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# Sasanian Amulet Practices and their Survival in Islamic Iran and Beyond

<https://doi.org/10.1515/islam-2018-0003>

Sulaymān! Bring the ring! / Subdue the *dīws* and *parīs*!

*Rūmī*

**Abstract:** As an element of material culture and popular belief, amulets reflect the religious and cultural identity of their producers and/or wearers. However, they may also testify to centuries-old iconographical (and textual) traditions. To remain effective and to meet the prevailing religious concepts of the time, those ancient amuletic iconographies and textual elements needed to be reinterpreted. This article takes a look into continuities between Sasanian and Islamic amulet culture in Iran, focusing on the technique of binding and sealing forces referred to on many Late Antique and Islamic amulets.

**Keywords:** Amulets; Seals; Cultural transfer; Sulaymān; Sasanian Iran; Early Islamic Iran

## Introduction

Sasanian and Islamic Iran both possess a rich amulet culture; however, comparatively few Iranian amulets from the Early Islamic centuries, i. e. the first and second centuries Hijra/the seventh and eighth centuries CE, have survived. (Of course, one may question whether we are always able to date Islamic amulets

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**Article note:** I want to thank kindly Stefan Heidemann, Universität Hamburg, who drew my attention to an Early Islamic amulet recorded in the *Universität Hamburg, Islamic Studies, Photo Archive* (Inv.no. SB 10754) discussed below, and encouraged me to publish it. He further offered many helpful comments.

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correctly, since we usually lack information on the artifacts' contexts.)<sup>1</sup> On the remaining Early Islamic amulets, the impact of pre-Islamic Iranian amulet culture, and its being influenced by the religious imagination of Late Antiquity, is especially strong. These amulets thus offer insight into a newly evolving religious and cultural identity involving continuity and change; the results of this process are still traceable in later centuries and show that amulet makers and their clients considered the employment of 'ancient' vehicles and iconography effective, though those vehicles and symbols were, of course, (continually) reinterpreted over time.

In this paper, I will try to trace continuities between Sasanian and Islamic amulet culture in Iran, focusing on the technique of binding and sealing forces referred to on many Late Antique and Islamic amulets.<sup>2</sup> While this paper does

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**1** However, one could imagine different explanations for this phenomenon: though not very likely, we might surmise that, influenced by the new religion, the preexisting amulet culture in Islamicate countries was 'abandoned' for a while (bearing the political circumstances in mind) and finally underwent significant change, that is, the terms and conditions of a new, religiously legitimized amulet culture then had to be negotiated. It also remains possible that, until that time, newly converted Muslims and of course followers of other religions preserved the amulet culture, which was at least centuries old, and either continued to use or reuse those amulets, or produced amulets resembling the old models – one only needs to recall that we are often unable to date Late Antique so-called magic (or incantation) bowls and, for example, Mandaean lead amulets exactly, which means that we are not completely sure whether they were produced before or after the Arab conquests. As PORTER writes (2010, 131): "The roots of using magical words and symbols clearly derived from the pre-Islamic era with obvious survivals into Islam through a number of different routes. There is a proliferation of literature and objects from the Near East continuing traditions of Assyrian, Babylonian, or Egyptian magical practices. These are, for example, in the form of amulets written in Aramaic on metal sheets to ward off evil, or to heal, or to gain love, and a large body of incantation texts written on bowls in Jewish Aramaic, Syriac, or Mandaic." A difficulty in dating Islamic amulets lies in the fact that Linear Kufic was employed for centuries as an effective means (see *ibid.*, 132–135; *eadem* 2009, 146–152; HEIDEMANN/TAL, forthcoming). Furthermore, we also have to take account of materiality; at least in theory, it is imaginable that during the Early Islamic centuries, amulets were preferably made from perishable materials, such as wood, but we have hitherto no evidence for such a supposed change in the material of amulets. Moreover, it could be that amulets produced from long-lasting materials, such as precious metals, were reused (and modified) in later centuries. For a (probably 12th-century) Islamic amulet seal found in situ in Apollonia-Arsūf, Israel, see HEIDEMANN/TAL, forthcoming.

**2** Already mentioned by SCHIFFMAN/SWARTZ (1992, 27). The act of binding and sealing can also be depicted on bowls. HUNTER (1998, 98) writes: "Incantation bowls often show demons bound and fettered, this fundamental element in the iconography reflecting a major textual theme". I will use the notion "amulet" in the broader sense, thus also encompassing amuletic objects not worn on the body.

not imply that amulet culture is monolithic and not subject to change, it highlights those textual and iconographic elements preserved over centuries and their development. Both objects and people needing to be protected *and* evil forces and enemies were sealed and bound, be it textually and iconographically; by ‘imprisoning’ an iconographic representation (and/or script), the aim might either be to protect the representation itself (and/or use its power) *or* to protect someone from the depicted figure (and thus preventing the figure from the execution of its power). Furthermore, I want to suggest that Sulaymān plays a prominent role in binding forces by means of amulets in Islam. The concept of binding and sealing that was much employed in Antique amulet culture was transmitted to Islamic Iran (and beyond) and is traceable at three levels: 1) iconography; 2) text; and 3) performance.<sup>3</sup> In the following, we will focus on points 1) and 2).

## Amulet culture in Sasanian and Early Islamic Iran

To my knowledge, we lack a comprehensive study on Sasanian amulets (understood as amulets used in the Sasanian realm) and amulet culture; yet so-called magic seals, being considered amulets, have been studied in detail by Rika GYSELEN,<sup>4</sup> and some Sasanian seal-amulets have been published separately.<sup>5</sup> Next to seals, several other Sasanian amulets, usually made of inscribed (e. g. in Aramaic, Hebrew, Syriac) animal skin or metal sheets and rolled up (for example

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<sup>3</sup> Techniques of binding and sealing were carried out on the client, for example during the practice of healing. While sealing the client was meant to protect him/her, sealing evil forces should prevent them from affecting the client. There is an interesting parallel with the act of sealing persons, and thus stigmatizing them, in the Ancient Near East and Early Islam. ROBINSON (2005, 407) writes: “While there are no pre-Islamic antecedents for neck-sealing for the purposes of taxing, what clearly does have a venerable tradition in the Near East is sealing, branding and otherwise marking defeated enemies, captives and slaves. In fact, branding, tattooing and incising the skin are traceable about as far back as one can trace things in the ancient Near East: brands and tattoos could function as signs of captivity and enslavement, record the name of the slave’s owner, or warn the unwary observer (e. g. ‘[This is a] runaway! Arrest!’)”.

<sup>4</sup> GYSELEN 1995.

<sup>5</sup> For example: HARPER/SKJÆRVØ/GORELICK/GWINNET 1992; SHAKED 1993. For catalogues of Sasanian seals, see, among others: HORN/STEINDORF 1891; BIVAR 1969; GÖBL 1973; BRUNNER 1978; GIGNOUX 1978; GYSELEN 1997. Furthermore, in Bohak/Harari/Shaked (eds., 2011) the *Continuity and Innovation in the Magical Tradition* is investigated in various aspects. There exist several other studies and edited volumes devoted to phenomena commonly treated under the notion ‘magic’ and encompassing amulet culture; one of many is Noegel/Walker/Wheeler 2003 (see esp. the contribution of Michael G. MORONY).

Mandaean lead amulets) have been studied;<sup>6</sup> not to forget the great number of incantation bowls which also form part of the broader amulet culture and which continued to be produced in the Islamic era.<sup>7</sup> I am unable to offer any synthesis or general remarks on these artifacts, but the sheer number of objects suggests that the use of amulets was widespread in the Sasanian realm. Moreover, although this amulet culture encompassed many different languages, religions and sub-cultures, the texts on the artifacts have many structural details in common,<sup>8</sup> and similar artifacts often share similar iconographies.<sup>9</sup> With regard to the purposes, SCHIFFMAN and SWARTZ suggest the following categories, which are based on amulets from the *Cairo Geniza* (mostly made from parchment and paper), although it appears they are applicable to amulet culture as a whole (though other purposes can be added): favor, healing, protection against magic, love incantations, repudiation/hatred.<sup>10</sup> What was the approach to these objects and ideas after the advent of Islam?

The Qur'ān does not explicitly mention amulets, and it was only during the canonization of the ḥadīths from the 8th century onwards that a kind of common sense on Islamic and thus religiously legitimate amulets was found. According to the ḥadīths, only Qur'ānic amulets, i. e. amulets with Qur'ānic citations (and for special purposes, e. g. the prevention of serpent stings and the evil eye) were allowed after this; thus, amulets bearing non-Qur'ānic texts and iconographies presumably were viewed with some suspicion, at least by certain religious authorities. This does not, however, imply that all surviving Islamic<sup>11</sup> amulets, or rather amulets used by Muslim Iranians, were deprived of non-Qur'ānic elements. Just like their Sasanian predecessors, Islamic amulets also display a potpourri of elements with different origins, which were, of course, reinterpreted over time

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**6** Some examples of them have been listed elsewhere (KIYARAD 2017, 28 n. 24).

**7** MONTGOMERY 1913; YAMAUCHI 1967; NAVEH/SHAKED 1987 and 1993; SEGAL/HUNTER 2000; MORIGGI 2014 (he also offers an overview on the study of (Syriac) incantation bowls, p. 1 ff); HUNTER (2008) investigates the language of three Mandaic bowls produced during the days of Early Islam. Later, incantation bowls became part of Islamic art, which means that bowls inscribed in Arabic and encompassing Islamic references were produced; see for example SPOER 1935 and 1938; CANAAN 1936. In 2005, Yuval HARARI published an article dealing with incantation bowls in Late Antiquity and Islam (in *Pe'amim* 103, 55–90; in Hebrew). Recently, OMARKHALI (2017, 70 ff.) has investigated Yezidi incantation bowls.

**8** See SCHÄFER/SHAKED 1994, 6–7.

**9** On the iconography of incantation bowls, see: MONTGOMERY 1913; HUNTER 1998; SEGAL/HUNTER 2000.

**10** SCHIFFMAN/SWARTZ 1992, 46–48.

**11** Islam/Islamic is taken here as a cultural sphere of the Islamic Empire and all states succeeding it, as Carl Heinrich BECKER (1910, esp. p. 17) defined it.

and sometimes replaced. Islamic amulet-seals, amulets made from parchment, leather, paper and metal, as well as incantation bowls, have formed the subject of several studies;<sup>12</sup> whereas, as the case with the Sasanian amulet culture, it rests on the future to bring the different categories of objects together systematically.

## The iconography of bound and/or binding figures on amulets

Two widely used iconographical techniques for binding anthropoid forces on Sasanian amulets are 1) depicting the force fettered to staves; and 2) surrounding the force with a “magical prison”, as GYSELEN puts it. In the following section, I would like to retrace the development of the iconographic representation of bound and/or binding anthropoid figures and suggest how the Islamic representation of a person sitting cross-legged on an (often H-formed) throne – which I propose to interpret as Sulaymān – might be connected to Sasanian precursors.

### Prisons and staves

The prison often, but not always, roughly adopts the form of the artifacts it is depicted on, so that we can observe circular prisons on incantation bowls (Fig. 1), sometimes in the shape of an ouroboros,<sup>13</sup> i. e. a serpent or dragon eating its own tail, and rectangular ones on rectangular amulets. These lines and ‘confinements’ can be understood as iconographic abbreviations of what is described in longer amulet texts in detail and what were probably also performed. Thus, binding and sealing are important elements, being not only represented iconographically, but also textually (and performatively). A Sasanian seal-amulet (Fig. 2) made out of chalcedony in the *Metropolitan Museum of Art* has been published by HARPER, SKJÆRVØ, GORELICK and GWINNET (Inv. no. 1989.123).<sup>14</sup>

The depiction on the seal (with undecorated reverse) dated by the authors to the 4th/5th CE is surrounded by a Pahlavi text (we should, however, recall that

<sup>12</sup> To name just a few: KALUS 1981 and 1986; MADDISON/SAVAGE-SMITH 1997; SCHAEFER 2006; FODOR 2009; PORTER 2011.

<sup>13</sup> See: NAVEH/SHAKED 1987, 204. The ouroboros originates in Ancient Egypt but later was employed in different cultures, usually in the so-called context of ‘magic’.

<sup>14</sup> HARPER/SKJÆRVØ/GORELICK/GWINNET 1992. The amulet was acquired on the art market in New York.



**Fig. 1:** Incantation bowl with Aramaic inscription (ca. 5th–6th century CE), ©Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (Acc. no. 86.11.259).

Pahlavi continued to be used in the Early Islamic centuries), “an incantation on behalf of a woman, perhaps of noble birth, who has an Iranian name, Pērōzduxt”, in which Jesus is invoked.<sup>15</sup> The probably Christian woman obviously suffered from a disease which the amulet was meant to heal, thus the words *bēšazih ud darmān*, “healing and remedy”, are written at the end of the legend.<sup>16</sup> The figure on the seal-amulet has “a large circular head on which the hair is represented, parted at the center, and projecting upward in six, wavy strands on one side and in six, curving, crescentic lines on the other side”; furthermore, its body is “stylized and abstract in form”.<sup>17</sup> Could it be that the figure represents an illness-demon responsible for the woman’s disease, a belief that was still traceable in Islam?<sup>18</sup> GYSELEN and HARPER/SKJÆRVØ/GORELICK/GWINNET agree that the represented figure on the seal in the Metropolitan Museum is demonic or malevolent (or at least possessed by a malevolent force), because its hair is disheveled, it resembles images of demons and Liliths on Late Antique incantation bowls, and it is caught within a ‘magical prison’ (the rectangular frame).<sup>19</sup> SHAKED, whose reading of parts of the inscription (*az sāsān ō sāsānmarg dēw*) differs from

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 43, 44.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>18</sup> On jinn causing diseases in Islamic belief, see NÜNLIST 2015, 269–286.

<sup>19</sup> GYSELEN 1995, 25–26 (referring to GIGNOUX 1978, 76), 76–78; HARPER/SKJÆRVØ/GORELICK/GWINNET 1992, 45, 47.



Fig. 2: Sasanian Seal-amulet, ©Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (Acc. no. 1989.123).

SKJÆRVØ's, suggests that the amulet is "attributed to the god Sāsān".<sup>20</sup> If Sāsān – or rather Sesen<sup>21</sup> – thus addresses a demon, a "Lilith-like entity",<sup>22</sup> this would be a functional parallel to later Islamic practices (against illness-demons, maybe threatening women in childbirth).<sup>23</sup>

Early Islamic amulets from Iran rarely show human figures – with the exception of a usually seated person (or equestrian).<sup>24</sup> This having been said, an amulet from a private collection, bought 30 years ago in the German art market, and recorded in the *Universität Hamburg, Islamic Studies, Photo Archive*, Inv. no. SB 10754, shows parallels to the discussed Sasanian seal-amulet but is definitely from the Early Islamic period and provides evidence of the continuity of prac-

<sup>20</sup> SHAKED 1993, 166; see also GYSELEN 1995, 55 f.

<sup>21</sup> Martin SCHWARTZ (1996, 253–254) has clarified that "the divine name **ssn** cannot stand for Sāsān if, as we must, we equate this **ssn** with the name also spelled **ssn** [...] for the name of the god in the Sasanian inscriptions in the magical documents". He distinguishes the personal name Sāsān from the divine name Sesen and writes: "The Sasanian magical cult of Sesen may be regarded both as a continuation of the Parthian cult and as an extension of the Late Antique East Mediterranean importance of Sesen in magic, itself developed and diffused by Aramaic culture."

<sup>22</sup> SCHWARTZ 1996, 254.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Elsewhere, it was already suggested that on Islamic amulets, the seated person could represent/have been reinterpreted as Solomon (KIYANRAD 2017, 281–282). WENZEL (2005) considers the seated figure as a fire-machine, see below. The mounted figure is connected to St. George (see PORTER 2011, 82). In later times, other persons, for example 'Ali and his sons could be depicted as well; see a 20th-century metal printing block with amulet text: FODOR 2009, 41 (cat. 8). On "Aniconism and Figural Representation in Islamic Art", see ALLEN 1998, 17–37.

tices. The amulet (Figs. 3 and 4) is a rectangular piece of bronze sheet, about 24–25 mm in height, ca. 20 mm long and ca. 2 mm wide, and incised on both sides.

Both sides of the amulet have undergone corrosion, partly distorting the inscription and the iconographic representation. The description states that the obverse is occupied by an “incised figure with wild long hairs between two three-pronged ‘candelabras’ within incised line margin”. The standing (!) anthropoid figure, whose body appears rectangular, seems to hold the ‘candelabras’ or staves with its hands or is somehow fixed to them. Furthermore, there is a prolate notch starting from the middle of the figure and proceeding upwards to its right (ithyphallic?). The whole depiction, which is very simply executed, is enclosed within a rectangular frame. This frame is much more elaborated on the figure’s right, above and beyond it; to the left, a fine (subsequently added?) stroke seems to complete it. On the reverse, the *sūrat al-ikhhlāṣ* (CXII)<sup>25</sup> is inscribed in five lines in Linear Kufic:<sup>26</sup>

ق[ل] هو [ال]له احد  
 اله [ا]الصمد(؟)  
 لم يلد و لم [يولد](؟)  
 و لم يكن(؟) له  
 كفوا [ احد]

Say, “He is Allah, [who is] One, / Allah, the Eternal Refuge. / He neither begets nor is born, / Nor is there to Him / any equivalent.”

The iconography of the unique Hamburg amulet is strongly influenced by Sasanian precursors – and unlike the later Islamic parallels discussed below the figure is standing (another indication that it dates to the Early Islamic era). Next to the depiction of the anthropoid being and the frame, there is yet another iconographic detail linking the Hamburg amulet to Sasanian prototypes, namely the staves. So-called magic seals from Sasanian Iran, which have been investigated in detail by Rika GYSELEN, comprise an iconographic category called “personnage(s) de face, bras et jambes écartés”,<sup>27</sup> with several subcategories, which is

<sup>25</sup> This *sūra* belongs to the most cited passages of the Qur’ān, not only on Early Islamic (for a little later, probably 10th–12th c. example, see PORTER 2009, 137 cat. 76), but also on later fabricated amulets (and e. g. metalwork), see: KIYANRAD 2017, 217–218; NEUWIRTH (2013, 761 ff) offers interesting insights on *sūra* CXII; according to her, the Jewish prototype (confession of faith) of the *sūra* is still traceable within the Arabic text. This could, in addition to the strong message of the verses, be another explanation for the fact that this *sūra* was much employed on amulets since the early days of Islam (as its contents were culturally spread before).

<sup>26</sup> On the employment of Linear Kufic on amulets, see n. 1.

<sup>27</sup> GYSELEN 1995, 26–31.





**Fig. 3:** Early Islamic amulet (obverse);  
©Universität Hamburg, *Islamic Studies*,  
*Photo Archive* (Inv. no. SB 10754).



**Fig. 4:** Early Islamic amulet (reverse);  
©Universität Hamburg, *Islamic Studies*,  
*Photo Archive* (Inv.no. SB 10754).

very similar to the figure represented on the Hamburg amulet's obverse.<sup>28</sup> The depictions within this category have in common the fact that they all display a figure, either naked or dressed, often ithyphallic and bound to two staves, one to its right and the other to its left (Fig. 5).

On certain Sasanian seals, animals (e. g. scorpion, cock, bird, snake) surround the anthropoid figure and in some cases, they twine around the staves; sometimes, birds sit on these staves. The figure's feet and the lower ends of the rods can be forked, and there are also seals showing a kind of doubled motive<sup>29</sup> with two identical figures next to each other. Depending on the iconographic

<sup>28</sup> On the influence of Sasanian iconography on Islamic art, see the numerous bibliographic references offered by GRUBE 2005, 24, n. 74. The Sasanian representation of the figure is found on Early Islamic stamp seals as well, reproduced in WENZEL 2005, 147 (Ill. 10), 148 (Ill. 11). Some re-engraved (amulet-?) seals with Sasanian representation (and sometimes Pahlavi script) on one, and Arabic script on the other side have been published; see PORTER 2011, 84 ff. Reference may further be made to metal seals dating to the 5th–6th/11th–12th centuries and combining Arabic inscriptions with Christian iconographies, i. e. representations of saints; HEIDEMANN/SODE 1997, 48 ff., fig. 5–10.

<sup>29</sup> It may be allowed to ask whether this representation could somehow be linked to, that is, the iconographic predecessor of the two human twin figures depicted on later Islamic amulets and fear cups; see FODOR 1987/1988, 267 ff., fig. 2+4+5.



**Fig. 5:** Sasanian stamp seal, Iran or Iraq (ca. 3rd–7th century CE), ©*Metropolitan Museum of Art*, New York (Acc. no. 93.17.7).

details, GYSELEN identifies different forms of this representation as demon, archdemon or Gayōmard (this last interpretation finally goes back to Phyllis ACKERMAN).<sup>30</sup> According to this interpretation, it seems probable that the figure on the Hamburg amulet is, following the Sasanian iconographic tradition, bound by two means: it is both fettered to staves and surrounded by an imprisoning frame.

### Sulaymān – the binding king?

The Hamburg amulet reflects iconographic continuities of binding anthropoid representations on amulets; as the number of remaining Early Islamic amulets is few, further early evidence for this phenomenon of cultural transfer is scarce. However, the Hamburg amulet could be considered a missing link between Sasanian and Medieval Islamic amulet iconography, where we find depictions of a *sitting* person resembling the *standing* figure on Sasanian seal amulets; tracing representations of a cross-legged figure sitting on an H-formed throne in Islamic art to (standing!) Sasanian prototypes (mentioned above, see Fig. 5), the late Marian WENZEL suggested that the whole constellation of a figure between staves (which is usually depicted inside a roundel or some kind of frame) could represent a scene of fire-making, because she considers the staves (later, i. e. in Islamic art, represented as a throne) and the “staff-carrier” as a “fire machine”.<sup>31</sup> In the absence of broad textual evidence, it seems hard to verify this interesting suggestion. ALLAN proposed astronomical connections and that the figure has to be understood as a power of darkness – which parallels interpretations of the Sasa-

<sup>30</sup> ACKERMAN 1936.

<sup>31</sup> WENZEL 2005, 149–157.



**Fig. 6:** Early Islamic amulet from Iran,  
©Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York  
(Acc. no. 1978.415).

nian iconography.<sup>32</sup> While Sasanian and Early Islamic depictions of the originally standing and later sitting figure leave little doubt that they are closely connected to each other, the interpretation of the person sitting cross-legged on the (often H-formed) throne remains somewhat puzzling.

Representations of the sitting figure can be found on amulets (see Fig. 6), and other Islamic, mostly Medieval Iranian (amuletic), metalwork. Even the presence of animals on Sasanian predecessors are reflected on those artifacts. Discussing a 13th-century inkwell from Herat, ALLAN writes: “The most striking is the figure seated between two staffs surmounted by animal heads”; this figure is imprisoned in a circle and depicted twice.<sup>33</sup> It is further interesting to note that beneficiary inscriptions similar to those on this inkwell (for example: “Glory, prosperity, wealth, contentment and perpetuity to its owner”) can also be expressed on Islamic amulets, from as early as the 8th century.<sup>34</sup> The same applies to a bronze stem bowl, also from 13th-century Herat, showing “five seated figures between dragon-headed staffs around the body”, each of which is found inside a roundel.<sup>35</sup> Could those dragon-heads reflect the birds<sup>36</sup> depicted on top of the staves on some Sasanian seals? Is the figure, which is commonly interpreted as malevolent in Sasanian contexts, on Medieval Islamic artifacts rather benevolent (it

<sup>32</sup> ALLAN 1999, 38; see also BAER 1983, 256 ff. Though BAER treats the “dragon monster held responsible for the eclipse of the Sun and the Moon” (“Jawzahr”) and depicted “in the form of a human figure which holds a staff surmounted by a dragon’s head in each hand” (256) separate from the “ruler in cosmic setting”, she concludes that the resemblance between both “is probably not accidental” (261–262).

<sup>33</sup> ALLAN 1999, 36.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 36; KIYANRAD 2017, 222–224.

<sup>35</sup> ALLAN 1999, 40. Elsewhere, ALLAN (1994, 119) suggests that these roundels are taken from “the art of the book”; see also ALLEN 1988, 27.

<sup>36</sup> See GYSELEN 1995, 27 (fig. 2b, 3b, 4b), 29 (fig. 6, 7, 8, 10?).

lacks typical features such as the disheveled hair and is not naked)? Were the producers of Medieval Islamic-Iranian amulets and amuletic metalwork still aware of the iconography's origin? How does the Early Islamic Hamburg amulet help us in terms of possibly shifting interpretations over time?

There exists yet another interpretation of the anthropoid figure fettered to staves on Sasanian seals – at least when it is accompanied by animals. GIGNOUX suggested that this person could represent a healer.<sup>37</sup> In the case of Medieval Islamic artifacts, it seems more likely to connect the person sitting cross-legged on a throne to a good force than to a malevolent one. In general, the sitting figure is reminiscent of depictions of Islamic rulers, who were represented sitting cross-legged on a dais from the 9th/10th century onwards.<sup>38</sup> Discussing the cross-legged figure on a 13th-century pen-box from Mesopotamia, Eva BAER writes: “In the center of each medallion a princely figure is seated cross-legged on a throne. A radiating crown frames the upper part of his head. His arms are raised [...], and two ribbons emerge under his arms [...] Does he indeed represent the seventh planet, the Sun [...] Or should we interpret this figure as a princely image, who in this cosmic setting has assumed an astrological character?”<sup>39</sup> On this artifact, as on many others, there is no evidence that the person on the throne represents a historical person. Could he rather represent an ideal ruler?

This leads us to Sulaymān, a figure who is considered the ideal king in Islam, and who is virtually always represented on his throne (Fig. 7).<sup>40</sup> There are many aspects connecting Sulaymān to the world of amulets and amuletic objects: according to the Qurʾān, Sulaymān is considered a sage prophet who speaks the language of the birds and who is able to reign the *dīws* (sūras Q 4:163; Q 27:16–17; Q 34:12) (as tradition has it, by means of his famous seal-ring). The hoopoe brings Sulaymān news from the Queen of Sheba (Q 27:20–24). Sulaymān's death is only discovered when ants eat his rod (Q 34:14). Thus, next to the throne, there are several elements allowing comparison to depictions of the cross-legged figure with Sulaymān.<sup>41</sup> In fact, this representation in some cases, usually if additional iconographic evidence is given, has already been interpreted as Sulaymān, one

<sup>37</sup> Cf. GYSELEN 1995, 28, 84–85.

<sup>38</sup> OTTO-DORN 1990, 64.

<sup>39</sup> BAER 1983, 259.

<sup>40</sup> For some examples, see: BROSH 1991, 102–111. On Solomon, his ring and his link with demons, see for example Gutmann 1976; FERNÁNDEZ MEDINA 2012; WALKER/FENTON 2012; Verheyden 2013; NÜNLIST 2015, chapter 10.

<sup>41</sup> It is interesting to see that most depictions of the figure sitting on the H-formed throne are on metalwork – IAFRATE (2015, 43–53) has shown that both Muslim and Christian artisans thought of Sulaymān as the inventor of special metal-working techniques.

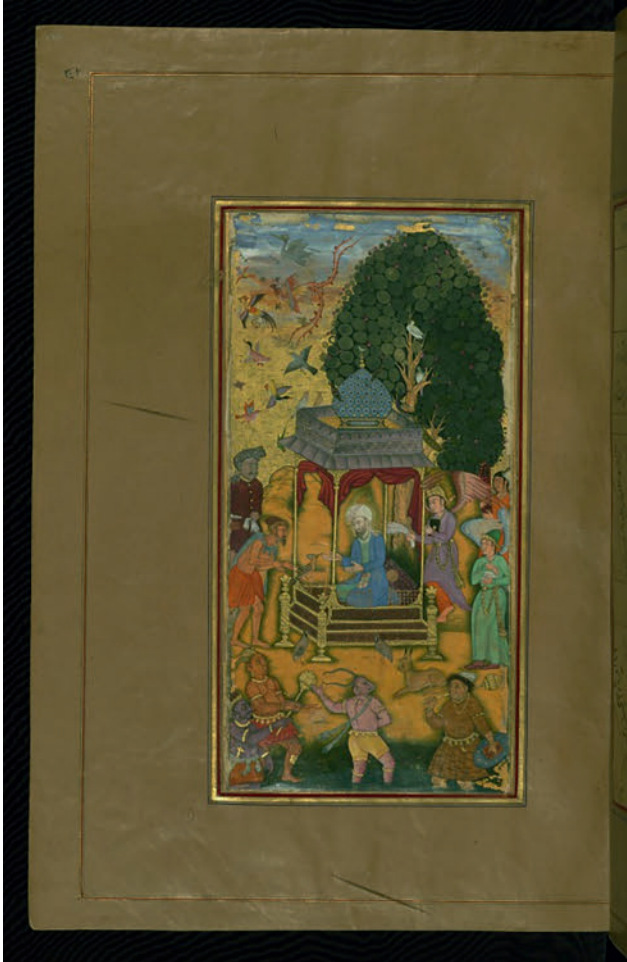


Fig. 7: Manuscript page: King Solomon Enthroned in the Company of Demons, Angels, Birds and Animals (India, 1602 CE), ©The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore (folio from manuscript W.650).

example being a 12th–13th century bronze mirror from Iran or Turkey (*Metropolitan Museum of Art*, New York, Acc. no. 1978.348.2), where Sulaymān, sitting on his throne, is surrounded by *dīws* (Fig. 8).<sup>42</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Still another mirror from 13th-century Khurāsān with human-headed lions shows a graffiti, i. e. a later-added engraving of the cross-legged figure with staves (and bowl in his left hand?) on its back: MELIKIAN-CHIRVANI 1982, 131 (cat. 59). On the mirror in the *Metropolitan Museum of*



**Fig. 8:** Bronze mirror (ca. 12th–13th century CE), ©*Metropolitan Museum of Art*, New York (Acc. no. 1978.348.2).

Next to the hoopoe, which is Sulaymān’s ‘trademark’ item, we also observe a stave on each side of the throne. As with the Sasanian anthropoid figure, animals – but also jinn – may surround the monarch and his throne (two lions may sit beneath it), and sometimes, attendants can be observed.<sup>43</sup> It seems the staves – the ends of the thrones – are usually surmounted by animal-heads (birds); in some cases, the figure holds a cup in his hand.<sup>44</sup> This cup could represent the famous *jām-i Sulaymān* (“bowl of Sulaymān”), through which Sulaymān again is connected to more ancient Iranian traditions (the bowl of Jamshid).<sup>45</sup> It

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*Art*, which has the Throne verse and two further inscriptions, one possibly in Coptic, the other in Armenian, inscribed on the undecorated site, see CARBONI 2006, 167–168 and pls. XV, a + b. CARBONI describes Sulaymān as follows (167): “At the top is a seated man wearing a turban and holding a cup in his left hand. His legs are crossed, his right hand rests on his right knee. A bird with a long tail, its head turned back, is on either side. The man appears to be seated on a stylized throne or stool, with long sides ending in split palmettes.” He further writes: “This rather crudely cast object has the distinction of being the only talismanic mirror, or at least the sole surviving example known to me, to carry the image of Solomon and his jinns.”

<sup>43</sup> See MELIKIAN-CHIRVANI 1982, 145 (fig. 50A), 195 (cat. 89); BAER 1983, 261 (fig. 212), inkwell from Iran, late 12th/early 13th century, 263 (fig. 213), Syro-Mesopotamian basin, ca. 1275 CE; BROSH 1991, 110–111 (figs. 38 and 39).

<sup>44</sup> See, for example, FEHÉRVÁRI 1976, 76–77 (cat. 85), plate 27 (brass casket from late 12th–13th century Iran); MELIKIAN-CHIRVANI 1982, 145 (fig. 50A; candlestick, first half of 14th century, Fars).

<sup>45</sup> For a Safavid bowl with according inscription, see: MELIKIAN-CHIRVANI 1982, 342–344 (cat. 159).

appears that varieties of this representation were commonly employed until the 14th century – mostly in Iran, but, for example, also in Spain.

Although it is hardly possible to *prove* that the cross-legged figure represented on Medieval amulets and (amuletic) metalwork in certain cases is Sulaymān, I think this is a possibility we should take into consideration. Especially in Islamic Iran, Sulaymān was integrated into the cultural memory. A few centuries after the Arab conquest, people considered him the architect of ‘miraculous’ places and buildings, such as Takht-i Sulaymān, “the throne of Sulaymān”,<sup>46</sup> not to forget the countless allusions to him in Persian poetry. As master of the *dīws*, he could have been employed on amulets to ward off evil powers – and to fetter evil forces. In this case, the roundels ‘imprisoning’ probably meant to protect Sulaymān – or to bond his power for the client’s needs. Could this be a hint that Sasanian prototypes (and our Early Islamic Hamburg amulet) do not show a malevolent being, but, as GIGNOUX suggested, rather a healer? Was he then actually not fettered to the staves, but do these staves refer to his medical activities?<sup>47</sup> Or did the possible process of reinterpretation bring along with it a change in the figure’s nature? It is furthermore thrilling to parallel the Iranian gods/mythical figures linked to Sasanian seal amulets – be it *Sesen* or *Gayōmard* – with Sulaymān. If they – or maybe a healer – were depicted on Sasanian seal amulets, and iconographically survived on Early Islamic amulets from Iran (the Hamburg amulet), they could have been reinterpreted (and thus iconographically adopted – the cross-legged representation being one change); maybe as benevolent *Sesen*,<sup>48</sup> and in later centuries as Sulaymān. This is still a very general assumption; small scale changes and possible (also regional) reinterpretations in the Islamic era until the Islamic ‘Middle-Ages’ have to be investigated thoroughly in future.

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**46** WIESEHÖFER 2006; IAFRATE 2015, 184–201. One has also to consider the phrase “Heir to the kingdom of Sulaymān” used by several dynasties in Fars and attested on many bowls (again a reference to Sulaymān?) from Fars; see MELIKIAN-CHIRVANI 1971; and, for one example of many: idem 1982, 220–222 (cat. 102).

**47** Comparing the Phoenician god Shadrapha to *Sesen*, SCHWARTZ (1996, 255–256) states: “The Phoenician god Shadrapha on reliefs of the early C.E. from Palmyra, like the Iranian representation which I identify as *Sesen*, holds a lance around which winds a serpent, as on the staff of Asklepios [...]. Already in the 6th–5th cent. B.C.E. Sicily, the Punic Shadrapha was a chthonic god [...], and as a chthonic god was also a controller of reptiles and a general repeller of poison and disease [...] already in the Ugarite snake charm [...]”.

**48** GYSELEN (1995, 56 n. 184) writes: “On ne peut manquer de relever le nom de Sāsān dans un contexte islamique où Sāsān est le patron des gens ambulants, c’est-à-dire des mendiants, prestidigitateurs, thaumaturges, de ceux qui parcourent les pays avec des animaux (boucs, ânes, singes).”

What is also worth mentioning is the fact that we find representations of the so-called seal of Sulaymān (usually depicted as a hexagram/ six-pointed star), or rather the seven Solomonic seals,<sup>49</sup> the Solomonic knot and ‘prisons’/lines surrounding, and thus protecting, iconographies and texts, on Islamic amulets and amuletic artifacts (Figs. 9 and 10) – an allusion to Sulaymān’s ‘binding’ powers.<sup>50</sup> As NÜNLIST has shown, the idea of encircling – and thus banning – jinn with means of a (protective) ring or circular line (*khatt/dā’ira*) drawn on the earth is widely attested in pre-modern Islamic literature.<sup>51</sup>

In the following, we will see how the idea of binding and sealing forces is expressed on amulet texts from Sasanian and Islamic Iran – and how Sulaymān is (in the latter instance) again of importance in this concern.

## Binding and sealing in amulet texts

Amulet texts and the idea of binding and sealing are closely connected to each other. First, amulets may be regarded as ‘binding’ contracts between the human and the supernatural; it thus comes as no surprise that both before and after the advent of Islam, amulets terminologically could reflect their legal, binding character: some Mandaean amulets refer to themselves as ‘*siqta*’; a notion almost synonymous with *hatma*, “seal”.<sup>52</sup> Arabic amulets (or designs and even *wafqs*

<sup>49</sup> See for example FODOR 1987/1988, 267 and fig. 2; idem 2009, 75 (fig. 30b); PORTER 2004, 200, fig. 8.13. The seven seals are discussed in detail by WINKLER 1930; see also DOUTTÉ 1909, 155 ff. On Early Islamic seal-amulets, five-pointed stars seem to prevail; they can be attested as early as the 7th century; see PORTER 2009, 146 (cat. 87) in combination with p. 158 n. 7.

<sup>50</sup> Knots are mentioned in amulet texts as well: on Late Antique incantation bowls and amulets, evil forces are fettered (sometimes with their own hair) with knots. Knots are also used as a means to fight evil forces (but evil forces use knots as well): LIDZBARSKI 1909, 352–371 (§§ 28–33, 210–214, 241–243); MONTGOMERY 1913, 231 (§ 10); YAMAUCHI 1967, 60, 172 (§§ 10–11), 176 (§§ 11–12), 182 (§§ 7–8); MACUCH 1967, 117–143 (Ic, §§ 22–23, 27–31); GIGNOUX 1987, text pp. 11–19 (§§ 15–17). See also: LIDZBARSKI 1925, 92–93; idem, 1915, 8; NAVEH/SHAKED 1993, 113 (§§ 4–5). In the Qur’ān, knots are employed by evil persons, namely witches, who blow on them; the corresponding sūra (CXIII) is assured on an Egyptian block printed amulet, SCHAEFER 2006, 170 (§§ 18–19). As DOUTTÉ (1909, 87–91) has shown, ‘magical’ practices with knots were still widely spread in Northern Africa in the beginning of the 20th century. See further: MELIKIAN-CHIRVANI 1982, 34, 35, 91, 92, 95, 96, 98, 110, 115, 176, 178, 180, 221; BAER 1983, 127 ff., 204 (fig. 178), 206 (fig. 180), 256 (fig. 208), 261 (fig. 212), 268 (fig. 218); BLAIR 2001, 91 f.; KIYARAD 2017, 272–273.

<sup>51</sup> NÜNLIST 2015, 374–378.

<sup>52</sup> CAQUOT 1972, 80.





**Fig. 9:** Talismanic scroll from Egypt(?) (ca. 11th century CE), ©Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (Acc. no. 1978.546.32).



**Fig. 10:** Earring from Iraq(?) (ca. 11th–13th century CE), ©Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (Acc. no. 95.16.2).

[‘magic squares’] on them) still are called *khātam*, “seal”.<sup>53</sup> In an amulet from Cairo, dating to the early 19th century, the *sūrat al-ikhlaṣ* is called *khātam* and not cited in length, but only by its name – this abridged reference already bestows the *sūra*’s effect on the amulet.<sup>54</sup>

If, as suggested above, Sulaymān is represented iconographically on Early and Medieval Islamic amulets, is there also textual evidence for his binding qualities – and, above all, for his seal? If so, are there again Sasanian predecessors for his role? The answers to these questions are twofold. The seal of Sulaymān (usually: *khātam-i Sulaymān*), on which according to tradition God’s great name is inscribed, is a frequent topos in Islamic metatexts on amulets. Sulaymān already plays a role on Late Antique amulets; but his role as king of the *dīws* and healer became much more prominent during the days of Islam.<sup>55</sup> However, explicit textual references to Sulaymān on Early Islamic – and even Medieval – amulets from Iran are, to my knowledge, hitherto unknown. What we do find on both Sasanian and Early Islamic amulets is the idea of binding; here again, we face phenomena of cultural transfer.

Sasanian and Islamic amulets appeal to supernatural powers – either in order to bind, fetter and/or seal evil powers (and thus deprive them of their power), or to seal the client (and thus protect him). In Sasanian Iran, this phenomenon was so widespread that it shall suffice to cite one example: a Mandaean amulet

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53 See FONAHN 1907, 409, 410; DOUTTÉ 1909, 82; ANAWATI 1972, 296 (§ 7), 305 (§ 3). On the different meanings of *khātam*, see ALLAN 1978. The interchangeable use of seal and amulet seems to be observable in some Coptic texts from Late Antiquity as well: KOTSIFOU 2012, 158. DORPMÜLLER (2012, 190) argues that before the 13th century, “the word *hātam* is mainly used to refer to signet-rings whereas in later Islamized magical treatises they usually denote a magical figure [...]”.

54 FODOR 1973, 280.

55 It is interesting to see that binding of forces through Solomon is mentioned on an Armenian amulet scroll dating to 1 November 1717; RUSSELL 2011, 16. As RUSSELL states (*ibid.*, 17–18), the “spells against the Al” (demons) are “the main purpose of the magician’s work”. He cites a “Prayer for the binding of demons and als” that starts as follows: “Solomon the Wise saw the prince of the demons of darkness, who roared like a cloud and screeched like a dragon. Solomon says: O foul and accursed one, what are you? The demon says: I am the prince of the demons and mother of all evils and sins. I am the one who kindles enmity between brothers, contention and quarrel and disturbance and fornication. I enter into the hearts of men, bringing and sowing the seed of wicked desire. Solomon says: Arise that I may see you. And he arose, greater than a mountain, and wished to fall upon him. Solomon says: Become small! And he became smaller than a mustard seed. And Solomon trapped him, and put him in a ring on his right hand, and put a piece of the tablets of Sinai on top, with a piece also of Noah’s Ark, and of Jacob’s Ladder, and of Aaron’s staff: and by the prayers of Kononos may all evil demons and wicked satanic contrivances be banished and frustrated, may they be released and cast out afar for this servant of God (N. N.) [...]”.

(dating either to Parthian or Sasanian Iran) for the female client Mama shows in exemplary fashion how this last aim could be expressed (§§ 29–45):<sup>56</sup>

(29) Bound and sealed is Mama, (30) daughter of Adurdukht (31) against the seven male (32) and female (evil) words, (33) the seven tongues of the sorcerers, (34) of the sorceresses (35) and of the eight Lilits. (36) Bound and sealed is Mama (37) by the seal-ring of Nabu and (38) Nirig, (39) bound and sealed is she by the seal- (40) ring of Nanay and Šadya. (41) And at night she is bound by (42) bond of linen, (43) {she is sealed by a seal of} (44) she is sealed by a seal (45) of bitumen and lead.

On Sasanian and other Late Antique amulets, one important means to bind powers is thanks to the seal-ring. Amulets from the *Cairo Geniza* mention the “seal-ring of El Shadday”, and the seal of God is asked to close the mouths, eyes, hands of evil forces.<sup>57</sup> Similar phenomena are traceable on incantation bowls.<sup>58</sup> One exemplar from Nippur states that evil forces are banned with a seal that sealed the seven planets and the twelve signs of the Zodiac.<sup>59</sup> Numerous other examples could be mentioned.<sup>60</sup> Interestingly, Late Antique amulets and incantation bowls often specify the employed seal, in that they explain to which benevolent force the seal belongs. In many instances, it is the seal of God or the respective greatest power, while the force conducting the sealing can be a lower benevolent power/intermediary.<sup>61</sup> Reference is made to the seal with which Adam has sealed Seth, and a seal with which Noah has sealed and thus protected the ark.<sup>62</sup> The incantation bowls also indicate a fire-seal, the seal of Solomon, of David, the seal of Abrasax/Abraxas and the seal of Bagdānā.<sup>63</sup> Some of these seals are traceable in

<sup>56</sup> MÜLLER-KESSLER 1998, 84–85; for similar aims expressed on an Aramaic incantation bowl, see exemplary MORIGGI 2005.

<sup>57</sup> SCHÄFER/SHAKED 1994, 222 (1a, § 7), 224 (2a, § 1).

<sup>58</sup> MONTGOMERY 1913, 127 (§ 1); NAVEH/SHAKED 1987, 124 (§ 10).

<sup>59</sup> MONTGOMERY 1913, 133 (§ 4).

<sup>60</sup> To name just a few: Mandaean amulet (5th–7th century) sealing the client with seals (LIDZBARSKI 1909, 352–371); Middle-Persian amulet (660–680 CE), previously probably accompanied by a small (amuletic) stone, mentioning, that it should be sealed by a tongue (WEBER 2008, 114–115); two 7th-century Syriac amulets written for the female client Yazdān-zādag calling on beneficent powers to seal all her belongings, the client herself, and her children (GIGNOUX 1987, 11–19, 29–35).

<sup>61</sup> See for example LIDZBARSKI 1909, 352–371 (§§ 28–32); MONTGOMERY 1913, 145 (§ 4), 154 (§ 11), 190 (§§ 11–12), 231 (§ 9); MACUCH 1967, 117–143 (Ia, §§ 92–102; Ic, §§ 27–31, 37; Ic, §§ 46–51); CAQUOT 1972, 85–87 (B verso, §§ 1–5); GIGNOUX 1987, 11–19 (§§ 36–40).

<sup>62</sup> MONTGOMERY 1913, 165 (§§ 3–5).

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 185 (§ 7), 232 (§§ 8–9), 248 (§§ 10–11); YAMAUCHI 1967, 15, 232 (§ 19). See also: NAVEH/SHAKED 1993, 91 (§ 2); MONTGOMERY 1913, 435. LEVINE (1970, 364–368) discusses the use of signet rings in incantation bowl texts in detail.

other cultural contexts as well: the *Greek Magical Papyri* (PGM) refer to the seal of Solomon, the seal-ring of Hermes and the seal of God; furthermore, the wearer of the amulet can be asked to seal the amulet with his own seal.<sup>64</sup>

The practice and metaphorical connotations of sealing were absorbed by Islam,<sup>65</sup> of which Sulaymān's ring is the most eminent manifestation, even though it is not explicitly mentioned on Early Islamic amulets from Iran (but depicted iconographically, see above). At any rate, the Qur'ān already provides some verses connected to binding and sealing forces which later were employed on amulets. For example, a block printed paper-amulet<sup>66</sup> in the *Cambridge University Library* (Taylor-Schechter Geniza Collection, T-S AR 38.135) edited by Karl Schaefer,<sup>67</sup> cites verses 8 and 9 of the *sūra Yā Sin* (§§ 20–24):

We have put yokes round their necks right up to their chins, so that their heads are forced up (and they cannot see). And We have put a bar in front of them and a bar behind them, and further, We have covered them up; so that they cannot see.

Another (partial) quotation from the Qur'ān (Q 55: 33) on an amulet made from paper and stored in the *Österreichische Nationalbibliothek Papyrussammlung* (A. CH. 12.146), again edited by Schaefer,<sup>68</sup> reads as follows (§§ 4–7):

[O ye assembly of jinns] and men! If it be that ye can [pass beyond] the zones of the heavens and the [earth, pass ye!] Ye shall not be able to pass!

**64** Betz 1986, (PGM I 306), 25 (PGM III 187–262), 94 (PGM IV 2943–66), 96 (PGM IV 3007–86), 104–105 (PGM V 213–303) etc.

**65** WINKLER (1930, 110) writes: „Bald liefert ein Dämon sein Siegel dem Beschwörer aus und unterwirft sich ihm damit, bald ist ein Siegel einem Kranken aufzudrücken, um ihn zu heilen, bald genügt ein hingeschriebenes Siegel allein, um z. B. Kiesel in Edelsteine zu verwandeln, bald siegelt Salomo die Dämonen oder versiegelt die Flaschen, in die er sie gesperrt hat, bald wird unter Anschluß an den Koran (Sure II, 6; VI, 46; XXXVI, 65; XLII, 23; XLV, 22) Allah gebeten, Mund, Ohr, Auge und Herz der Feinde zu versiegeln”; see also: *ibid.*, 112.

**66** Block printed amulets are usually attributed to Egypt – though we cannot be completely sure where they were produced in the individual case, and evidence exists for block printed amulets with Persian words; they continued to be used from ca. 900 until ca. 1400 CE and usually cannot be dated more precisely.

**67** SCHAEFER 2006, 84–89.

**68** *Ibid.*, 142–145. Sabine DORPMÜLLER (2012, 205) cites still another amulet (here: *khātām*) mentioned by al-Būnī in which “the intrinsic power of the seal is transferred to the trace and thus to the desired persons [...]”; for further examples, see: FODOR 1973, 273 (Arabic)/ 274 (translation). DOUTTÉ (1909, 223–224) reports that in the beginning of the 20th century, in Northern Africa, there existed a technique called “imprisonment of jinns” carried out directly on sick persons (the jinn were held responsible for the disease).

Although texts on Islamic amulets from Iran and beyond were not restricted to Qur'ānic quotations, verses and sūras played a preeminent role. The few examples show that the idea of binding and sealing which was very explicit in Sasanian amulets and part of the usual textual repertory of amulets is no more traceable on Early Islamic amulets, except for allusions in Qur'ānic quotations. Even the prominent seal-ring of Sulaymān is not evoked textually – unless we assume that each reference to dīws, binding, and sealing was connected to Sulaymān by the reader. As already mentioned, if an amulet wanted to be legal from an Islamic point of view, the text had to be taken from the Qur'ān. Although this was not strictly observed, it could explain why 'subtexts' not fitting the legal/religious frame (because, in the case of Sulaymān, forces other than God were approached) were sometimes expressed rather iconographically than textually.

## Conclusion

On an iconographic level, continuities in representing a bound anthropoid figure enclosed in a prison/frame in Sasanian and Islamic Iran are obvious. But while Sasanian predecessors show the figure standing, it is seated on Islamic amulets (and represented until ca. the 14th c.). The Early Islamic Hamburg amulet (on which the bound figure is still standing) shows that this development must have occurred after the 8th/9th centuries, that is, about the same time that rulers were represented seating/cross-legged for the first time in Islamic art. In accordance with Sasanian iconography, the figure on the Hamburg amulet holds staves in its hands. These staves are still visible on some Islamic amulets/amuletic objects, but over time they started to merge with the H-formed throne – another new element of the representation. Other elements of Sasanian iconography were kept – e. g. the birds are sometimes represented above the staves/throne. Both the Sasanian and the Islamic representation of the bound figure on amulets have been interpreted as malevolent by researchers; but at least the Islamic figure shows clear attributes of a benevolent being (throne, cup, lions). It is those attributes – and his cultural role – which suggest that it represents Sulaymān, who was well known for his binding qualities, on Medieval Islamic amulets. However, it is not clear yet how the figure was interpreted during the Early Islamic centuries, and thus on the unique Hamburg amulet.

On Sasanian amulets, Sulaymān and his seal are evoked to bind malevolent beings and to seal (ill) clients. Astonishingly, Sulaymān is hardly ever conjured in Early and Medieval Islamic amulet texts, although his seal-ring especially became a standard topic in classical Persian poetry. Thus, on a textual level, ref-

erences to binding and sealing are commonly found in Qur'ān quotations. Still, the seal of Sulaymān and so-called Solomonic knots belonged to the standard iconographic repertoire employed on Medieval Islamic amulets and metalwork. As a result, it could be that during this period binding means and forces were represented iconographically rather than textually.

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