them, making them a safe place to rest under.

When trees are connected to a saintly figure, their power is sought in the form of baraka, which is obtained through engaging with the tree in different ways. One way is by tying rags to the branches. The act of tying is a particular form of petition, whereas the person who looks for help offers a vow, which is symbolised by the rag. The aim of leaving the rag is to establish a continuous presence of the petitioner/vower. Vows are offered to a saint, and the trees where rags are tied are considered part of the abode of the saint, and extensions of his/her power. These rags acquire the baraka of the saint through the tree, and can be later removed and used as carriers/containers of the blessing. Rags that have been removed from a tree circulate from person to person

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20 Welî in Palestinian dialect, walî in MSA, is translatable as saint but does not have the same meaning as the concept of sainthood in Christianity, therefore using the Arabic word is preferred. According to the Encyclopaedia of Islam, “a wali (pl. awliyā’) is someone who is near (to God), he is also a friend, and in his being as a friend he possesses friendship, and in a way, he also acquires his friend’s (God’s) good qualities, and therefore he possesses particular authority, forces, capabilities and abilities.” Cfr. B. Radtke, P. Lory, Th. Zarcone, D. DeWeese, M. Gaborieau, F.M. et all., “Wali,” in ei2.


22 Crowfoot and Baldensperger, From Cedar to Hyssop, 107.


Having described the general beneficial associations with trees, the kinds of trees and their specific qualities, I should now turn to the twigs from the Tawfik Canaan Collection. These appear under the following catalogue numbers and are of the following kinds (see table 10.1).

At first sight these twigs could be grouped under one single category due to their raw nature and because they do not have any sort of alteration or human intervention. However, this could be misleading as there are important differences according to the kind of tree they come from and the ritual framework in which their power is circumscribed.

### Table 10.1  Kind of trees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number in catalogue</th>
<th>Kind of tree</th>
<th>Latin classification</th>
<th>Arabic name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>810, 814, 815 and 818</td>
<td>European nettle tree/ Mediterranean hackberry/ Lote tree/ Honeyberry</td>
<td>Celtis australis</td>
<td>shajaret mēs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1017</td>
<td>Rue/ herb-of-grace</td>
<td>Ruta graveolens</td>
<td>fayjan/ sidhdhāb/ adhfar keff sadabie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1088</td>
<td>Jujube</td>
<td>Ziziphus jujuba</td>
<td>shajaret ʿenāb</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

carrying with it the power of the saint.25 Another way of approaching the tree to get *baraka* is by cutting a small part out of it. Depending on the kind of tree, leaves, fruits, twigs, or bark can be used. Each part of the tree undergoes a different ritual procedure in order to extract this *bienfasante* power.26 Due to the fact that the tree is connected to a saint, any approach requires a particular protocol. Permission must be asked to the saint or to the tree before taking anything from it. If something is taken from a sacred abode without permission, it could lead to negative effects such as illness.27

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25 Some rags were collected by Tawfik Canaan. They are among the items of the Tawfik Canaan Collection of Palestinian Amulets.
1  Keff Sadabie (Kaff Sadhāb)

Item no. 1017 (see Fig. 10.1) is a small box that contains a few sprays of rue. The sprays were collected by Tawfik Canaan during one of his medical visits to the countryside. He obtained them directly from his patient, a Muslim child. The mother of the child used the sprays to protect her child by attaching them to his cap.

Called in Arabic fayjan or sadhāb, this plant grows in Palestine and it is used as a medicinal herb. Leaves, flowers and twigs are all used. By squeezing the flowers the extract is used as drops to cure ear infections. In combination with other wild rues such as garden rue (ruta chalepensis), wild rue (haplophyllum tuberculatum), and white rue (peganum harmala), it is used as an ointment in the treatment of rheumatism. It is also used as an ingredient of drinking infusions for stomachache and for cases of khof (khaf).28

Besides its medicinal properties, rue is used as a powerful amulet. Twigs and sprays in general are very efficacious to protect from the evil eye ('ayn, 'ayn al-ḥasūd),29 because they stand out when worn attached to the clothes. Their power lies in the way they deviate the attention of the envious person; the focus on the victim is directed towards the twig. Functioning as an eye-catcher, twigs and sprays are usually attached to the clothes or hung in a visible spot. The sprays of the ruta graveolens are particularly used because besides their eye-catching quality, as any other twig, people believe in their magical effect due to the shape of its fivefold leaves. In Palestine it is called keff sadabie30 or hand of rue as it resembles the fingers of an open hand, a khamsa.31

Representations of hands are widespread and diverse. They might have originated from the mere gesture of raising the hand to protect from danger,32 and

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28 Khof or khauf' means fright. Cfr. Crowfoot and Baldensperger, From Cedar to Hyssop, 93. According to Abu-Rabia, khuf, khawf, khilia'h, rajfih, rajjih, are all names to refer to undefined anxieties and sudden fear. Negev Bedouin believe that the origin of this condition is the jinni and that it is healed using tassit al-rajjih or fear cups. Cfr. Abu-Rabia, Indigenous Medicine, 128.

29 Evil eye is referred to in Arabic as 'ayn and 'ayn al-sharira. Since it is caused by the envy of someone else, it is also called 'ayn al-ḥasūd or envious eye. Abu Rabia describes the evil eye under the heading of nafs, being the way it is referred to among the Bedouins. Cfr. Abu-Rabia, Indigenous Medicine, 83.

30 Keff sadabie (kaff sadhābiya in MSA) is the transliteration from the Palestinian dialect registered by Crowfoot and Baldensperger. Cfr. Crowfoot and Baldensperger, From Cedar to Hyssop, 94.

31 Tawfiq Canaan, Aberglaube und Volksmedizin im Lande der Bibel (Hamburg: L. Friederichsen & Co, 1914), 64.

developed into abstract shapes made of different materials. The *khamsa* is the term to refer to an open hand with the five fingers visible. *Khamsa*-s are used as amulets because their association with the number five is believed to be efficacious against the evil eye.\(^{33}\) They are mostly human-made, but there are cases of *khamsa*-s found in nature, such as the spray of rue. Resembling a hand, the *keff sadabie* is the result of the phenomenon of anthropomorphism found in the autochthonous medical tradition in Palestine, where human aspects are recognised in nature and used for their given qualities.

*Keff sadabie* is widely used to protect children and adults. However, children are believed to be the most vulnerable to any kind of evil, so they are usually covered with different kinds of amulets. Small twigs and sprays are mostly hung on children's caps to protect them against the evil eye. These same sprays are worn by women who are a frequent target of people's envy, particularly in moments of their life such as marriage, pregnancy, and child delivery. Sometimes the sprays are gilded and put on the head of brides. In her fieldwork notes, Lydia Einsler described how she found a young mother in Jerusalem wearing a blue *mandil* decorated with sprays from different plants. Among them there was one gilded rue spray, considered to be efficacious due to its apotropaic qualities.\(^{34}\)

\(^{33}\) Ibid.

The jujube (Ziziphus jujuba) belongs to the same genus as the holy tree Ziziphus Spina-Christi, but are slightly different. With very similar foliage and fruits it is easy to confuse one with the other. It belongs to the evergreen trees, so its foliage gives shade all year round. Due to its size, it is very appealing to sit under. According to N. Jaradat, fruits of the jujube are used to get rid of toxic material, against coughing, chest pain and the relief of asthma.35

Jujube twigs are used as amulets. Tawfik Canaan collected samples that can be seen in his collection. Catalogued with number 1088 (see Fig. 10.2) there are two twigs of 30 cm and 40 cm long respectively. Tawfik Canaan acquired both from the same person. He registered (in German) in his notes the widespread use of jujube twigs among people suffering from Bäulen.36 Translated into English as bulges, this medical term that he used could refer to any other kind of inflammation, swelling or protruding, such as tumours or waram.37 People suffering from it believed in the efficacy of cutting a knot of the twig and pulling it apart. What is interesting to note here is that the twigs used to cure illnesses with a swelling effect, must have a knob resembling the bulge or protuberance. The procedure then followed the logic of sympathetic magic. It was simple; the twig went through a process of anthropomorphism, so by breaking the knob of the twig, the patient’s swelling was addressed, treated and cured.

According to Tawfik Canaan the twigs had to be cut in pieces of approximately one inch long and then had to be attached to the clothes. The two twigs in the collection, however, are too long to have been used as such. Their length suggests that they were collected by Canaan before having been cut up and used, or just after the owner had acquired them directly from the tree, from a particular shaykh or at al-ʿaṭṭārīn (al-ʿaṭṭārūn).38 Probably the aim was to cut

37 waram means swelling or tumor, it comes from the root warima to be swollen. Cfr. H. Wehr, Dictionary, 1245.
38 al-ʿaṭṭārīn sing. ʿaṭṭār comes from the word oitr, which means perfume or fragrance. The name is given to the seller of perfumes, but also of spices and herbs. Traditionally al-ʿaṭṭārīn sell the ingredients for medical remedies. Basic ingredients might appear in all shops despite the location, but there are particular ingredients that differ from place to place. Since the owners of these kinds of shops come from specific families, they are also sought for medical advice. Cfr. Marcela Garcia Probert, “Exploring the life of amulets in
them in many pieces and use them on multiple occasions as part of one treatment. If this is the case, I argue that the twigs were collected before being used as an amulet. It is not clear in Canaan's records whether the knob of the twig was supposed to be pulled apart before or after attaching it to the clothes. However, it seems plausible that the twigs were attached to the clothes after being depurated from their knob (the illness), and were worn to slowly release their healing power and transmit it to the user.

According to Canaan, these two twigs came from the trees that grew at jawrat al-ʿenāb. The place, as the name indicates, was a pit or a small valley, and the ʿenāb tree abounded there. The pit became also known as Sultan's pool, after the construction of the dam in the Valley of Hinnom by the Ottoman sultans. In other sources this place is also called berkot el-taʾwabīn (birkat al-thaʿābīn) or the pond of the snakes.39 Jawrat al-ʿenāb was located nearby Bab al-Khalil outside the walls of Jerusalem’s Old City. The place is nowadays part of the National Park of Jerusalem, and it is under Israeli control. Before the occupation of West Jerusalem, it was an important resting spot for the merchants who came from surrounding villages to sell their products in the Old City. Its importance relied on the water reservoir. Mainly fed from rainwater, the reservoir served as part of the water supply of the city, as well as for the itinerant peasants and merchants and their animals.

Tawfik Canaan did not specify from whom he got the twigs. According to the year of obtention and the kinds of amulets he collected in this period—when he worked as an itinerant doctor in the countryside—it is feasible that

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they came from one of his patients that paid Dr. Canaan's medical services with their own amulets. The way that the patient acquired the twigs is also unknown. Another possibility is that Canaan got the twigs directly from a healer. From Canaan's notes we know that he was in close contact with some shuyūkh, who in fact were involved in his collecting activity of amulets. At jawrat al-ʿenāb there was a well-known amulet maker, Shaykh Maḥmūd Basha al-ʿAskarī also known as Sheikh al-Falaki. His amulets were famous in Jerusalem. He wrote a famous book al-muntakhab al-nafīs min ʿilm nabī allah idrīs, which includes a section on 'ilm al-ḥurūf, where he shared part of the knowledge he used for amulet-making. His amulets contained inscriptions in special arrangements and letter combinations. It is not certain whether he also recurred to other kinds of healing techniques such as the use of herbs. In this case it is arguable that the twigs might have been prescribed by him as a cure.

The trees of jawrat al-ʿenāb do not seem to have been connected with any saintly figure, but were used because they resembled the inflammation in the body. The jujube tree, like many other plants in Palestine, has been used in medical treatments; its power lay in the natural intrinsic medicinal properties. Since the jujube twigs belong to a tree from the same family of the jujube-spins christi, they might have been considered an alternative to it. Moreover, the jujube twigs were used as amulets due to the connexion of the trees with a water supply. As mentioned before, these spots are called manāhil, they are markers and as such they stand out from the rest of the landscape. Finally, being obtained from a well-known sheikh, these twigs might have been considered efficacious due to the reliance on him as a good amulet maker and healer.

3 Shajaret-al-Mēs (Shajarat al-Mīs)

Al-mēs (al-mīs) tree belongs to the group of perennial trees, its foliage is green throughout the year. Due to the big size of its canopy and foliage it is one of the preferred trees to sit under. It is a species that grows in the Mediterranean

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climate. This tree grows naturally but can also be found in cultivated land where it is planted in open fields for its shade.\(^{43}\)

Contrary to most trees, this is one of the kinds, in which no evil spirits (\textit{arwāh sharīra}) can dwell.\(^{44}\) It is believed that evil spirits like the darkness, so the night is their favourite time to become active. They dwell in dark places such as caves, wells, grottos, groves or trees with abundant foliage, so people are careful not to approach these trees particularly after sunset. Ironically, the bigger the tree, the better the shade, and the more appealing to men, the more avoided they should be. There are trees however, that according to popular beliefs are immune to evil spirits. \textit{Al-mēs} is one of them. It offers refuge, it is possible to sit under it during day and night.\(^{45}\)

The protective power of this kind of tree has to do with its intrinsic qualities, but is also related to its location. Although \textit{al-mēs} tree is generally considered protective regardless of where it grows, particular trees stand out for various reasons.\(^{46}\) First, when a tree stands alone in a huge open field where no other protection is offered, it is considered a good spot to rest especially if it is in the middle of the way between two villages. An example is the tree of \textit{al-mēs} located between the village of al-Khadr and Bait Zakkariya near Bethlehem, which is believed to be a sprout of the tree in which the Virgin hid during the persecution of the Jews.\(^{47}\) Second, the tree marks the place where a miracle or an important event took place. Particularly famous among Christians is the \textit{al-mēs} tree of Bir Qādīsmu (Kathisma) on the way to Bethlehem, which grew from a small pond said to have been where the three magicians saw the reflection of the light of the star during Epiphany.\(^ {48}\) Third, trees are believed to be protective if they grow near a shrine or belong to the abode of a saint. Their power relies on their location, but is also connected to the site through the sacred stories. This is the case of the \textit{al-mēs} trees that grow in the area of \textit{al-ḥaram al-sharīf}, the place where the twigs studied here come from.

Apart from the protection that \textit{al-mēs} tree offers to passers-by, the protective power of this kind of tree can be extended through the use of its wood in amulets. Based on the material collected by Tawfik Canaan and Lydia Einsler, it is possible to trace two main applications of the \textit{al-mēs} wood in amulets. The wood was carved in a triangular or cylindrical shape, pierced and attached
to other beads or stones as part of a more elaborate amulet. In other cases, the wood was left unaltered, as in the case of the twigs. The difference between both forms of using the wood lies in the way the material is manipulated, which in turn shows the techniques of cutting, carving and piercing the wood, as well as the intended use. For the purpose of this article, I only delve into the second form, the twig amulets.

Twig-amulets from *al-mēṣ* are usually small. According to Canaan, they should be between 2 or 3 cm long, but the ones he collected are up to 8 cm long, as shown in objects no. 810, 814, 815 and 818 from the Tawfik Canaan Collection. (see Fig. 10.3) The shape differs, sometimes a regular twig, sometimes a bifurcate twig. The belief in the power of these twigs is widespread in Palestine. Peasants, Bedouins and townsmen have used this wood extensively. It is used to protect children, horses, and to cure ill people. The twigs are used as amulets by attaching them to children’s caps, by hanging them at the entrance of the house or at the base of the entrance arch. The twigs are sometimes accompanied by a piece of egg shell, a garlic clove, a blue bead, and a piece of alum.

49 Evidence of this use of the wood is the amulets in the Tawfik Canaan Collection at Birzeit University and the Lydia Einsler Collection at the Museum of Ethnology in Dresden.

50 ʿArraf, Ṭabaqāt, 448.
Three different concepts have been used to describe the protective function of the twigs: *ruqya*, *taʾāwīdh* and *tamīma*. Shukri Araf informs us that the wood of *al-mēs* is used among the fellahīn and non-fellahīn in *ruqya*. *Ruqya* is a general term that refers to the formulae that the Prophet Muhammad used to pronounce when healing someone. *Ruqya*, however, is not an exclusive Muslim practice, in Palestine it can be found among Christians as well. Moreover, *ruqya* has developed in different ways, and in early twentieth-century Palestine when the twigs were collected, it also referred to the material objects and ingredients of respective cures administered in conjunction with the recitation of the formulae. One formula is the *istaʿādha*, in which by the uttering or writing *aʿūdhu bi-llahi min al-shayṭān al-rajīm* one place oneself under the protection of God. *Taʾāwīdh*, the second concept under scope, refers to those material objects that bear such formula or have been affected by its recitation. The third is *tamīma*, a term that contains the idea of completion and perfection. By wearing a twig, an efficacious complete remedy or perfect cure is expected.

The use of *al-mēs* twigs varies according to the tree and the beliefs around it. Beliefs may also differ according to religious denomination. For instance, Christian inhabitants from Artas use the twigs under the belief that the better wood for *ruqya* is the one taken from a tree that has not heard the *adhān* or the Muslim call for prayer. Therefore, the wood is taken from trees that grow far away from villages. This belief gave rise to the following saying: *al-mīs illī mā bitismaʾ al-adhān ḍid al-nafs wa ḍid al-ʿayn*.

This belief points to the fact that the location of the tree matters, the most efficacious twigs come from a pure, uninhabited, natural space. Such a belief, however, could be considered as an expression of religious differentiation, but it could also be understood within a logic in which the natural world is powerful and efficacious through its intrinsic qualities. A twig should not be used in *ruqya* unless it is new. The twig has to be unaltered physically and never subjected to previous religious invocations.

For inhabitants of Jerusalem and visitors to *al-ḥaram al-sharīf*, the most efficacious *al-mēs* wood is the one from the trees that grow in the esplanade between the Dome of the Rock and al-Aqsa Mosque. According to Canaan, the sacredness of these trees rests on the fact that they grow in the area of the holy site. The *al-mēs* is not the only kind of tree that grows there, but it is the only one used for amulets. Stories revolving around the sacredness and power of

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51 ʿArraf, Ṭabaqāt, 448.
52 Toufic Fahd, “Ruḳya,” in *EI2*.
53 Toufic Fahd, “Tamīma,” in *EI2*.
54 idem.
55 Crowfoot and Baldensperger, *From Cedar to Hyssop*, 449.
this tree circulate orally. The importance of popular stories and sayings must be highlighted here, since it is through the mechanism of orality that knowledge about the efficacy of some amulets is transmitted. This knowledge is based on the experience of the residents on how nature behaves throughout the year, how nature has been subsumed to sacred history and how it has become powerful in offering protection and healing.56

There are two main stories about the origin of al-mēs trees in the esplanade of the al-ḥaram al-sharīf. According to both, the jinn offered the trees to King Salomon as a gift to protect his temple from any harm. The temple was so beautiful that it could attract the envy of many. The trees were therefore planted in rows in the esplanade. Tawfik Canaan registered the stories in his Aberglaube und Volksmedizin:

After the King [Salomon] had finished building the Temple, kings, angels and even animals sought to offer the best gifts. However, the jinn were reluctant to do the same. In answer to the king's question about why they did not want to give something to the temple, the jinn responded: ‘O kind and great ruler, the Temple is the most beautiful structure man's hands have ever built, and no one will ever succeed again to build a glorious building. We think we have something to donate, which should protect this miracle from the “evil eye”. Not a blue pearl because it would disappear into the size of the building, so it would always be exposed to the “evil eye”. Thus, we have decided to plant two rows of mīs-trees around the temple.57

A different version of the story goes as follows:

When King David started to build the temple, his construction collapsed every few years. He implored God for help. Then a jinn appeared to him

and told him to give up the work, but his son [Salomon] and heir to the throne continued to build the temple. When his son had ascended to the throne, he began again building, but the work fell again. He asked God for help and the same jinn who had appeared to his father said to him: “The evil eye of the many envious persons harms this unprotected building”. Behold, I give you trees to plant around the temple. After the king had these trees planted, he could continue building. The Temple of Salomon is still standing today because these trees still protect it.58

As part of his research on Palestinian folklore, Tawfik Canaan collected amulets and recorded oral accounts about them. These two stories about the origin of the al-mēs trees seem to have been well known by Jerusalemites who used the wood, and they might have been also heard by the people who visited al-haram al-sharif. But more interesting is the fact that these two stories disclose the agency of the jinn when giving the trees to Salomon, and their submission to the power of God and his prophets. When Canaan obtained the twigs, there was a widespread belief that the most powerful were those cut on the 27th of Ramadan, after sunset and before day-break. This night, also known as laylat al-qadr, is believed to be the most powerful night when any kind of petition to God is heard. It is feasible to assume that any kind of amulet obtained on that day would be more efficacious, however, Canaan’s records do not provide any evidence of this belief applied to other amulets. Besides cutting twigs on laylat al-qadr, twigs could be cut on Thursday afternoon. Properties of the twigs were believed to diminish if cut on Saturday before sunrise, and become not beneficial if cut any other day. According to Canaan, the efficacy of the twigs was reaffirmed by sheikhs, who claimed that the twigs were powerful regardless of when the twig had been cut. This claim could have come as a response to the custom of cutting the twigs on particular days.

The two main explanations of the beneficial power of *al-mēs* shows that the power of the twigs is on the one hand, related to the jinn, and on the other hand, to particular times of ritual twig cutting. The efficacy of the twigs in relation to the jinn’s power seem to have been a problematic explanation for some. Seeking the jinn for protection and healing is, in strict terms, considered *shirk*, because the only one who can grant protection and healing is God. The belief in cutting the twigs in specific days of the Muslim calendar tries to re-assert the belief of God as the ultimate source for protection and healing. The religious debates that might have influenced the stories around the use of twigs is material for another paper. For now, what is important to observe is the different ways in which the twigs functioned and acquired meaning.

4 Conclusion

Plants are considered an integral part of the Palestinian medical tradition. The Palestinian landscape is covered with more than 2600 plant species, from which more than 700 are used for their medicinal properties. All the parts of the plant (leaves, twigs, fruit, roots, stem) can be used. Infusions, fumigations, and ointments, are some of the ways in which the properties can be extracted. Another way is through applying these ingredients in amulets, which are either used for their apotropaic power or for their healing qualities. In each case, the plant requires to be processed in a different way to activate its properties, which are apprehended/assimilated through the senses. Some plants function by attracting the gaze of others in order to deviate the evil eye; other plants work through their odour and have to be burnt; in other cases, the plants have to be infused or ingested.

Although the plants have intrinsic properties that act fully when prepared as medicinal remedies, extra beneficial powers can be added to them. The power can derive from the holiness attributed to the place of origin, such as the twigs obtained at *al-ḥaram al-sharīf*, and by means of ritual actions performed by the user himself or by the practitioner or healer who makes the amulet, such as *ruqya* procedures. The different rituals to activate plants’ properties with extra beneficial power are for instance, cutting twigs at a certain time of the day, on specific holy days, and pronouncing invocations on them such as invoking God for His protection.

59 Jaradat, “Medical Plants,” 2.
The twigs analysed in this chapter are carried, hung and displayed in order to deviate the focus of the evil-eye. The efficacy of the twigs depends on the kind of tree they originate from, which is believed to have special qualities in relation to the life of a saint, or to the place where it grows. Beliefs around the trees take shape in stories which are told and re-told conveying knowledge about the elements/parts of the natural landscape but also emphasising their connexion with episodes of sacred history or with holy characters.

The materiality of the twigs can be explored by looking at them carefully. Even the more subtle features disclose traces of how they have been cut, manipulated, and reached the shape that they currently have. These aspects have to be considered when analysing their uses and functions through their life as objects. Cutting a twig in one way or another points to different ritual contexts which effect and affect the meaning of the twig itself. In each act of cutting the twig, making and incision on it, engraving it, etc., many elements must be considered: first of all the kind of wood; second whether the act was performed by a healer or by the user himself; then, the time and spacial context. Once this is set, the function can be disclosed, and the different stages through which the object has been.

Approaching any amulet through its material qualities counterbalances the dominant textual approach to the amulets’ inscriptions, and shows that texts are not necessary to produce potent amulets.

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