

## *Solomonica Magica: Greek-Inscribed 'Solomonic' Amulets from Late Antiquity and Early Byzantium*

Juraj Franek (Department of Classical Studies, Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University)

### 1. Summary

The monograph collates, introduces, and analyses a corpus of 'Solomonic' or 'Holy Rider' apotropaic amulets with Greek inscriptions from Late Antiquity and Early Byzantium (c. 300 – 700 CE), preserved by public institutions and private collections in Northern America, Europe and the Middle-East. Although most of these artefacts are unprovenanced, the available evidence suggests that their production bloomed during the 5th – 7th centuries CE in the workshops of the Syro-Palestine region. Clear attestations for their use in other parts of the Mediterranean show that the 'Holy Rider' amulets were frequently exported and the inscriptions and iconographical motives they display are important witnesses to the complicated intertwining of the many religious traditions of the Late Antiquity.

### 2. Description

The principal aim of the book has been to produce a comprehensive corpus of a well-defined and cohesive group of magical artifacts with recurring epigraphic and iconographic themes that satisfy the following criteria: (a) Greek-inscribed; (b) datable to the period of Late Antiquity and Early Byzantium (c. 300 – 700 CE); (c) exhibiting a clear apotropaic function; and (d) featuring an explicit textual or visual reference to Solomon or Sisinnios, the latter realized commonly, but not exclusively, through the depiction of the 'Holy Rider' spearing a female demon. Over 350 artifacts satisfying these criteria have been collated by the author, including magical gems (ca. 80 items), oblong, leaf-shaped bronze pendants (ca. 180 items), circular 'medallions' (ca. 60 items), rings (ca. 20 items), bracelets (ca. 20 items) and other artifact-types, including pilgrim tokens, buttons, stamps and textual amulets on various material supports (lead, shale, bone). Given the widespread use of the 'Holy Rider' motif in the Mediterranean of Late Antiquity, it would seem arbitrary to limit the material excerpted in the monograph by the criteria introduced above. The author opted for this approach because (a) most of the studied artefacts seem to originate in the workshop of 5th to 7th century Syro-Palestine (unity of origin); (b) the artefacts exhibit a significant overlap in inscriptions and imagery (unity of contents) and (c) whenever these amulets identify the 'Holy Rider' textually, he is consistently introduced as Solomon or Sisinnios (or, indeed, both at the same time). Whenever appropriate, the monograph discusses other attestations of the motif and its parallels, from the 'Thracian horseman' to Bawit murals and Coptic textiles.

The corpus itself is complemented by (a) an introduction outlining the *status quaestionis* and mapping the past ca. 130 years of scholarly research into these amulets, roughly from Schlumberger's 1892 study 'Amulettes byzantines anciens destinés à combattre les maléfices et maladies' to Jeffrey Spier's 2019 paper 'Solomon and Asmodaios on Greco-Roman Magical Amulets and Rings'; (b) a chapter on literary sources for Solomon the Magician and Sisinnios the Demon Hunter (well-covered in the recent decades by Duling, Torijano, Busch, Cosentino, Giannobile, Greenfield and others, but necessary to provide context), together with the exploration of literary sources commenting on the practice of using apotropaic amulets; (c) detailed running commentary exploring the epigraphic and iconographic elements found on the amulets; (d) a short chapter on the 'survival' of selected motifs into the Middle Byzantine amulets; and (e) a set of shorter concluding studies focusing on the archaeological context (in those few precious cases there is any), dating, geographical distribution, regional differences, identification of individual workshops (or even hands); religious identity of users and the contribution the study of these amulets makes to our knowledge of the religious, magical, and sociocultural worlds of the Late Antiquity, most notably in the Syro-Palestine area, where the majority of workshops and users have likely been based.

### 3. Rationale & Key Features

(1) **Modern corpus.** The monograph presents a comprehensive corpus of one of the most common types of apotropaic amulets used in the Mediterranean during Late Antiquity. The corpus features hundreds of new, high-resolution photographs (commissioned or taken personally by the author), which will replace the century-old facsimiles (Schlumberger, Perdrizet et al.) and miniature photomechanical reproductions (e.g., Bonner) that are—for the lack of a better alternative—still being reproduced even in the most recent papers on the topic. The author produced fresh diplomatic editions of Greek inscriptions based on autopsies or new photographs. All Greek texts are translated into English to ensure the accessibility of the material to all interested scholars, irrespective of their linguistic competences. The corpus further introduces dozens of previously unpublished pieces from both private and public collections. Many published amulets whose location has been cited as ‘unknown’ or misattributed have been successfully identified and the author consistently checked in person or with the invaluable aid of curators and registrars the present location of the pieces and their inventory numbers to prevent mistakes in attribution and duplicities—a frequent occurrence even in the more latest scholarly works on the subject.

(2) **Strength in numbers.** The amulets with references to Solomon, Sisinnios and the ‘Holy Rider’ form a cohesive and interconnected group that must be considered in its entirety to achieve best results in their interpretation. Many artefacts suffered considerable damage and their inscriptions are only partly legible, in which case the identification of a better-preserved amulet with the same inscription may serve to safely fill-in the lacunae. The same principle applies in cases of overtly stylized iconographical elements, whose interpretation may be much improved by identifying amulets featuring the same element that is less stylized or simply better preserved. The epigraphic and iconographic building blocks of the ‘Solomonic’ apotropaic amulets are shared across different materials supports and many new insights are gained by considering the extant evidence in its totality. The inscription Σολομῶν λέγει: φύλαξε on a bronze ring from a private collection in München has to be considered together with the inscription Σολομῶν εἶπε: φύλαξε on a magical gem from the Istanbul Archaeological Museum; the iconographic motif of the ‘much suffering eye’, present on dozens of bronze pendants and circular medallions, has to be considered together with the inscription σφραγὶς Σολομῶνος ἔχει τὴν βασκανίαν on a shale amulet from Anemurium etc.

(3) **Multi-disciplinary approach.** To achieve the aims and objectives outlined above, a multi-disciplinary approach is necessary. Producing new editions of Greek texts requires philological competence; the interpretation of the iconography must consider not only earliest Christian art, but other visual traditions as well; archaeological approaches are necessary to evaluate various material supports as well as the context of provenanced finds. It is, however, of paramount importance to understand the apotropaic amulets studied in this monograph not as mere containers of philological, iconographical or archaeological data, but as widely-used, serially-produced prophylactic devices that can provide valuable information about their users and their religious and socio-cultural beliefs and practices.