A history of amulets in ten objects

Abstract

What are amulets? How are they situated in the larger narrative of European healing? Varied and complex objects, amulets present both challenges and opportunities for historians and museums alike. Yet an examination of these often-overlooked items within a medical context can provide significant information about cure and protection over different times and geographies. This article analyses ten amulets from the Science Museum collection, and asks what we can learn from exploring these objects’ material features and varying functions. It argues for a re-consideration of amulets from their categorisation by nineteenth- and twentieth-century collectors and classification by modern museums, to their recognition as a significant part of the history of healing.

Keywords

Amulets, collecting, Europe, healing, history, material culture, medicine, museums, objects

Introduction – a hare’s foot and a Biliken

On his way home from running errands one morning in January 1665, Samuel Pepys stopped to buy a hare. Pepys was a Member of Parliament and administrator of the Navy, and is perhaps most famous for keeping a diary for almost a decade during his younger life. A few weeks earlier, despite ‘very cold weather’ he had celebrated a phase of good health, unsure whether to attribute it to his daily pill of turpentine, the fact that he had ‘left off the wearing of a gowne’, or simply his ‘hare’s foot’. Yet this good health did not last. The new year brought burning, pimples and pricks, bladder problems, headaches and ‘a great deal of pain’ to Pepys’ body (Pepys; Wheatley (ed.), 1893). [1] On this January morning, however, he had run into an acquaintance at
Westminster Hall – Sir William Batten, Member of Parliament and surveyor to the Navy (Peyps, Latham (ed), 2003, p xlv).

Batten had given Peyps medical advice regarding his latest ailment, a most painful bout of colic, for which he showed Peyps the mistake he had made with the hare’s foot and guaranteed the perfect modification to his remedy. Originally, the foot had not been cut properly, and ‘hath not the joint to it’; this was where the problem lay.

Eager to try anything to alleviate his swollen belly and ‘grievous of wind’, Peyps handled Batten’s correctly cut hare’s foot, and noted in wonder:

[Batten] assures me he never had his cholique since he carried it about him: and it is a strange thing how fancy works, for I no sooner almost handled his foot but my belly began to be loose and to break wind, and whereas I was in some pain yesterday and ‘t other day and in fear of more today, I became very well, and truly I cannot but impute it to my fresh hare’s foot.

The next day, having obtained a new animal and taken Batten’s advice, Peyps was finally convinced: ‘To my office till past 12, and then home to supper and to bed, being now mighty well, and truly I cannot but impute it to my fresh hare’s foot.’

One thing was clear; the hare’s foot had worked. Peyps was cured of colic.
This object is not unfamiliar to us. This particular hare’s foot, which forms part of the Science Museum’s amulet collection, is originally from Norfolk and dated 1870–1920, but hare’s and rabbit’s feet can still be bought as ‘lucky charms’ and are widely available on the internet.

Popular literature similarly continues to reference the use of these items; Scientific American published an article on ‘What Makes a Rabbit’s Foot Lucky’ in 2011 (D’Costa, 2011). Such objects remain a part of popular culture – that is, part of recognised cultural traditions – over three hundred years after being employed by Pepys. Yet we can observe a shift in function. In Pepys’ world, the various elements that constituted sickness and health were broad and wide-ranging. Illness, like health, could be affected by an extensive range of things from an imbalance of the bodily humours, environmental factors such as sleep, food, emotions and exercise, supernatural or preternatural forces, and even the stars.

Whilst Pepys sometimes consulted learned medical practitioners, the variety of people from whom he could seek counsel was extensive. In this case, he took the advice of his friend Sir William Batten.

Pepys’ story is part of a larger narrative of healing in which learned medicine, religion, astrology, magic, fate and fortune all played a role. As part of healing, objects could be invested with power from one or more of these various sources, and employed to cure or protect. These objects have often
Protective potency, and demonstrate the wide spectrum of healing.

Temporally and materially distinct, the hare’s foot and the Luna Park Billiken are nevertheless united by their curative and to the person who possessed it. Evidently, it had been considered important enough to be kept. Thus while culturally, luck/happiness (‘I smile at you bad luck can’t harm you’).

Inscription upon our second object, the park’s token:

1908. The Billiken, known as ‘God of Things as They Ought To Be’ was said to bring the customer luck, indicated by the

As a ‘Billiken’, a creature devised by an American artist who reportedly saw the mysterious figure in a dream and patented it in our first amulet, the hare’s foot, an amusement park opened in Paris. As part of their brand which objects are situated, as well as the objects themselves. For instance, around 250 years after Pepys cured his colic with

which function a variety is valuable, as it can tell us a great deal about the practices and cultures in

have changed from antiquity to today. What, then, is the defining feature which makes an object an amulet? The answer to this

Evidently, amulets cannot be easily and simply defined, in part because the ways in which they have been used and understood

claims are worn about the person to avert evil or ensure prosperity; an amulet’ (OED, 2018, ‘amulet’)

Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford has implied a semantic similarity between ‘amulets’ and ‘charms’, noting that an amulet is defined by the

varies, ‘charm’ is often used synonymously with ‘amulet’, whilst ‘talisman’ features less frequently. For instance, the Pitt Rivers

how

Y et within their own contexts, this functional complexity has not detracted from the items’ curative or protective effects. The

been called amulets, historically and today, although our interpretation of them has changed over time. The healing

Horniman Museum, 2017

Pitt Rivers Museum, 2017

OED, 2018, ‘amulet’

Skeimer, 2006, pp 6–7)

mained as
did

S i t u m e g a r d e s j e t e p o r t e r a i b o n h e u r

[10]

[9]

[185]
The reasons for this anachronistic categorisation could be multifarious. As discussed, objects such as hare's feet do not align with negative connotations being formed. Provenances and functions, undermining the fact that they were legitimate items within their own contexts, and leading to subjectivity afforded to these objects. However, to class amulets in this way disregards their disparate and diverse practices with superstition. Indeed, there seems to be a tendency to group anything vaguely esoteric, supernatural or having healing power can be denigrated and trivialised. One common manifestation of this is the connection of amulets and their healing. As such, they often have their mysterious apotropaic values highlighted and sensationalized, while their fundamental purpose, as assumptions are made about the power and value of objects; a trend applicable to too, often erroneously refer to Pepys' practice of carrying his 'lucky hare's foot'. This hare's foot from the Science Museum's collections is recorded as an amulet employed 'for cramp'.

We do not yet have a full history of the hare's foot. It may be that this object has been affected by historical changes and cultural discontinues hidden by the passage of time. Yet whether vague semantics or functional progression, the hare's foot also epitomizes the modern tendency to regard to today as 'amulets'.


Figure 2

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.15180/191103/010

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To label something as prophylactic, an item 'against' a particular affliction exemplifies typical amulets. Yet where once healing and amulets went hand in hand, modern discussions tend to treat them as distinct. Labeling certain objects as 'amulets' questions their power to work, and when these items and their potency are challenged, they are 'othered'.

Through this tendency to infer an item's power, a great level of subjective meaning is attributed to objects that are similarly ascribed protective functions. Historians,
A variety of amulets from different cultures and time periods are shown as real, potent facets of healing— even

But this aspect of study is crucial for

Other articles

(20) Research
limited temporal trajectory allowing for a closer study. Due to the remits of this article and the fact that many non-Western objects have different histories and contexts, European items form the focus of the examination. In what follows, I will demonstrate what these ten amulets can show us about changes and continuities in European healing from the early modern period until the present day.

Component DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.15180/191103/002

A gold angel

Around the same time that our first object was used by Pepys, a healing practice similarly drew upon hidden powers was taking place. The disease was known as 'scurvy' or 'King's Evil', and its remedy was based on the notion that monarchs had the power to heal by touch. This 'Royal gift of healing' had been a tradition in England and France since the eleventh century, and continued for around 700 years (Lindemann, 1999, pp 80–1; Ettlinger 1939, p 161; Toyne, 1950).[22]

Whilst centred on the invisible haptic powers of the sovereign, in the early modern period (around 1500–1750) tangible material also played a central role in this cure. This object – our third amulet – was a metal coin, usually gold and often called an angel, strung through with a ribbon and placed around the sufferer's neck after he or she had been touched, as 'A Token of his Sacred Favour, and Pledge of his best desire for them'.[23]

Figure 3

© Science Museum / Science & Society Picture Library

A amulet Three – Gold angel, object number A 641050

DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.15180/191103/011

This particular example was gifted by Charles I, on the throne between 1634–49.[24]

The theory behind this curative practice was clear; it was the royal touch that held the curative power. Yet the reality differed. Testimonies were common in early modern texts (whether medical or otherwise) and were almost always ordered according to the characters' rank.[25]

As such, primary texts discussing the 'King's Evil' including John Browne's Adenocoi radologia written in the later seventeenth century are littered with first-hand accounts of those who, upon losing their gold coin, were re-inflicted with the illness and only recovered once the material process was repeated, or the original coin was found. Whilst Browne's scepticism for the gold forming an effective part of the cure is evident, the examples he provides are nonetheless carefully selected by people 'of Quality' – esquire, 'honoured' doctors, members of Cambridge colleges, knights, and those of respected social standing:[26]
On Thomas Costland, (as another remark of His Majesty's favour) living near Oxford, and having many Strumous swellings about his neck, for which he had been touched and cured; but upon leaving off his gold, his swellings seized him afresh: the gold being new strung, and put again about his neck, his swellings suddenly abated, and he to his dying day continued ever after in health, without any appearance of relapse.
The Royal Gift of Healing

© Welcome Collection

Charles II touching a patient for the King's Evil (sarcoid) surrounded by courtiers, clergy and general public. Engraving by R. White.

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.15180/191103/012

For one so careful to disregard the sole power of the coin, it is interesting that Brown provides a multitude of personal
examples of the cure only working if the gold remained in contact with the body, eagerly and fervently noting the correspondent or patient's high social status as if to legitimize the use of and belief in the material facet of this cure. Moreover, Brown's very impetus for writing this treatise—in part to argue that gold was not the essential or most important part of the remedy—indicates the widespread fervour of this very belief.

He would not needed to argue with such ardour if not vexed by the weight of power given to the gold in this cure for scrofula. What this amulet tells us is that despite the elaborate nature of the ceremony, those from the lowest to the highest strata of society made the journey to be healed, were granted audience with the monarch, and given a gold token. This was a disease where an object played an undeniably crucial part of a process of healing, universal across social rank and irrespective of wealth.

Perhaps most importantly, this gold angel exemplifies two important interconnected notions about the power of amulets—the significance of their situation, and their important relationship with the corporeal. Just like Pepys' use of the hare's foot, and like the Luna Park Billiken around 250 years later, the gold angel was efficacious only when kept on the body.

Figure 5
© Science Museum / Science & Society Picture Library

A mulet Four – Caul in envelope, object number A132443
DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.15180/191103/013
Component DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.15180/191103/003

A caul, a whelk shell and hag-stones

Like the gold angel, medals, coins and other objects made from metals have often formed amulets, probably in large part due to their inherent portability and durability.

Yet the Science Museum collections show that amulets could consist of a great variety of materials, whether human, animal, vegetable or mineral, durable or fragile. Just like the hare's foot, the efficacy of some amulets depended on the inherent potency of the material. For a later and materially varied example of this, let us turn our attention to our fourth amulet—carefully preserved caul.

A tissue-like membrane enclosing the fetus in the womb, a caul is occasionally found around the child's head at birth. Through time and across geographies, this object has been considered curatively and protectively potent simply due to its inherent and symbolic materiality (Roud, 2006, pp 71-2).

Those born with the caul in nineteenth and twentieth-century England were considered immune from drowning, with sources...
reporting incidence in which, if the caul was kept safe, the child to whom it belonged was spared from a watery death (Muir, 1995, pp 27–8; BA, 1950; Hole, 1957; Tongue, 1965).

This example from the Science Museum is ‘regarded as lucky’, a widespread belief.

If the caul was sold, its potency transferred to the buyer. Notices in newspapers and ‘dock-side shop windows’ abound advertising this popular amulet; in 1835, the London Times marketed ‘a Child’s Caul to be disposed of, a well-known preservative against drowning, &c., price 10 guineas’ (Moore, 1891, p 157; Round, 2006, p 72). Others made direct appeals; in 1920, around the time from which this example is dated, one notice read: ‘sailors will still buy caulss when they can, and have been known to give as much as £20 for one…no ship that contains a caul will sink at sea’ (Hole, 1957, pp 412–13).

Figure 6 © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Locket containing a caul

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.15180/191103/014

This material method of prophylaxis was long-standing. Seventeenth-century physician and polymath Sir Thomas Browne recorded the knowledge of the caul’s power since antiquity, stating that in the life of Antonius this ‘natural cap’ was sold by midwives for their advantageous effects (Browne, 1671, pp 314–5). Browne similarly provides evidence of the caul’s potency in his own lifetime. Whilst doing so with contempt, noting that ‘great conceits are raised of the involutio or membranous
covering, commonly called the Silly-how, Brown nevertheless records how this object was 'preserved with great care, not only as medical in disease, but effective in success, concerning the Infant and others' (Brown, 1671, pp 314–5; Muir, 1995, pp 27–8).

At the same time, Sir John Offley's will recorded a bequest to his 'loving daughter'; 'one jewel done all in golden enamel wherein is a caul that covered my face and shoulder when I first came into the world' (Hackwood, 1924). Unlike the durable angel, the caul needed protection, and caults were therefore preserved in varying ways. Just as the Science Museum example is safeguarded within an envelope, Offley's sample was incorporated in jewellery, a similar example of which can be seen in Figure 6, a locket containing a caul from the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, dated 1597.

Whatever the method of preservation portability seemed pivotal when remembering amulets' fundamental relationship with the body. The caul also provides us with an example of another common feature of amulets—that they were often rarities. Throughout history, children born with a caul have been so infrequent as to be considered important; in the twenty-first century, they are known to occur in less than one in eighty thousand births (Crawford-Mowday). Thus whilst the caul was inherently potent due to its prophylactic capacity, it was also invested with value as a rare object, thereby increasing its desirability as an amulet.
The worth of uncommon and exceptional items had long been recognised. In the Renaissance, "nature's jokes" were often collected in the form of flowers, sea horses, fossils, giants, unicorn's horns, loads stones, zootypes and of course shells and stones (Findlen, 1990, pp 292–3; p 303). "Rich elements of the quotidian" such as shells were revered, and material irregularities were recognised as "sophisticated deceptions played out by nature in her leisure" (Findlen, 1990, pp 302–3). Exercising our fifth amulet – this whelk shell – the reversed spiral forms the focus of attention, and the description draws attention to its quality as a rarity.

Reportedly carried to "promote good health" by a fish porter in Billingsgate, London (1850–1920), this type of amulet does not appear frequently in museum collections or among literary references, and so is perhaps an example of an item with less popular renown, yet with more personal value to the owner. Indeed, Lovett noted the "mascots" carried by soldiers in the First World War, which included a "left-handed" whelk shell. The word "mascot" was used here to denote an object with a strong personal link between the luck-bringing and its owner (Lovett, 1925, pp 10–15, 18, 30, 34, 41–3, 70–2; 'Mascot', in Simpson and Round, 2003).
Why did the Billing Gate fish porter value this rare whelk shell? Whilst we cannot be certain, objects such as this were anomalies, not in accordance with the established order and laws of the world, and have often attracted human curiosity.

As such, many rarities and wonders of nature such as this whelk shell could be imbued with value and potency. Access to these kinds of objects was restricted by their very scarcity, and they therefore carried a great weight both in terms of social and healing power. The owner of a rare object like this could possess and control that power, and had the capacity to monopolise it (Daston and Park, 1998, p 81).

Figure 8
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A mulet Six – Hag stones, object number A666087
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.15180/191103/016

The same trend can be seen in our sixth object, this similarly natural amulet recorded as ‘eleven stones with natural holes, threaded on wire, hung at head of bed as charm against nightmare’.

Whilst the specific origins of their power remain unclear it is evident that these stones formed with organic irregularities, were known to have intrinsic potency, with examples of their use recurring all across Europe for hundreds of years (Roud, 2006, p 438).

In England this practice is evident from around the seventeenth century, yet sources show that the belief in the stones’ power was already renowned by this time. The use of hollow stones was recorded by Pliny in Natural History, 77 BCE, in which he records ‘a sort of egg in great repute… called “the serpent’s egg”’ (Pliny, 77 BCE, Book XXI). Certain sources cite this object as functionally equivalent to the ‘hag-stone’, and materially they are the same.

Termed ‘ephialtes’ in the early modern period, Sir Thomas Browne noted of this nocturnal affliction: ‘what natural effects can reasonably be expected, when to prevent the ephialtes or nightmare we hang up a hollow stone in our stables.’

The stones had two main uses but protected against the same affliction, in which a witch or hag was believed to torment the sufferer at night. The patient could be human or equine. When horses were found ‘sweating, exhausted and frightened’ in the morning, it was a common notion that they had been subject to nocturnal terror, often known as being ‘hag-ridden’. Similarly when humans suffered the ‘nightmare’, this did not simply signify a bad dream but a terrifying affliction in which a colossal weight could be felt on one’s chest (Ettlinger, 1939, p 152; Roud, 2006, pp 225; 437).

These hollow stones (thus often known as ‘hag-stones’) were believed to prevent the nocturnal suffering for both beings. Although not
apparently requiring any material alteration or preparation to render them efficacious, such stones were often used by being strung on a thread and hung in close proximity to the body in need, in stables or by beds (Grose, 1781, pp 57-8; Round, 2006, p 438).

The human cauld, animal whelk shell and the mineral 'hag-stones' demonstrate the material variability of amulets. Yet the three objects are further united by one important facet of value: their status as rarities. These marvels of nature help us to understand an important quality sought in curative and protective objects, and demonstrate that their knowledge and use was significant throughout society. Even if not prescribed within learned medicine, these amulets formed an important facet of healing. These rare, prized anomalies of nature were imbued with protective and/or curative powers, and belief in their use endured social, cultural and temporal changes.

Component DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.15180/191103/004

An astrological sigil

Whilst the value and potency of the amulets we have encountered so far lay in their very form and matter, others functioned due to the way they had been materially modified. Evidence for this lies most clearly in objects inscribed with symbols, words and pictures. Amulet number seven is a circular metal disc known as a 'sigil', invested with power due to the inscriptions made upon its surface.

Whilst this object is dated 1850-1920, there is no firm evidence of its provenance, although designs for amulets like this date from at least the sixteenth century.

The manufacture of sigils enabled the power of the stars to be represented and harnessed materially, for curative and protective benefit.

Engraved with images or words, these amulets were often worn on the body – indicated in this example by a suspension hole (Kassel, 2005a, pp 43-57, esp. pp 43-4; Roos, 2008 pp 271-288).

Figure 9

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Amulet Seven – Sigil, object number A657575

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.15180/191103/017

In early modern England, two main medical theories prevailed. The predominant theory (based on principles passed down from Galen, 130-210 AD) decreed that the balance of a person's four humours was key to preserving health and understanding disease. The opposing Paracelsian theory dictated that disease was a result of impediment to the 'spirits' of the body. Within both theories of medicine, the malign powers of the stars and planets could cause disease, and a physician skilled in astronomy and astrology could identify the source of illness and thereby devise a necessary remedy (Kassel, 2005b, pp 6-8).
example of one.

control one's own fate. Whilst there have historically been various ways in which this may provide a way, an amulet created and used to propagate good fortune (or prevent misfortune) might attend the common human desire to protect against potentially harmful events, like our fifth object – the 'hag-stones' preserving against nightmares. In a similar way to amulets, some could target specific ills, like our third object – the gold angel that treated King's Evil. Others could employ using astrological power instead uses it in its inscription to draw upon the faculties of fortune and luck.

and symbols) can imbue an object with power. This is similarly true for many different amulets across time and space; our significant items like the sigil demonstrate how material alteration (in this case inscriptions in the form of words, numbers and characters'. Sigils relating to other planets had other specific functions – with him who wore the table of the Sun becoming 'potent and strong, and the stars are made the same, and in the celestial and mathematical world encompassing the influence of planets, stars

so sources with medieval Jewish Kabbalah, aiming to provide technical explanations and procedures for practical magic.

magic. As such, magic tables were attributed to each of the seven planets (as they were known at this time), which could in 'no way be expressed, than by the marks of numbers, and characters' (magic). Described as 'the art, surrounded by Hebrew names relating to Jupiter's numbers.

This sigil, our seventh amulet, expressed and employed the power of Jupiter. Printed on one side are the planet's sign, seal and other way be expressed, than by the marks of numbers, and characters' (magic). Described as 'the art, surrounded by Hebrew names relating to Jupiter's numbers.

This sigil, our seventh amulet, expressed and employed the power of Jupiter. Printed on one side are the planet's sign, seal and other way be expressed, than by the marks of numbers, and characters' (magic). Described as 'the art, surrounded by Hebrew names relating to Jupiter's numbers.

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The wheel of fortune was a well-known concept stemming from ancient philosophy, representing the supposedly un governable nature of fate. In Greek and Roman tradition, the goddess Fortuna (Greek equivalent 'Tyche') had the ability to spin the wheel with the means to change a person's position on it. Under her hand some would suffer misfortune, while others would gain great fortune. A renowned allegory continuing throughout the medieval and early modern worlds, references to fortune's wheel pepper primary literature, from Geoffrey Chaucer in the fourteenth century, 'Thus Fortune guides her wheel, and turns it so, And brings us all from happiness to mourning' (Chaucer; Wright (trans.), 1998; Shakespeare; Hunter (ed.), 2005) to William Shakespeare in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, 'Fortune, good night; smile once more; turn thy wheel' (Chaucer; Wright (trans.), 1998; Shakespeare; Hunter (ed.), 2005). References to the wheel abound in medieval art, from engravings and manuscripts to the great Rose windows in many medieval Gothic cathedrals,
including Beauvais and Amiens in France.

Physical manifestations were even created, a 12th-century French abbot reportedly installing a mechanical wheel of fortune in his monastery, so that ‘his monks might ever have before them the spectacle of human vicissitudes’ (Roberts, 2013; Male, 1962).

Figure 11

© David Dixon

Tympana depicting Destiny and Fortune, copied from Robert Recorde’s Castle of Knowledge (1556), at Little Moreton Hall, Cheshire

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.15180/191103/019

The popularity of the wheel of fortune in popular culture reinforced the wish of some to steer both the consequential and the quotidian occasions of life; or their acknowledgement of life’s inevitable highs and lows. This is shown here in the tympana in a gallery of Tudor manor Little Moreton Hall, Cheshire, which are decorated with plaster depictions of ‘Destiny’ and ‘Fortune’, in direct imitation of those in mathematician Robert Recorde’s Castle of Knowledge (Lake and Hughes, 1995; Angus-Burttworth, 1970; FIGUEIREDO and TRUEHertz, 1988). Many objects have been made specifically to aid ‘good fortune’, as evidenced by our second object, the Luna Park Billiken. Whilst perhaps not manifesting an attempt to control fortune, a physical wheel may have served as a material reminder of one’s powerlessness against one’s fate in the face of God. Our eighth amulet represents a French example, acquired by the Science Museum from a chapel called ‘Notre Dame Du Riolou’ in Brittany, near to St Nicholas-du-Pélem in the north-west corner of France. This is a ‘Roue sain à carillon, dit ‘Roue de Fortune’ – Saint Carillon wheel, called ‘Wheel of Fortune’, dated 1777.

Figure 12
The craftsmanship of this carillon is uncertain, with sources stating that the name 'Alain Le Roux' carved next to the date on the wooden frame relates either to the carpenter's name, or the rector of Botoha (the district encompassing St Nicholas-du-Pélem) from 1583–1638.

Primarily functioning as a musical instrument, carillons have typically been housed in bell towers of churches or municipal buildings, formed of 'at least 23' cup-shaped bells (Nelson, 1980; Rombouts, 2014). Once a widespread feature of churches in France and across Europe, these wheels are said to have originated in Brittany, and according to René Couffon were used during services, baptisms, celebrations, and pardons.

Traditional notes that 'Alain Le Roux's wheel also had therapeutic uses. Apparently offered in ex-voto by parents after their child was healed of muteness, this wheel went on to help other children with speech disorders. Stories record youngsters troubled with verbal ailments who were led to the wheel, where the bells were turned above their heads to promote its curative effects (Héliaès, 1975).

Several concepts operate in conjunction within the oak frame, brass bells and carved brackets of this object. The names by which it has been known are varied and its history is somewhat ambiguous.

Several forms of power are brought together by its manufacture and use; created in the form of a musical instrument, it was accorded religious status, perhaps donated as an ex-voto, and certainly used within a church. A material representation of the perennial wheel of fortune, this object drew upon long-standing beliefs in the capricious nature of fate and man's sole lack of command over it. In combination with the reputed ability to cure certain disorders, and housed within a religious setting, this object had power. An amalgamation of forces integrated to evidence its supposed healing power. But is it an amulet?
Carillon wheels were once common within churches, especially in Brittany. But the situation of this particular 'wheel of fortune' within the Science Museum's amulet collection is questionable. Through exploring the history of the amulet, so far we have identified that these objects have a clear relationship with or proximity to the body, can be materially varied – comprising of mineral, animal or vegetable and inscribed, man-made or natural – and occasionally valued as rarities. Yet most importantly
As described by Pliny since the first century CE, amulets were worn and used for therapeutic, apotropaic or exorcistic benefit. They are invested with the power to heal or protect. Just as the hare’s foot has often been uncritically labeled as lucky, does this wheel of fortune provide an example of an object that has been classed as an amulet because it could not easily be categorized within other collections? In this way, the ‘Alain Lé Roux’ wheel of fortune helps us ask important questions about the position and categorization of amulets within museums today.

In a similar vein, the relationship between amulets and religion is often inconsistent within museum collections. At the Science Museum, many amulets are connected with religion; from objects used by Hindu pilgrims, to Jewish manuscripts, to skull-caps printed with Catholic saints, as well as several items relating to less established religious practices. Votive objects form a significant proportion; also known as ex-votos, these were objects acting as offerings given to a saint or divinity in gratitude, devotion or fulfillment of a vow. Henry Wellcome is credited with having collected five hundred fourth-to-second-century BCE votive offerings alone, with several hundred more votive offerings in the Science Museum collection. Of these, only some are credited as amulets. A similar pattern can be discerned; within the collections of the Pitt Rivers Museum (Oxford), Horniman Museum (London), and British Museum (London) there are several hundred objects classified as votives or ex-votos, yet only a small proportion are also recognized as amulets. Of the votive objects that are not classed as amulets, many seem to be distinctly categorized as religious objects. This group of objects therefore epitomizes the problematic relationship between religion and amulets, highlighting potential mutual exclusivity. Yet votive objects only represent one facet of religious material culture. Religion has undeniably played (and continues to play) an important part in healing, exemplified by amulets from across different centuries, geographies and cultures. It would be foolish to disassociate religion and amulets, when both provide analogous forms of protective and curative power. This symbiotic potency is demonstrated by our ninth amulet.

Figure 14
© Science Museum/Science & Society Picture Library
A amulet Nine – Rabies pendant depicting Virgin and Child, object number A666096
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.15180/191103/022

This is a brass pendant, representing the Virgin and Child on one side, with the depiction of a man threatening a dog with a stick on the other. A suspension loop indicates this amulet, like many others, was efficacious when worn on the body. Another instance of the potency of inscription, this object also draws upon religious power to facilitate its prophylactic benefits,
affording protection against 'bites from mad dogs'.

 Whilst cited as being Italian, 1870–1900, this brass amulet is Spanish.

This is discernible due to the inscriptions on each side stating: 'VIRGEN DE VALDEGIMENA' (obverse) / 'ABOGADA DE LA RABIA' (reverse); the amulet utilising the prophylactic support of the Virgin Mary of Valde Gimena, Spain.

Rabies has been written about for at least four thousand years, with writers in classical antiquity such as Galen, Aristotle, Pliny and Hippocrates lending their own medical theories for its cure and prevention (Taran, 2017). One comparative method of protection was offered by amulets known as 'St Hubert's Keys'. These objects, shaped like nails, were apparently hung on the walls of houses to offer prophylaxes against rabies, or heated and placed on the wound afflicted by a rabid dog as a means of remedy. St Hubert (656–727 AD) was one of several Christian saints said to cure rabies. Examples can be seen in both the Pitt Rivers and Science Museums, and show how – like the pendant depicting the Virgin – religious power was employed to remedy this disease.

Marian protection against rabies is materialised by this amulet. The religious power invested within this pendant is not distinct from the physical devices of imagery, inscription and means of bodily suspension it uses to convey and facilitate its amuletic potency. These different types of healing power were synonymous in the medieval and early modern periods, until those like John Brown – who contended that a gold angel was not a necessary part of the cure for scrofula – argued that they could be divided. The conflict and symbiosis of disparate sources of potency is common within amulets, and is exemplified definitively by our final object.
Our tenth object combines many of the efficacious features of amulets discussed in this article. This is an item thought to protect against the plague, made in Bavaria, Germany in the eighteenth century. Commonly known as ‘brevier’ (Austrian/Bavarian), ‘brevia’ (Latin), ‘briefs’ (English) or ‘brevi’ (Italian), and also by other vernacular expressions such as the Italian ‘lettera di preghiera’ (‘prayer letters’) or Latin ‘charta’ (paper), this group of objects was made formulaically and consisted of various religious or magical components, both man-made and natural (Tyč, 2018).
This brevile, dated 1690–1710, brings together many of the important features of amulets that this article has explored. Its names of saints in each corner perhaps indicating a connection with the named figures (may have been related to a particular pilgrimage site; pieces of bone or hair may indicate personal relic collections, with types of healing power, combining religious potency with elements of magical power. Other objects in the central composite and protective effects in the early modern period, and often used to heal (other materials embedded in the paper demonstrate this further; coral, for example, was recognised for its magical, medical known, at this time, to be effective against the plague, confirming the amulet’s multifunctional nature (see seeds, wax, silk, and perhaps even hair and plant materials. The two Zacharias crosses or ‘suorum quae sanctorum contra daemones’.

The printed text on this particular example from the Science Museum begins: ‘Ettinger, 1965, p. 111.

Instead, the amulet was permanently folded (often in decorated paper cases) and worn on the person (produced in many different countries, ‘brevile’ enjoyed widespread popularity among Catholics in eighteenth-century...
chance, like the sceptical Pepys did with his hare's foot, we too might be pleasantly surprised.

Various social and functional contexts, and their legitimate place in the history of early modern healing. If we give amulets a past. Instead, by exploring their differing powers and values, we can discover not only about the things themselves, but their

or uncritically accept their complexities, but actively engage with them. This article has argued for the dismissal of sources of power, and took various different material forms. Amulets do not have to be considered according to paper evidence important features of illness, health, protection and life that would be lost if we sought answers from texts

found from the analysis of another ten. Yet this article has demonstrated the often-overlooked complexities of amulets, and these are by no means black and white statements. Just as these ten amulets present one history, other narratives could be

together (we need only remember our last two amulets).

distinct elements work in symbiosis in the manufacture and use of an amulet. No single material, feature or source of power is established and perpetuated by the owner, collector, possessor or wearer. Some aligned with religious and spiritual potency; protect a body, animal or home. In other cases, the curative or prophylactic role of an amulet was a secondary function, after; whilst the value of others was determined by their status as rarities. The primary function of some amulets was to heal or

efficacy depended on several components. Like the gold angel, it was to be worn on and kept close to the body it was intended to...

Microcosm of amulets in general, its complexity constitutes its power.
Footnotes

1. More information about Loveett is Cadbury, 2012. For more on Henry Wellcome, see Robert Rhodes James, 1994; Helen Turner, article prevents a detailed discussion of these two collectors; further information can be found. Secondary analysis of http://broughttolife.sciencemuseum.org.uk/broughttolife/people/henrywellcome

2. On magic and superstition, see for instance Michael D. Bailey, 2006.

3. For instance, Museum of Witchcraft object 1709, where the object’s classification as an amulet is specifically


5. The provenance of the appeal “luck” is unknown; instead, the stone was used to protect cattle from disease, and


8. Medicine more generally, see Nancy Siraisi, 1990. For a useful social history of medicine in this period, see Harold Cook,

9. For a recent introduction to early modern English medicine, see Andrew Wear, 2000. For an overview of Renaissance


14. 20 January 1664/5. Pepys, S; Wheatley, H (ed), 1660-9; 1893, found at P Gyford (ed), (accessed 4 April 2018). Whilst the remits of this

15. 1714 esp. pp 6-19.
We also see references in popular literature, most notably Charles Dickens'
put by, If lost she may cry: For ill luck on her will fall. ' A lass if born with a caul in July, will lose her caul & young will die. Every month beside luck comes with a caul If safe caul-piece-of-tissue-like-membrane-in-an-amulet-human-remains

Also known as a mask, baby's veil, silly-how (e) and haly-hood.


Michael Hunter and Anna Marie Roos have noted that coins and medals were often collected as amulets or for cabinets.

2018)
http://recipesandmedicineinearlymoderneapland.com/2014/03/30/the-kings-evil
royal touch: Hope and Fear at KCL; 'The King's Evil',

For more on scrofula, see James F Turrell, 1999, pp 3–36; Marc Bloch, 1973;

For a contemporary example including testimonial, see John Evans, 1651.

See Brown, 1684, pp 138–9; 148–9; 167; 171; 184

number SRP 98 [33571] <3421>.

(Elizabeth I, 1582–1603). For similar examples in other museums, see for instance 'Angel', Museum of London, object

The Science Museum collection is around 1870–1930, encompassing the lives of Welcom, Lovett, and other prominent

monarchical ability to heal 'King's Evil', see Peter Elmer, 2013.

For an example, see Cadbury, 2016.

For instance, Campbell Bonner, 1950; E A Wals Budg, 1961. For an example of amulets in a particular time period, see

collectors who provided objects for the Museum such as Adrienne

the Science Museum collection is around 1870–1930, encompassing the lives of Welcom, Lovett, and other prominent

For instance, Cummins, 2016, pp 164–187, Stefan Münge,

For instance, Campbell Bonner, 1950; E A Wals Budg, 1961. For an example of amulets in a particular time period, see

...
The catalogue notes that this wheel was accorded a 'holy' status and known as 'The Rose of Fortune'.

When the rose is also a wheel, this could symbolise the up and down movement of human life. They may also have a protective and curative objects, amulets, see Rook, 2008.

On coins as magical objects, see Maguire, 1997. On stamping, see Park, 1998. On sigils as items of curiosity, protective

Donald Tyson notes, 'The Kabbalah was to Agrrippa the magic of God'. Classical sources included Pliny the Elder, Ovid,

A griffon ring, although in Collections Online it is called a 'pendant'. Science Museum Group, 2018, 'Circular Metal Pendant',

For a thorough analysis of this practice, see Dent, G, 1964a & 1964b.

The seven 'planets' known at this time were Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, the Sun, Venus, Mercury, and the Moon.

Remains of Gentilism and Judaism

Etlinger, 1939, p 152. For examples in other museums, see Horniman Museum object number 19.106, 'Soldier's hole'.
Welcome Trust Second Fellow at the Science Museum in 2017–18. Her research examines magic and the material culture.

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