

Material Culture as Amulets: Magical Elements and the Apotropaic in Ancient Roman World

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This article aims to make a brief presentation on the elements of material culture in the ancient Palestinian region, mainly coins, which were removed from their production context and placed in funerary contexts (coins were often buried in graves), thus converted in amulets, acquiring magical and apotropaic senses. We will use examples verified in different parts of the Roman Empire, as in Pithekússai (modest island, which is in the Italian Peninsula), on the banks of the Thames, in Celtic contexts, more specifically in the current city of Lezoux, France, in the ancient city of Aquincum, present day Budapest, also in Tel Maresha and Tiberias, present-day Israel, to demonstrate how these practices were recurrent throughout the Empire. It is also our intention to observe iconographic elements that bring apotropaic content in their formulations, because, in addition to the role that coins could play in connecting the worlds of men and gods, many people believed that they had the power to project magical and apotropaic strength through images powerful that they portrayed.

Keywords: archaeology, material culture, amulets, coins, numismatic, magical elements, apotropaic elements, Roman Empire, Roman Palestine

Magic, Amulets and the Apotropaic Element

First of all, I believe that it is important to define the concept of magic, which, unlike our day—in which it generally receives a negative meaning—had a very different meaning in the past. According to Golding (2013, p. 16), “magic is the attempt to influence events through the use of certain media, such as the written or spoken word, the use of images, ritual actions and the use and display of charms called amulets”. Golding sees magic as a belief that certain words, such as the name of a deity, or certain images, often representative of the deity, contained power. This power could positively influence negative events, such as illness or the actions of a demon. Therefore, magic was used to maintain good health and well-being, in addition to keeping evil under control (Golding, 2013, p. 16). Geller (2010, p. 38), in turn, summed up magic as “expressions of humanity’s anxiety and concern for angry gods, malicious demons”.

Magic has an infinity of meanings. In the present paper, we are interested in understanding how amulets worked, in some magical form, in the Roman world, more specially in ancient Palestine, being used for protection and to ward off the evil that could come and invade the owner of some sacred objects.

It seems that etymologically the word amulet means “something that can be carried”. Authors such as Petrie (1972, p. 1) and Budge (2001) claim that this word comes from an Arab origin. Golding stated that

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apotropaic magic incorporates the use of amulets to ward off damage or harm. In this sense, it has two important values: (1) Guardianship: the protection of a person, position or place; (2) Prophylactic: specifically, a preventive measure against the disease. (2013, p. 25)

Tutelary and prophylactic practices are therefore both aspects of apotropaic magic. One of the most well-known apotropaic symbols is the blue and white “eye”; its function is to ward off evil. This object is commonly found in modern countries, such as Greece, Turkey, and Syria. It is generally known as the “evil eye”, but, here in Brazil, it is well by many people as the “Greek eye” (see Figure 1). The eye can be hung in a room or above a door to provide protection. It can also be used as a jewelry store and is often incorporated into popular tourist souvenirs. Ancient amulets worked in the same way (Budge, 2001, p. 13).



Figure 1. Example of a “Greek Eye”, hanging on a wall for the protection of the house (Photo: Personal archive).

A lot of what we know about amulets from the world of Israelites comes from the Hebraic Bible and from archaeological surveys. The Sumerians and Babylonians influenced their magic, according to Budge (2001, p. 213). In this sense, Goldind reminded us that:

There were a number of Hebrew amulet objects. Included in this list of objects are the *saharôn*¹, *terâphîm*², *lehâshîm*³, and bells. Some Syro-Palestinian amulets have been found in tombs according to De Tarragon (1995, p. 2079). They were intended to exorcise evil that had accumulated in life as well as in death. (2013, p. 29)

The study of archaeological finds from Maresha⁴ underground complex, city near Jerusalem and Hebron,

¹ A crescent form ornament used on camels, by women and royalty (Budge, 2001, p. 213; Goldind, 2013, p. 29).

² Anthropomorphic figures probably influenced by similar figures found in southern Mesopotamia, where they were apotropaic domestic amulets (Budge, 2001, p. 214; Goldind, 2013, p. 29).

³ Ornaments, including jewelry, that were used while enchanting prayers and spells (Budge, 2001, p. 215; Goldind, 2013, p. 29).

⁴ Tel Maresha is a *Tel* (in archaeology, a hill or mound, which is a type of archaeological site in the form of an earth mound) from the biblical Iron Age city known as Maresha. Later, it was known by its Hellenized name Marisa. The Tel is located in the Shephelah region of Israel, that is, at the foot of the Judean mountains. It was excavated for the first time in 1898-1900 by British archaeologists Bliss and Macalister on behalf of the Palestinian Exploration Fund and again after 1989 by Israeli archaeologist Amos Kloner on behalf of the Israel Antiquities Authority (Negev & Gibson, 2001, p. 315; Kloner, 2003). Most of the artifacts from the British excavation are now found in Istanbul’s Archaeology museums.

shows other category of cultural amulets⁵. In a 2017 paper, Ester Eshel sorted more than a hundred ostrakon and conceptualized them as divination texts.

Eshel (2017, p. 7) emphasized that “in this same subterranean complex a disproportionate number of other finds were uncovered that can be considered cultic in nature”. These cultic materials are linked to fertility, apotropaism, health protection and include statuettes, phallus models made of limestone (see Figure 2), small domestic stone altars (see Figure 3), astragalus, aniconic kernos and lamps. In the sequence, we can see some images of these findings.

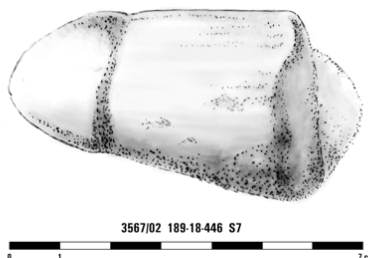


Figure 2. Phallus made of limestone (SC 169) found in Maresha underground complex (Drawing by Denise Dal Pino, adapted from Eshel, 2017, p. 13).

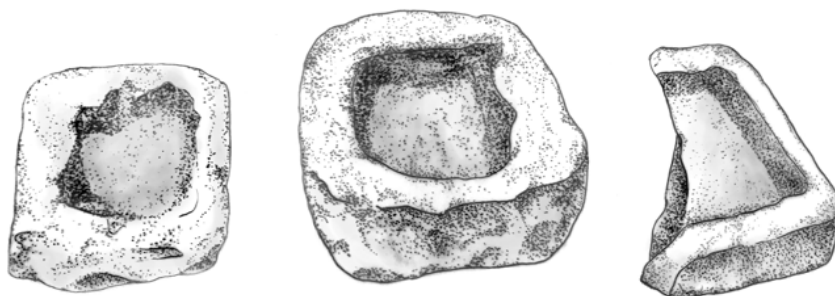


Figure 3. Domestic altars made of stone (SC 169) found in Maresha underground complex (Drawing by Denise Dal Pino, adapted from Eshel, 2017, p. 13).

Now I want to divert your attention, reader, to the coins that are found in graves, and what these findings can mean. According to György Németh (2013, pp. 59-61), “apparently two types of grave coins can be distinguished. Charon’s obol⁶ (Grabka, 1953; Stevens, 1991) called *δανάκη*⁷ or *viaticum*⁸ is one category,

⁵ For a discussion about coexistence of religions and cults in Maresha see N. Belayche, “Cults in Contexts in the Hellenistic and Roman Southern Levant: The Challenge of Cult Places”. In O. Tal and Z. Weiss (Eds.) *Expressions of Cult in the Southern Levant in the Greco-Roman Period* (Turnhout, 2017), pp. 3-21.

⁶ Although Archaeology shows that the myth reflects a real custom, the deposition of coins with the dead was not widespread or confined to a single coin in the mouth of the deceased. At many burials, inscribed sheet metal tablets or Exonomia take the place of the coin, or gilt crosses during the early Christian period. The presence of coins or a treasure trove of coins at German ship burials suggests a similar concept.

⁷ *Danake* or *danace* (Greek: δανάκη) was a small silver coin from the Persian Empire, equivalent to the Greek obol, and circulated between the polis of the East. It was later used by the Greeks in other metals (see Frey, 1917, p. 60; Bivar, 1993, p. 635). 2nd century A. D. Greek grammarian, lexicographer and sophist Julius Pollux refers to the name *danikê* (still, *danakê* or *danikon*) as being a Persian coin (see in Cunningham, 1881, p. 167).

⁸ In Latin, Charon’s obol is often called *viaticum*, or “sustenance for the journey”; the placement of the coin in the mouth was also explained as a seal to protect the soul of the deceased or prevent him from returning. Ian Morris (1992, p. 106) presents a skeptical discussion about “who pays the boatman?” in it, he argues that “the coins may have paid the boatman, but it was not all that they paid”. Keld Grønder-Hansen (1991, p. 215) goes so far as to state that “there is very little evidence in favor of a connection between the Charon myth and the practice of the coin of death”, but the main point is that the term “Charon’ obol” belongs more to the myth’s discourse and literature, than the archaeological discipline itself.

whereas a mint of apotropaic function is the other one". This author states that, if there is no detailed description of the circumstances of the deposition of coins in a burial, it is impossible to understand and infer about the real function of these small objects. Therefore, coins from several other excavations, which were deposited for apotropaic purposes and functions, were often interpreted as *viatica* (Németh, 2013, p. 59).

According to Németh (2013, p. 59), in addition to the lexicographers' notes, Plutarch stated that the "δανακή (Charon's obol/*viaticum*) was put into graves and it was used as a kind of payment to help the deceased cross the swamp of Acherusia⁹". In the same manner, a text from Strabo (Strabo, VIII 6, 12; Németh, 2013, p. 60) says: "the word ναυλον refers to the fare of the vessel". Németh (2013, p. 60) stated that: "(...) Hesychios writes that it had to be put into the mouth of the dead. A fragment of Callimachus calls this coin πορψυνιον, since it facilitated the crossing through Acherusia".

Sylvia Alfayé, reflecting on the differences between *viaticum* and objects deposited with an apotropaic function, examined some nails found in a funerary context (they would have been used to secure the furniture of graves), and conjectured about the apotropaic component that these objects could come to contain.

The researcher realized in a "detailed chart that burials with nails often contained coins as well" (Németh, 2013, p. 61). Alfayé (2010) claimed that, in the case of finding several coins that were not located in the mouth of the dead, these objects were probably intended to serve as amulets and not as *viaticum* (pp. 430-438)¹⁰. From Figure 4, we can see the sketch of a ceramic vase, two nails, two coins¹¹ and a lamp found in the Roman cemetery of Pithekússai (small island located in the Italian Peninsula). In it, Alfayé illustrates the objects found in a Roman tomb in the central part of the Empire. We believe that Alfayé's observations can be extended to the eastern part of the Roman Empire, especially to Roman Palestine, our main geographical interest in this text.

⁹ Acherusia, in Greek mythology, was the name given to several lakes and swamps, also to the several rivers that were called as Acheron. The lake that gave rise to this belief was Acherusia in Thesprotia where the Acheron river flowed (Thucydides I. 46; Strabo, VII, p. 324). Other lakes and swamps with the same name were considered to be a connection with the underworld. Among them are: Hermione in Argolis (Pausanias II, 35. § 7), Heraclea in Bithynia (Xenophon Anab, VI, 2. § 2; Diodorus Siculus xiv, 31, Cumae (Pliny the Elder. *HN*, III, 5; Strabo, V. p. 243), and the Memphis (Diodorus Siculus, 96). Open content. In: Wikipedia: the free encyclopedia. Available at: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Acherusia>, accessed: April 8, 2019.

¹⁰ In an interesting study by Ľivn̄ Michal entitled "Coins in Graves as Reflection of Social and Spiritual Culture", he sought to analyze coins that were found in tombs of the 11th and 12th century in region of Moravia. This is another context, but it is interesting to exemplify the archaeological method used to arrive at the conclusions he reached. He found, most of the time, the coin in the palms of the dead (26%) or in that position, for which they could get out of the hands (15-20%). No relationship between coin position and sex, age, position or orientation of the dead has been proven (Michal, 2009, p. 116).

¹¹ The anthropological perspective on the notion of value in the Ancient world shows us that the connection between the human and the divine has been occurring since time immemorial and that metal has always been a link between them. The man offered metal to the gods, at first raw, then manufactured: rings, weights, spears, arrowheads, and finally coins. This symbolic exchange can be seen in the various archaeological finds both on the basis of temples and in burials (since the dead, in many cultures, acquire divine status). What we are trying to imply here is that the act of depositing coins to the dead or to the gods is beyond the practical and economic meanings generally observed, reaching other values such as magic, mythic and symbolic, which are linked to the metal itself, among other things, a heritage that began in prehistoric periods and that echoed in both the Greek and Roman world.



Figure 4. Funerary objects: ceramic vase, two nails, two coins and a lamp. Burial 110 (Drawing by Denise Dal Pino, adapted from J. Rodríguez Corral, from Buchner e Ridgway, 1993, board CXI. Cf. Alfayé, 2010, p. 430).

Coins as Amulets

The amulets were called *peripta* or *periammata*, and meant “linked things”. John Chrysostom states that superstitious people used to wear coins of Alexander the Great as *peripta* or amulets¹² (John Chrysostom, *Ad Illuminandos Catechesis*, II, 52, https://medieval.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/catalog/work_2642).

The use of coins as phylacteries¹³ was widespread, not only in the Classical period, but also in Late Antiquity and the Byzantine period. In addition to the role of coins linking the worlds of men and gods mentioned above, many people believed that they were effective in portraying powerful images: Victoria, the cross, Christ, the emperor in arms or even Alexander himself (Rowan, 2009, p. 9). Many amulet jewels were produced to look like pieces of money, although they were not coins (Fulghum, 2001, p. 146).

In this sense, presumably, it was the image of the goddess Fortuna that transformed the coin made in A.D. 88/89 into an amulet. The coin I speak of was discovered next to the mast of a ship found next to a ravine, on the banks of river Thames. This is one of the shipwrecks in Blackfriars¹⁴, present day London. Regarding this coin, Rowan (2009, p. 9) stated: “Fortuna, particularly an image of Fortuna carrying a rudder, was no doubt an apt choice to plate beneath a ship’s mast”. Interestingly, the ship is dated one hundred years after the date of the coin, when the object was no longer in circulation. In this case, it is conjectured that the coin was placed exactly in that place of the ship, next to the mast, in a deliberate action of those who longed for Fortuna to protect not only some of the crew on board, but the entire ship (Németh, 2013, p. 62).

A special use of coins as amulets was also observed in Celtic contexts, where a prophylactic text was written on a folded lead slide (see Figures 5 and 6), which contained a coin issued by Trajan.

The lead lamella inscribed in Celtic was found in the Roman cemetery of Lezoux (France) and the coin is dated between A.D. 103 and 111 (Poursat, 1975, pp. 432-434 quoted in Németh, 2013, p. 61). The image on the

¹² Quid vero diceret aliquis de iis, qui carminibus et ligaturis utuntur, et de circumligantibus aerea Alexandri Macedonis numismata capiti vel pedibus?

¹³ Phylactery, comes from the Greek term *phylaktérion*, which basically means “outpost”, “fortification”, or “protection”, which explains the use of these objects as protection or amulet.

¹⁴ The Blackfriars wrecks were a series of wrecks discovered by archaeologist Peter Marsden in the Blackfriars area on the banks of the River Thames in London, England. The wreckage was discovered during the construction of a wall in a ravine along the River Thames. Marsden discovered the first on September 6, 1962, and the next two were discovered in 1970. A later discovery was added to the previous three wrecks, now constituting what is known as the four Blackfriars wrecks. For further details, see G. Milne, “Blackfriars Ship 1; Romano-Celtic, Gallo-Roman or Classis Britannicae?” *The International Journal of Nautical Archaeology*, 25(1996), 234-238. P. Marsden, “Blackfriars Wreck III: A Preliminary Note.” *The International Journal of Nautical Archaeology*, 1(1972), 130-132. And also “Blackfriars Wrecks”, in J. Delgado (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of underwater and maritime archaeology* (New Haven, 1998), pp. 64-66.

coin suggests an amulet: Victoria on the left, holding a palm leaf and lifting a trophy¹⁵. Only a few words of the Celtic inscription have been deciphered, but their interpretation undoubtedly suggests an amuletic function (Németh, 2013, p. 62). It is interesting to note that in this case the amuletic function appears both on the coverslip (which wraps) and on the coin (involved object). This component reinforces the hypothesis of amuletic employment in this context.

According to György Németh (2013, p. 62), an 85 mm by 78 mm silver lamella is also kept at the Aquincum Museum in Budapest. Its casing was found in 1927/1928 in the excavations of the cemetery next to the Aranyhegyi stream, but the lamella was discovered only after 1945, inside a perforated bronze *bulla*¹⁶, 30 mm in diameter (Inv. 30236/3).

The silver lamella was folded nine times, as it was usual in the case of magic silver lamellas, and—quite unusual—a silver coin in the condition of metallic disk was also folded together. It would be an issue of Trajan from A.D. 116¹⁷. Németh concludes, therefore, that the coin does not determine the usual *terminus post quem*, because coins just manufactured may not have been in circulation even for a single day. Thus, Aquincum's silver lamella was manufactured shortly after the coin was made and then placed inside the *bulla*, probably to be used by its owner for years on the neck before being buried with him (Németh, 2013, p. 62).



Figure 5. Lamella found in Aquincum, today Budapest (Drawing by Denise dal Pino. Adapted from Németh, 2005, p. 64).

¹⁵ According to B. Mees in the paper “Gaulish Prayer for Vengeance on a Lamella From Lezoux”, 2010, the coin in question depicts the emperor laureate on the front (his head turned to the right). According to the author, as *s(enatus)* and *c(onsult)* are marked, that is, “coined by the Senate”, the piece would naturally be of low value. Bronze coins were typically issued by the Roman Senate in imperial times, with the highest values being the prerogatives of imperial productions. The back of the coin features the goddess Victoria standing, facing left, holding the palm branch and holding up a trophy. According to Mees, it is an As (RIC II 524). According to the author, consequently, the text of the lamella must be a creation from the end of the first century or the beginning of the second century A.D. and is more or less contemporary with the funerary curse tablet found in L’Hospitalet-du-Larzac (RIG L-98) (Mees, 2010, p. 48).

¹⁶ Roman *bullae* were enigmatic lead objects, sometimes covered with gold leaves, if the family could afford it. A *bulla* was used around the neck as a kind of medallion to protect against evil spirits and forces. *Bullae* were made of different materials, depending on the family’s wealth.

¹⁷ Monetary type 187 from the catalog of Edward E. Cohen according to J. Szilágyi, “Jelentés a Fővárosi Ókortörténeti (Aquincumi) Múzeum kutatásairól és szerzeményeiről az 1945-1948,” *Budapest Régiségei*, 15(1950), 305-321, at 319 quoted in Németh, *Coins* 62.



Figure 6. Drawing by Denise dal Pino, inspired in a drawing by Kotansky (Kotansky, 1994, Nr. 20) (Source: Németh, 2005, p. 64).

Professor Florenzano, a pioneer of numismatic works in Brazil, presents and discusses, in several of her texts, how coins are loaded with magical values¹⁸ (Florenzano, 1995; 1999; 2005). She used to say that coins were “objects impregnated with magic” (Florenzano, 1995, p. 228, *own translation*).

According to Florenzano (1995, p. 229), there are many references to coins used as amulets in antiquity. First of all, we draw attention to coins discovered in archaeological contexts that are perforated. These were sometimes interpreted as “tests” of the quality of the metal. However, these tests were done in different ways, such as scraping the edges of a part or removing small portions of its surfaces. It is much more likely that the regular perforations found on Greek coins, as well as those of the Middle Ages (time when textual documentation is readily available) are intended to hold the coin close to the neck, ankle, or wrist (Gorini, 1978). We can certainly extend these Greek characteristics of coins to Roman period coins.

In the last part of my text, I would like to go a little deeper into the theme of coin iconography (I remember that we have already covered the iconography of a coin with the goddess Fortuna and another with the goddess Victoria and a trophy). I believe that it is possible to analyze coins found in archaeological contexts to understand some magical situations that involve this small object—as we mentioned earlier—and I also believe that it is possible to study coins as amulets from the iconographic analysis of this object. Here, I will use the following example: The appearance of snakes in the coins of the Roman city is known as Tiberias, which was in the region of Galilee.

A struck coin of Trajan’s government brings an interesting representation of Hygieia (Smith, 1873), the goddess of health, sitting on a rock, feeding a snake with a *phiale* (Grummond & Simon, 2006; Tsetschladze, 2001; Taylor, 2008; Ammerma, 2002)¹⁹. Take a look at the currency below (Figure 7); a fountain flows from the rock (Goodenough, 1965, pp. 52-54). This coin symbolically represents the hot springs of Tiberias, whose healing properties were famous in the Ancient world.

¹⁸ As an example, I quote M. B. B. Florenzano, “Notes on the Representation of Monsters on Greek Coins,” *Revista do Museu de Arqueologia e Etnologia* (1995), pp. 223-234; M. B. B. Florenzano, “Notes on the Imagery of Dionysos on Greek Coins,” *Revue Belge de Numismatique CXLV* (1999), pp. 37-48. Also, M. B. B. Florenzano, “Coins and Religion: Representations of Demeter and Kore-Persephone on Sicilian Greek Coins,” *Revue Belge de Numismatique et de Sigillographie CLI* (2005), pp. 1-29.

¹⁹ Also called *Patera* (there is no significant distinction between the two terms).



Figure 7. Coin struck at the time of Trajan. Date: A.D. 108-109. Obverse: Trajan's bust on the right. Reverse: Hygieia sitting on a rock in the right, feeding a snake with *patera* (Source: Meshorer, 1985, p. 78; Porto, 2007, p. 277).

Tiberias (also known as Hammat Tiberias) is mentioned as a medicinal spring in textual sources from the 1st century A.D., as in the writings of Pliny (Pl. *NH*, V. 71) and Josephus (*War*, II. 614; *War*, IV. 11; *Ant*, XVIII. 36; *Life*, 85).

These historical sources could be promoting an imperial discourse, in line with the political instrumentalization of these coins (note that the Roman emperors were also represented in this iconographic ensemble, almost always in the front) to draw people's attention, highlighting the possibility of bathing in the healthy waters of Hammat Tiberias. Jewish writings also mention the hot springs of Tiberias and their medicinal properties. The Jewish book *Midrash Esther Rabbah* reports that Shim'on bar Yohai said: "Come, let us dive into the medicinal sources of Tiberias. They then went to seek health" (Meshorer, 1985, p. 35).

Shulamit Miller (2011, p. 9) stated that Roman coins made in Tiberias carry images symbolizing the springs of Hammat. The coins, issued by Trajan and Commodus, display the image of the goddess Hygieia, daughter of Asclepius, feeding a snake while resting on a stone surrounded by bubbling water; clearly representing natural springs. Coins issued by Heliogábalo depict Hygieia and Asclepius holding snakes and facing each other.

Is there a connection between snakes as healing creatures and springs as healing places? The Arameans referred to the "water of life" as "snake" (Albright, 1920, p. 284). The life-giving water emerges from the ground as a source. Snakes also emerge from the soil (Golding, 2013, p. 161).

Campbell, analyzing the strength and performance of snakes, states that "but the serpent, too, is a lord of waters. Dwelling in the earth, among the roots of trees, frequenting springs, marshes, and water course, it glides with a motion of waves" (Campbell, 1976, p. 10 quoted in Golding, 2013, p. 162).

Thompson's (1903) comments that water in ancient Mesopotamia was believed to have a purifying quality and was sprayed on the sufferer at the end of an enchantment ritual.

Thompson (1903) also mentioned that water symbolized the god Ea, which, from what we know, had the form of a serpent monster (Thompson, 1903; Golding, 2013, p. 162). The scholar W. A. Jayne (1962, p. 119) believes that Ea was the proxy of the healing qualities associated with springs.

The healing connection between water, the underworld and snakes are best illustrated in the information provided by Van Buren (1934, p. 64 quoted in Golding, 2013, p. 162). One of the meanings of Ningizida's name is thought to be "healed in the underworld with the Water of Life existing there".

This epithet incorporates a serpent deity with chthonic nature, water and healing. Van Buren (1935-1936, p. 54 quoted in Golding, 2013, p. 162) believed that the chthonic nature of snakes is what made people believe in their powers of “life and death, healing or destruction”.

In the iconographic representation of this coin we can see that the snake is connected with a magical healing power in an oriental tradition linked to water deities. And a Greek and Roman tradition can be connected by evoking Hygieia, daughter of Asclepius, gods related to health, in the context of the Greek and Roman presence in Galilee, more specifically in Hammat Tiberias. In this case, the snake represented on these coins was designed as an amulet that would protect its owner from any diseases and health problems of any kind.

Final Considerations

It was our goal in this article that we have tried to present some concepts for magic in the Ancient world, amulets and apotropaic elements. We have seen that apotropaic magic has two aspects inherent to its essence: tutelary (protective) and prophylactic (preventive) practices.

We have observed as an example of the archaeological finds in Maresha’s burials, which, according to Esther Eshel, are cultic in their nature; they would be amulets, for cultural purposes, linked to the notions of fertility, apotropaism, and health protection.

In the sequence, we have pointed out the differences between two-coin functions found in burials, next to the dead: the Charon’s obol, also known as *viaticum*, on the one hand, and the coins buried with the dead, but which should have an apotropaic function, on the other hand.

Coins were used as amulets (*peripta*). We saw how the power derived from the metal implies in the choices involved in manufacturing these small and important objects. We also have seen how the images contained therein can generate or strengthen the bond between gods and mortals; since the images portrayed in them had such a protective force.

We also have discussed about coins that were found surrounded by lead and silver lamellae in funerary contexts. The case in question was observed in the city of Lezoux, in France, and the coin was dated to the beginning of the 2nd century A.D. An interesting factor in this finding is that this coin had not yet images on either side; the coin was placed there even before it was ready for commercial circulation.

We could see that studies believed that perforations in coins were often interpreted as holes to test the quality of the metal. This interpretation does not proceed since tests were usually done in different ways, such as scraping the edges of a piece or removing small portions of its surfaces. Today, the most accepted interpretation is that these perforations would serve as adornments, ornaments on people’s necks, ankles or fists, on the one hand, or, on the other, they were exposed in these places for the purpose of protection, very directly associated with magical functions.

Finally, we have presented and discussed a coin produced in Tiberias, Galilee, which contains on its back (tails) the goddess of health Hygieia sitting on a rock, feeding a snake; you can see water bubbles represented around the rock where Hygieia is. These are the thermal springs of Hammat Tiberias. We were able to observe that the serpent is linked to magical healing power in the Mesopotamian tradition, on the one hand, while the presence of Hygieia, daughter of Asclepius in the region, is an inheritance of the Hellenistic tradition in the place and reaffirmed by the Romans, on the other. The bearer of this coin believed that all these protective iconographic signs would keep his health intact.

With this article, we have sought to show that, among many things, coins in the Ancient world could have had functions and natures that surpassed their economic sense—a premise so easily observed today—and that they succeeded, either by the power of metal, by the strength of mythologies, by virtue of iconography, be part of very many aspects of the lives of people who lived in such distant periods of our time.

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