

Review of Juraj Franek, *Solomonica Magica: Greek-Inscribed 'Solomonic' Amulets from Late Antiquity and Early Byzantium*

The thesis prepared by Dr. Franek addresses an important but previously poorly studied body of material: engraved magical gems and metal amulets invoking the name of Solomon produced in the eastern Mediterranean region (chiefly ancient Syria-Palestine) in the late antique period, ca. 3rd-7th century AD. It is clear that a considerable amount of research has gone into compiling and categorizing over 300 objects, many previously unpublished, which are carefully described, with particular attention given to their Greek inscriptions. The result is a fundamental corpus that will be greatly valued by scholars of ancient magic, Jewish and early Christian religion, and Late Antique and Early Byzantine archaeology, among other disciplines. The work is indeed interdisciplinary, involving archaeology and religious history as well as conventional epigraphy and philology.

I would argue that the methodology employed by Franek is the correct one, indeed the necessary one, to contextualize this material. These amulets have attracted scholarly attention since the late 19th century, but only with the seminal work on magical amulets by Bonner (1950) have the archaeological and philological questions been investigated at a high level of scholarship. The study of magical texts in general has intensified over the last fifty years or so but has been dominated by a philological approach based on the reading of papyri from Egypt. Other categories of objects, such as gems and amulets, have until recently not received such careful attention. The study of inscribed metal lamellae, notably the brilliant work of Kotansky (1994), who, although primarily a philologist, recognized the value of compiling a datable corpus, demonstrates how important it is to expand the range of material beyond papyri.

Franek's analysis of the corpus of objects that he has compiled is thorough and far-ranging, including a full review of previous scholarship, accompanied by his own critical readings and commentary. He places the amulets in their historical and theological context, without which it would be difficult to understand their significance. The first section of the work (pp. 22-88) reviews the literary and textual sources for the tradition of Solomon as master of demons. Solomon's name (or that of his powerful seal) were invoked for exorcism and healing. The tradition is already attested by the 1st century BC, including in the Dead Sea Scrolls, as well as in Jewish authors, Gnostics, and early Christian theologians, notably Origen. Franek summarizes this material well, along with later Rabbinic and Christian sources. There follows a brief summary (pp. 89-102) of other epigraphic sources mentioning Solomon, including papyri, ostraca, and metal

lamellae and curse tablets (defixiones). This section concludes with a very competent critical reading of a much-debated curse table from Carnuntum (pp. 96-102).

A careful discussion of the corpus begins at p. 103, section 3.2.4, and perhaps a division should have been made here to make it clear that this is the beginning of the corpus. The sections that follow—rings, armbands, tokens, gems, and pendant amulets—are all closely related archaeologically, as Franek himself shows. This section (pp. 103-205) serves as a commentary on the descriptive corpus that follows. In it, Franek demonstrates the usefulness of his methodology, which incorporates commentary on chronology based on archaeological evidence, the iconographical significance of each variety of amulet, and the analysis of the various magical formulae. Throughout he pays careful attention to the readings and often suggests corrections to earlier interpretations. The commentary concludes with a literary-historical analysis of how ancient writers, both pagan and Christian, interpreted the efficacy of amulets and addressed the ethics of their use (they were invariably condemned by Christian theologians).

The long catalogue that follows, with very good illustrations, includes new readings of all amulets, most from autopsy.

Conclusion:

I would argue that bringing together a comprehensive corpus of all relevant material, along with careful descriptions, including new readings of high standard, a very intelligent commentary on both inscriptions and iconography, and a clearly demonstrated mastery of the scholarly literature, well satisfies the requirements of competency for this dissertation. In addition, Franek provides a highly useful summary and analysis of the literary traditions relating to Solomon and of the Christian theological views of amulet usage. In short, the dissertation is an up-to-date corpus with a highly competent commentary on philological, iconographical, religious, and archaeological aspects.

As I mentioned above, I believe the methodology for the most part is exemplary, although some sections could be organized differently for clarity. As noted above, the start of the actual corpus should be marked at p. 103. I also find that the Conclusions (pp. 192-223) contain sections that do not fit well together. For example, I felt that the very important discussion on archaeological context and chronology (pp. 192-197) should be moved earlier in the work. If the thesis is to be published (and I hope it will be), indices and perhaps even charts of variant readings will also be needed. These are minor issues, though.

More importantly, I believe that the dissertation serves a broader purpose by bringing an important and complex subject—material long known but poorly understood—to a wider scholarly audience in a clear and well-organized manner. The study fits well into the ongoing international study and publication of magical papyri (such as PGM, Suppl.Mag.), lamellae (Kotansky 1994), and gems (Bonner 1950, Delatte and Derchain 1964, Philipp 1986, Michel 2001 and 2004, Mastrocinque 2003 and 2014). Some of these publications are museum collections while others are more wide-ranging. I should also note that I find Franek's commentaries to be unusually clear and thoughtful, more so than many recent works.

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