KEEPING THE DEMONS OUT OF THE HOUSE: 
THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF APOTROPAIC STRATEGY 
AND PRACTICE IN LATE ANTIQUE BUTRINT 
AND ANTIGONEIA

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Abstract

Amulets and amuletic imagery are characteristic features of the Late Roman world and yet few examples can be localised, physically contextu-
alised or dated. Excavation of the late antique phases of a large peristyle house in the coastal city of Butrint in southern Albania, ancient Epirus Vetus, has produced a remarkable assemblage of apotropaic devices and protective forms which goes some way to correcting this deficiency. These, together with the imagery on a remarkable mosaic pavement in the sanctuary of a small 6th c. A.D. chapel in the nearby ancient city of Antigoneia, show the range of subjects deployed, in a period of increasing social insecurity and urban decline, to assure safety, health and success in life and a safe passage to the next world after death.

Introduction

Evidence for widespread recourse to amuletic protective devices is common from Late Antiquity,1 although controlled archaeological evidence for this is surprisingly uncommon. Amulets, engraved gemstones, phylacteries, and salutary and apotropaic figures on articles of apparel and on objects of everyday use from both the domestic and the ecclesiastical sphere, have survived in their thousands and are continually coming to light. A representative selection is described and analysed in the catalogue of an exhibition held some years ago at the Krannert Art Museum at Urbana-Champaign.2 However, all too often, artefacts of this kind are without provenance, a curious and somewhat arbitrary

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1 For concise overviews of the subject, see Engemann (1975); Vikan (1984); Maguire, Maguire and Duncan-Flowers (1989).
2 Maguire, Maguire and Duncan-Flowers (1989).

flotsam and jetsam, landing in the collections of archaeological museums by gift or acquisition from the art market. While their form and imagery can be investigated and analysed, the contexts in which they were used and abandoned are nearly always unknown, and the places of their origin and their date often a matter of more or less controlled and derivative guesswork. A rare exception to this state of affairs is the assemblage of amulets, phylacteries and bells found in the ruins of a group of 7th c. A.D. houses at the Cilician coastal city of Anemurium, in southern Turkey, which has been analysed by J. Russell. The aim of the present paper is to consider another group of material of this kind, which has come to light during recent excavations at Butrint in southern Albania. In a strict sense the assemblage from Butrint is smaller than that from Anemurium, but in its scope in some ways it is more various and wide-ranging.

Russell began his paper on the amulets of Anemurium by drawing attention to the survival of what he terms magical practices—practices which it might be more precise to call superstitious, empowering, salutary—in modern southern Turkey, where people still tie strips of white cloth to small trees in order to ensure success in a particular objective, to effect the cure of an ailment or to facilitate the conception and safe birth of a child.

Practices of this sort are still very much alive in the geographical area of the assemblage which is the subject of this paper, the coastal regions of southern Albania; where it is the usual custom when constructing a house to set up a more or less life-size anthropomorphic figure in an...

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3 Where a provenance is recorded or guessed at for objects of this kind, it is all too often sweepingly generic, such as Asia Minor, Egypt, Syria or Palestine, East Mediterranean; e.g., Maguire, Maguire, Duncan-Flowers (1989). The recently published catalogue of magic gemstones in the British Museum is instructive; see Michel (2001a). Of the 649 items only 35 have provenances which may relate to their places of origin, and not one of these can be associated with a particular site, let alone a precise archaeological context: Alexandria (2, 22, 165, 267, 410, 424), Beirut (582), Caesarea (420), Cairo (391), Catania (475), Constantinople (278, 414, 584), Ephesus (473), Gaza (320), Jerusalem (593), Karnack (461), Naples (519), Nazareth (323), Smyrna (189, 236, 279), Strassburg (454), Tartus (472, 596–8), Egypt (538), the Syrian coast (367, 371), the Syrian Desert (147, 251), the East (301). The situation with the corpus of *lamellae* with magical inscriptions in Greek, of known provenance, published by Kotansky (1994) is similar; very few are from controlled stratigraphic contexts in scientific excavations.

Russell (1995). A further site in modern Turkey on which amulets have been found in controlled archaeological contexts is Sagallassos, in ancient Pisidia: three uniform copper circular pendants with a powerful nimbed rider spearing a female on one side, and on the other side the legend ‘seal of Solomon help’ circling a cruciform configuration of four discs; see Waelkens and Poblome (1997) 337–38, nos. 289–91.