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Source: *Folklore*, Vol. 53, No. 2 (Jun., 1942), pp. 95-103

Published by: Taylor & Francis, Ltd. on behalf of Folklore Enterprises, Ltd.

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1257559>

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BRITISH CHARMS, AMULETS AND TALISMANS

BY GERALD BROUSSEAU GARDNER

IN the East, Charms, Amulets and Talismans are everyday things used by all. As a rule one does not speak of them to Europeans, who are too stupid to understand, one simply wears them in defiance of all progressive thought. After a life spent in the East, I think I may claim to some comprehension of the ideas which cause such protective means to be believed in and used by nearly all nations.

I have frequently been asked the question "How do you define them and what is the difference between them?"

To reduce them briefly to English terms I define as follows. They are objects specially made or assumed naturally to possess certain powers to avert danger, to protect against disease, to guard against material influences and their accompanying dangers, supernatural influences for evil such as witchcraft and generally to bring luck to their owner. For instance you can get talismans for protection against lead or steel, though I have never heard of one which could avert the visit of a Tax-collector, or undesirable relations. Charms are freely sold in India and China to guarantee success in examinations, to obtain a good job. Though I have not seen their counterparts in Europe, it does not follow they do not exist; my wife tells me that at school, before exams. they always used to bend pins and give them to each other wishing they would get through.

Charms are of two sorts, firstly, objects credited with the powers of which we have spoken already and secondly, a ceremony of some rite or spell. This latter aspect we are not dealing with here. Amulets may be defined as charms small enough to be carried on the person. A third class may be mentioned in those ornaments sold by jewellers, which, strictly speaking, are not charms at all, though they may become so for various reasons.

Objects usually become charms because they are odd or rare, or because they resemble or are connected with some substance which has power. The stone with a hole in it is a good example of the odd or rare. A hole is not natural to a stone in general and it is noteworthy that in districts containing holed-stones such are not taken for charms because they are too common. A once familiar example of this kind of charm was the holed-stone attached to the stable-door key, to protect the horses from molestation and bewitchment by pixies and witches. Holes appear to

have some special virtue of their own, for in this instance cotton-reels have been known tied to the key for lack of the necessary stone. A coin with a hole in it was lucky. In the Men-an-tol stone near Penzance you have an example of the curative stone, through the hole of which people would crawl to rid them of disease.

While touting for fire-watchers the other day I was pleased to find a horse-shoe and two holed-stones hung up over the door of a house I visited. I asked, "Are these for luck?" and was told, "I suppose so, they were there when we came, we've only been here a month; but we've got two holed-stones inside that we picked up ourselves for luck!"

A horse-shoe is a good example of the charm which resembles or is connected with a substance which has power. Some writers assert that its luck is due to its resemblance to the new moon, others that it represents the horns of power, though personally I fancy it is because it is connected with the horse. The old British Corn-Goddess, Cerdwen, was represented as a horse or mare. The theory is held by many authorities that the horses cut in the white chalk of our hill-sides were made in her honour. The Hooden-horse used to be taken out in procession in many country districts and in remote places may still be, though church and town-councils have done their best to suppress it. Nelson always had a horse-shoe nailed to the mast of his ship. The English tabu on eating horse-flesh is probably connected with it. Also, being cold iron may help, the strange iron, that the stone using Old People were afraid of.

For charms to be at their best they should come to their owner either by finding or as a gift with a good thought behind it. My wife's bent pins for instance! I confess I cannot understand why some things should be regarded as charms . . . the heart, for instance. Yet it was a powerful charm in ancient England though now it is used simply as a pattern, or at best a love charm, but in Scotland it was powerful to keep away witches. I have in mind the famous Luckenbooth broaches. Mary, Queen of Scots, always wore one.

If I described the crosses that some people wear as charms I should probably become unpopular, but if crosses are worn without any religious sentiment, purely for luck or to avert bombs . . . well, what else are they? I have one, which appears to be a cross but is more like the Hammer of Thor, which our heathen ancestors wore to obtain luck and power from the Thunder-God.

In the Horniman and Imperial Museums are exhibited many charms that were carried by soldiers and sailors throughout the last war. These include holed-stones, hearts, bits of amber, various tropical seeds, four-

leaved clover, merry-thoughts, the hyoid bone of a sheep (hammer shaped . . . Thor's Hammer?), Mandrake root and ladies' garters.

These charms include the odd and the rare, the substance in the shape of or connected with power. Four-leaf clover is both rare and shaped like a cross, the garters represent the love-gift. It would be interesting to know whether our men in this war carry such protective charms. From the quantities of lucky rabbits' feet sold in Woolworth's it might be deduced that they do. The rabbit is swift and dodges danger, so by sympathetic magic those who carry his foot can hope for the same proficiency . . . in the dodging of bombs and bullets.

All these genuine specimens represent the same scarcely realised idea, that the charm which is received by apparent chance contains the most virtue. Behind it lies the unsuspected theory that some powerful supernatural force prompts the sending of the charm. It may be found, given, or it may be stolen. In the latter case, as in the Luck of Edenhall, it is so placed by the power that it is easily stolen. Or again it may be bestowed as a gift because the receiver has attracted it to himself. To buy it in a shop in the ordinary way would impair it's efficacy but it's attraction for the buyer, if found in some little-out-of-the-way shop, for instance, would, in the first place, be tantamount to finding it, especially if it was bought very cheaply. Horse-shoes that are found by their owner have ten times the power of those acquired in other ways, while one that is bought is useless as a charm.

This rule does not apply to talismans. The maker may be paid for the material used, but the talismans are generally especially made for their owner and will work properly only for him. If found, or stolen, it is true they may work, though in a chancey way, for they have a life of their own and if they do not like the new owner, then woe betide him. The witch-balls one sees so much to-day as ornaments are hung up to avert the Evil-Eye, or over-looking as it is called in many districts. The superstition behind it asserts that the Evil-eye blasts the object it first falls upon. Any object that attracted the eye would extract the evil, preserving the house and its inmates. Eye-Agates and stones like eyes, I believe were used for the same purpose. The marking in the stone resembled an eye and attracted the eye and warded off evil from the wearer.

Probably many of the small jeweller's charms originated in this way. They were striking and attracted attention, also many of them resembled powerful things. For instance, the Lucky Pig is in my opinion, the modern version of Fray's Boar. It was a Saxon belief that the device of a boar on helmet or shield averted sword-cuts. The tiny boot thrown at

weddings may also have the same origin. The belief in precious stones as charms is very old. I think it is because gems were rare or hard to come-by for every-day folk. The notion of their protective capacity is fostered by jewellers, who keep little lists showing which stone should be worn according to birth-date. Scarabs also are worn as luck-bringers, though not to any great extent.

Occasionally flint arrow-heads, mounted in silver and gold are used as charms. Usually these are presumed to be thunder-stones, which protect the wearer against being struck by lightning, because in Scandinavia and Saxon England, stone axe-heads and other queerly shaped weapons were supposed to be thunder-bolts and so capable of inflicting great damage. When I was a child I was told not to be afraid of lightning unless a thunder-bolt fell with it since lightning by itself was harmless. Connected with this theory can be found the superstition that the spot stricken by a bolt was immune from further attack, as lightning was said never to attack or strike in the same place twice. Therefore people collected these flints and used them as lightning-conductors or as protective charms, assuming that the bolt which once has struck could never strike again and could avert danger. Usually, however, the strength of their charm lay in their being kept isolated and undisturbed, so they were hidden in the roof, on tops of beds and cupboards. They were probably connected with the Thunder-god, I suppose, the arrow-heads being his small-arms.

How far this practice went in England it is difficult to say, though that they were regarded as charms is certain. Old writers call them Serpent's tongues (*Clossopetra*) affirming they were worn as amulets against elf-shot. Other writers declare that when mounted in silver they were used to detect poison. I can quite understand that those who assumed them to be adder's tongues would use them to detect poison by sympathetic magic and by a similar process of reasoning they could be used against elf-shot by those in favour of the elf-shot theory, but I should welcome information how they could be efficacious in all these instances. I have a specimen which was thought to be a Thunder-stone by the seller. I believe modern babies no longer have corals, but formerly they were much in use as christening gifts, though the Bishop of Hamburg in 1706 forbade their use because of the superstition in connection with the practice. Amber necklaces are still sold all over the country not only as ornaments but as cures for croup, whooping-cough and asthma. In the past, early Church Fathers fulminated against women who wore amber or frequented the engravers of talismans.

Talismans may be defined as superior kinds of charm, which, instead of attaining to power by resemblance to something powerful, or by attraction to possessor by mere chance, have a mysterious in-dwelling power of their own. Seers may have recognised the presence of this power as a natural element, as in the Coronation Stone, the London Stone or the Luck of Edenhall, but as a rule they are charms especially made for the purpose. They are made for the individual possessor in accordance with the birth-date and deliberately charged with power by rites and ceremonies. Thus the maker must have sufficient working knowledge of astrology to make the calculations, enough craftsmanship to make the talisman itself and knowledge to perform the consecration ceremonies with the will-power to focus and force them to remain in the talisman. If these powers are possessed it seems easy enough to make one if any one wants to try. If the consecration ceremonies have been successfully performed the talisman will glow and if it does not, then the whole performance must be gone through again.

Talismans are usually made for some special purpose, for instance, one designed for protection from disease will be useless to avert gun-shot wounds, one proof against lead and steel would not prevent drowning. While they are all more or less luck-bringers I have not come across general-purpose talismans, because in both East and West they are considered difficult to make and are not so successful because their effect is diffuse and not directional, but I should welcome information on this subject.

It should be stated that if the purpose of the talisman is known it is possible to circumvent it, as in the case of Claverhouse (Bonnie Dundee). He was so charmed against lead and steel that bullets have been seen jumping off his body and ammunition was saved by not firing at him, until a soldier better informed than the rest, charged his musket with a silver button and killed him. A Malay Prince of my acquaintance in much the same circumstances has such a charm. He paid a high price for it and in order to test efficacy before payment had a number procured and fastened them to chickens, emptying both barrels of a shot-gun at each in turn. One chicken was undamaged and for that talisman he willingly paid a good price. His faithful subjects now know that cart-ridges are too costly to be wasted on him.

I have a talisman which I bought in Bournemouth. It was made for a Jupiter subject and is worked in silver on tin with the appropriate signs. Each planet has its special metal, Jupiter silver or tin, Saturn lead, Mercury tin or quick-silver, Venus copper, the Sun gold, Mars iron or steel and the Moon silver.

(Fig. No. 1.) This talisman is inscribed with its appropriate sign, the Kabbalistic sign of Jupiter, together with its Spirit and Daemon, with a motto or spell round the edge. ON THEBAL GUT GUTINI. AGLA. The first part, or variants of it is often met with on ancient charms, but I have

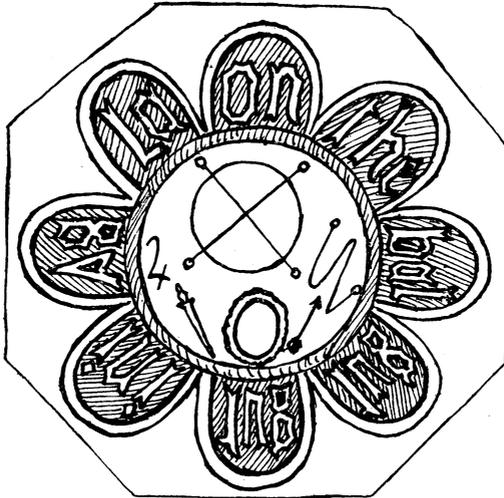


FIG. 1. (Life Size)

never discovered what it means and would welcome information. Agla is also well known, it is said to be the first letters of an invocation. On the reverse side is the magic square of Jupiter, and the number of the square.

(Note). In Hebrew, each letter is also a number so as a sort of secret writing, much used in spells, the number of the word is given; the difficulty is, that many words add up to the same number and one must guess which is right or meant.

In the case of Fig. No. 1, each column of the square adds up to 34, D = 4 and L = 30 which equals GAD, and also the Hebrew for tin, the total of all the columns adds up to 136, which equals JOPHIL, the Spirit of Jupiter.

(Fig. No. 2.) This specimen is borrowed from a shop in Christchurch. It is also of silver and is for protection against war-like weapons. It is a pattern used in the Thirty Years War and now, apparently, is being used again. The motto is from verse 15 of the XXXVIIth Psalm, "Their

weapons shall be turned against them and their bows shall be broken! ” There is a general protective design in the centre and a blue stone, (I do not know what it is). The design is surrounded by a word of power, ACHJMBBR in the secret Hebrew Malachim Script. This script, old writers say, should not be given to the profane.

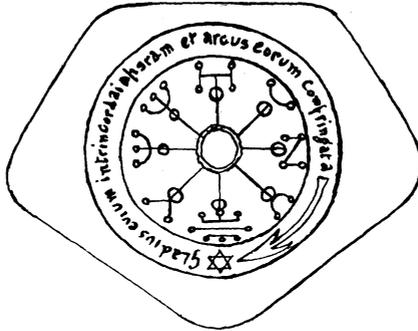


FIG. 2 (Life Size)

(Fig. No. 3.) Here is another of tin and is for one born under Mercury and Gemini. It has various signs to link with the owner. Its reverse is the magic square of Mercury, which adds up to 260, and which may express KOKAB KESEF HAYVIM, said to be an expression used for quicksilver.

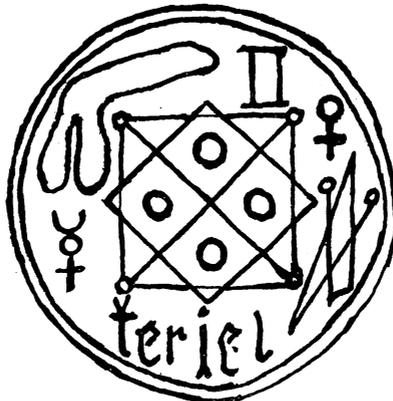


FIG. 3 (Life Size)

(Fig. No. 4.) Another is of lead for one born under Saturn, with the appropriate words and signs, each line adds up to fifteen in the Hebrew figures ΥH , and the total is forty-five, which expresses $\Upsilon\text{H}\text{VH}$.

Another talisman for Jupiter and the Sun is of gold set with amethyst and is in the form of the Seal of Solomon. It bears no signs and is

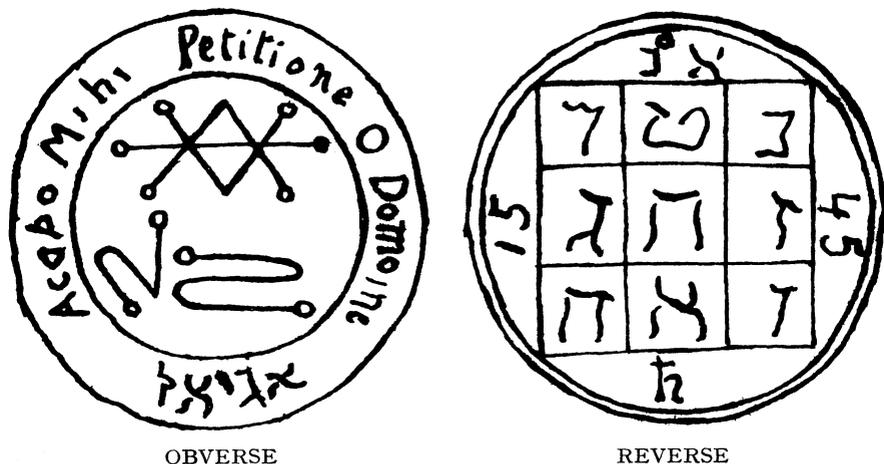


FIG. 4 (Life Size)

more in the form of a charm. It was probably made to order by some small working jeweller who had not the requisite knowledge to put the proper signs on, but the workmanship is better than usual.

Generally the maker of talismans has just enough knowledge to work metals and not the experience of any fine finishing, so the work is crude and obviously hand-made. Authorities say that a successful talisman is made only when the signs used are in the ascendant. One of the Sun should be made while the sun is rising till midday. If it is made while the Sun is declining it will be weak in power and a bringer of bad luck. The same theory applies to all other signs, such as the Moon, Jupiter, etc. The mind of the maker must be concentrated acutely on his work and its purpose . . . if for protection, he must concentrate on protection, and if he knows the future owner his task is easier, for his mind can dwell on protection for the subject concerned. When made the talisman must be properly consecrated to the purpose with the proper spells and prayers, using the properly constructed instruments. He must do what he can to establish a link with the owner and employ the utmost concentration of his will-power to force all the power he can into it. When it glows he

knows it is properly magnetised and if it fails he must consecrate it again. To prevent its losing power until it comes to its owner, a talisman should remain untouched after consecration. It preferably should be thrown to the owner who must as it were, seize it out of the air, recognise it for what it is, by saying certain words, accepting it for what it is and what it will do. If he misses it (i.e. drops it) it is a sign that the talisman is useless to him and will have to be made in another form. We are told a new talisman should be worn for some days so that it can be impregnated with the aura of the owner and remain untouched by anyone else during that period.

I know of one belonging to a lady friend, it is some sort of crystal, cut into all sorts of queer irregular facets, it is of such a shape and size, that it could not possibly be worn. It was given to her by a friend who had it especially made for her at a place in London, where she understands, this work is a speciality. I presume each facet has its meaning. It is the odd or rare, certainly. I have not seen anything like it before and should very much welcome information as to the system on which the cutting of the facets is done, so as to apply to the individual owner. The same lady showed me a tiny gold hand, in the shape of the Horns of Power. It is probably of Italian origin, but as she told me that her father always carried it and firmly believed that it warded off all sorts of harm and brought him good luck, perhaps we may call it a British charm.