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The Power of Not Reading

Amulet Rolls in Medieval England

Faced with a text to copy, a medieval scribe or patron might also be faced with a choice: what form should the new copy take? As discussed elsewhere in this volume, certain types of document and certain bureaucratic institutions tended towards using either the roll or the codex. For many other texts, however, the decision of whether to create a copy in a codex or a roll seems to have been dictated neither by the text's content nor by the workshop making the copy. For example, the same fifteenth-century workshop produced genealogical chronicles with closely related texts in roll form, codex form, and as a hybrid 'roll-codex'.¹ The religious poem 'O Vernicle' is another instance of a text that circulated in multiple forms. It survives in twenty manuscript copies, ten of which are codices and ten of which are rolls.² The decision to produce such texts in roll form likely rested, therefore, on a combination of factors relating to the preferences of the scribe or patron, the practicalities of each form, and the interaction between the content of the text and the cultural meaning of the roll. This article examines amulet rolls as one type of manuscript in which the practicalities and impracticalities of the roll form contributed profoundly to the meaning of the textual object. The form adds to the object's amuletic power through the orientation of the writing and through the physical interactions it encourages. As I argue here, the features of the amulet roll assure its user that its texts will function whether or not they are read.

Surviving medieval parchment amulets, intended to protect their users from harm, frequently take the form of a roll. Other examples were written on sheets, while some instructions for the production of amulets or written charms mention copying text onto a 'scrowe', a word that can mean a scroll, or simply a scrap.³ As amulets were

1 Mare 1971, 81–85.

2 Nichols 2014, 319–345.

3 <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED39074> (last accessed: 13.1.18). The word is used in the context of written charms in the recipe for a *hawe* in the eye recorded in Cambridge, Cambridge University Library, Additional MS 9308, fol. 22^v–23; London, British Library, Additional MS 33996 and MS Sloane 1314, fol. 14^{r-v}, and Wellcome Library, MS 542, fol. 6. An example of a surviving possible amulet in the form of a sheet is the mid-thirteenth-century Canterbury amulet, Canterbury, Canterbury Cathedral Library, Additional MS 23. This manuscript is discussed in detail in Skemer 2006, 199–214. There is an edition of the text at 85–304.

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carried by their users in order to provide protection from a range of potential harms, it is not surprising that their forms should be small, light, and portable. The roll form, when small, lends itself well to this. It has also been suggested that certain types of roll were perceived as having their own amuletic power. Mary Agnes Edsall, examining manuscripts of the poem ‘O Vernicle’, has argued that “[t]he narrow roll format very well might have contributed to what I will call an ‘amulet effect’: the potential perception and use of some of these rolls [...] as ‘functional objects’ of ‘practical devotion’”.⁴ Edsall’s article defines narrow rolls as being rolls “around five inches or less in width (ca. 13 cm)”.⁵

While Edsall draws valuable attention to the meanings created by the size or form of a manuscript, she pays little attention to the length of the rolls in question. Amulet rolls indeed tend to be narrow, at least in part because they have to be portable. However, width alone is insufficient to determine how a medieval reader would have handled and experienced a particular manuscript roll. I suggest that the physical experience of handling a narrow roll that is also very short is significantly different to that of handling a narrow roll that is extremely long. London, British Library, Harley Ch. 43 A 14, for example, is a small roll containing an amuletic drawing of a cross said to be one-fifteenth the height of Christ, as well as related prayers to Saints Ciricus and Julitta.⁶ The roll is 70 mm wide but only 475 mm long: less than the height of two A4 pages.⁷ It can be easily unrolled to its full extent in a single movement. By contrast, the manuscript birth girdle New Haven, Beinecke Library, Takamiya MS 56, which I discuss in more detail below, is just 10 mm wider, but more than a metre and quarter longer.⁸ Its narrow width means that it can be carried almost as easily as the Harley roll, but its length makes it significantly more difficult and more cumbersome to roll and unroll. Its reader must therefore work harder to access the text it contains. I argue that this difficulty is both significant and deliberate.

There survives a particular subset of amuletic rolls which are not only narrow, but disproportionately narrow relative to their length. Among the forty-five narrow rolls

⁴ Edsall 2014, 188.

⁵ Edsall 2014, 188.

⁶ The cross image is accompanied by the following promises of protection: *p(a)t day p(a)t p(u) beryst it upon þe or lokist p(er) vpon p(u) shall haue þise gret giftis p(a)t folowyth. The furst is p(u) schall die no soden deth The seconde is p(u) schall not be hurte nor slayne w(i)t(h) no maner of wapyn The iij^d is p(u) shall haue resonabull godis 7 helth vn to þy lyuys ende The iiijth is þyne enmys shall neu(er) ouyr com þe The vth is no man(er) of preson nor fals witnes shall neuyr greue þe. The vijth is p(u) shalt not die w(i)t(h) oute the sacramentt(is) of the chirche The vijth is p(u) schall be defendid from all maner of wykkid spir[it]s tribulac(i)o(n)es 7 dissesis 7 from all Infirmittees 7 sekenes of þe pestilence The viijth is yf a woman be in trauell of childe lay þis vpon her wombe 7 þe childe schall haue cristendom 7 þe moder schall haue purificac(i)on. The manuscript has been digitised at http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Harley_Ch_43_A_14 (last accessed: 15.7.18).*

⁷ http://searcharchives.bl.uk/IAMS_VU2:IAMS040-003380324 (last accessed: 27.2.18).

⁸ The manuscript measures 1,730 mm long and 80 mm wide. Morse 2013b, 269.

examined by Edsall, two stand out as being exceptionally long for their width.⁹ The mean width to length ratio of the narrow rolls in Edsall's sample is approximately 1:11, meaning that the roll is eleven times longer than its width.¹⁰ This number is skewed by the fact that some of the rolls in the sample have lost membranes or partial membranes through damage. However, it does serve to emphasise the extraordinary format of the two longest rolls in the selection, both of which are amuletic. One of these, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS e Mus. 245 (R), has a width to length ratio of roughly 3:368, making it more than one hundred and twenty-two times the length of its own width.¹¹ The other, Oxford, Bodleian Library, Bodley Rolls 26, has a width to length ratio of 17:4,663—roughly two hundred and seventy-four times longer than it is wide.¹² By contrast Chicago, Newberry Library, Case MS 32, a roll containing the Middle English poem 'The Stacions of Rome' and the manuscript with the next most extreme width to length ratio, is just forty-six times longer than it is wide.¹³

I suggest that the noticeable length of both of these examples is directly related to their function. The narrowness of the rolls can be explained by the need for them to be portable. Their length, which makes them unwieldy to roll and unroll, appears to be connected to the fact that amuletic images can function without being seen. I argue that there is a relationship between the amuletic protections offered by these manuscripts and the fact that their format makes them difficult to read. People could own and carry these protective objects but were not necessarily expected, or even encouraged, to engage with their text. The length of the roll allows each manuscript to contain more protective texts and images, while also discouraging casual reading. Although amulet rolls are not always extremely long, the long and narrow format of the examples mentioned is both a product of the amuletic purpose of the text and a way of physically differentiating powerful texts from texts to be read in ordinary ways.

The idea that unread or unreadable text might have power is not unique to medieval amulet rolls, or to England. As Richard Gordon has argued, the *charaktêres* used in ancient magic were developed by Greco-Egyptian magicians in the second century AD as the ability to read and write hieroglyphs declined. The Greeks viewed hieroglyphs as divinely created symbols representing complete ideas and providing access to the divine world.¹⁴ This interpretation was important to their magical practice, so as they lost the ability to write true hieroglyphs they replaced them in ritual contexts with hieroglyph-like characters. In the context of magical practice, the important element of the hieroglyphs was not the verbal meaning of the text being recorded, but the reception of the hieroglyphic writing system itself. Traditions of using esoteric or even

⁹ Edsall 2014, 206–209.

¹⁰ The median ratio is approximately 2:27, suggesting a roll that is 13.5 times as long as its own width.

¹¹ By my measurements, MS e Mus. 245 (R) is 120 mm wide and 14,723 mm long.

¹² By my measurements, Bodley Rolls 26 is 34 mm wide and 9,326 mm long.

¹³ Saenger 1989, 56.

¹⁴ Gordon 2014, 260–262.

illegible scripts in amuletic and magical contexts appear in religions and cultures across the globe, from antiquity to the present.¹⁵ Passing across cultural boundaries, this idea of powerful symbols appeared in Western Europe from the twelfth century.¹⁶

In the medieval English context, numerous medical recipes provide instructions for using unread or unreadable text for protection or healing.¹⁷ Texts might be deliberately hidden from the patient, as in the charm for insomnia that instructs a practitioner to write a text, and then *let this wrytyng und(er) his* [i. e. the patient's] *hed þ(at) he know it not*.¹⁸ Alternatively, they might be written in scripts that could not be easily understood by non-specialists. A famous example is John Arderne's textual amulet against spasm and cramp, which, he tells his reader, he writes in Greek letters lest it be seen by "common people".¹⁹ While these patients might see the powerful writing of the charm, the sound of the words would be recoverable only by those who could read Greek, or by practitioners who had access to Arderne's instructions.

In other cases, amuletic texts and written charms exploit the visual trappings of literacy to give the impression of an underlying textual meaning even when no such meaning is present. Here I refer only to a decodable linguistic meaning, not to the social or cultural meanings inherent in any human artefact. These 'texts' range from strings of recognisable alphabetic characters which do not form readable words, to more complex symbols with no necessary relationship to the standard alphabet. A fourteenth-century example in the Bodleian Library's Ashmole MS 1447, for instance, states that the letters *P. G. C. p. E. v O. x. a. c. 7. I. I. N. M. 7. c.*, written on parchment in two lines and bound between the thighs, will stop bleeding.²⁰ In appearance,

¹⁵ See, for example, Mullen 1996, 672; Robson 2008; Spadola 2014; Cook 2016, 124.

¹⁶ Gordon 2014, 290–291.

¹⁷ I have discussed this phenomenon more fully elsewhere, see Hindley 2017.

¹⁸ Durham, Durham University Library, MS Cosin V.III.10, Part C, fol. 30^v. A similar charm appears on fol. 38 of the same manuscript, as well as in Cambridge, Cambridge University Library, Additional MS 9308, fol. 48^r; Durham, Durham Cathedral Library, Hunter MS 100, fol. 107; London, British Library, Additional MS 33996, fol. 150^v, Harley MS 978, fol. 34^v, and Sloane MS 3466, fol. 27^v; and Oxford, Bodleian Library, Douce MS 84, fol. 5^v.

¹⁹ Found in Arderne 1968, 103: [...] *solebam scribere istud literis grecis, ne a laicis perspicitur* [I usually write it in Greek letters, lest it should be seen by the common people]. Another version of the same charm in John Bradmore's translation of the surgical treatise *Philomela*, found in Lang 1998, 56–57, gives similar instructions, telling the practitioner to write the words of the charm in Greek *ne a quolib(et) de leui p(er)cipia(n)t(ur)* ['lest they should be seen by any trivial people'].

²⁰ Oxford, Bodleian Library, Ashmole MS 1447, part 1, p. 1. The manuscript reads: *Onop(er) Writ þes lettr(e)s in p(ar)chemyn in to lynes 7 bind by twene þe þy3es Anop(er) 3if þou ne leuest not þis writ þes lettr(e)s on a knyf 7 þer w(i)t(h) sle a swyne 7 þe ernynge of þe blod schal be þe lasse þes boþ þe lettr(e)s. P. G. C. p. E. v O. x. a. c. 7. I. I. N. M. 7. c.* Similar strings of readable letters, intended to treat a range of conditions, appear in late medieval manuscripts including Cambridge, Magdalene College, Pepys MS 878, p. 181; London, British Library, Cotton MS Julius D viii, fol. 79, Harley MS 1680, fol. 7^v, Royal MS 15 A viii, fol. 44, and Sloane MS 3466, fol. 48^{r-v}; Oxford, Bodleian Library, Digby MS 88, fol. 78^v, Douce MS 84, fols. 4 and 8^v, and MS Wood empt. 18, fol. 9. Many earlier examples also survive.

this string of letters is similar to the twelfth-century charm in Durham, Durham Cathedral Library, Hunter MS 100, which was to be written on a lead cross and hung around the patient's neck: *Ardeo. sentio. fugio. Dext(er)a. d. f. u. d. d. e. m. d. d. f. u.*²¹ In the Durham manuscript, however, the initial word *dextera* serves to identify a longer text whose subsequent words are represented by their initial letters: “*Dextera domini fecit virtutem, dextera domini exaltavit me, dextera domini fecit virtutem*”, lines from Psalm 117.²² Unlike this example, Ashmole MS 1447's lack of an initial word prevents ready expansion of the string of letters. If the letters did originally represent a longer text, their meaning was lost over time. The string of characters *E. v. O. x. a.*, one of the more stable parts of this charm, appears elsewhere as *o. z. o. x. a.*, as the shorter string *e. v. x. a.*, and as a word, *anexa*.²³ Such a range of versions suggests that any expanded text that may have been behind the letters went unrecognised by scribes.

In some cases, unreadable symbols were explicitly described as texts with a linguistic meaning, although not always one that could be accessed by their user. For example, a series of symbols incorporating the word *tetragrammaton* in the mid-thirteenth-century Canterbury amulet is explained as having been given to St Columbanus by an angel.²⁴ The text continues: *siquis fidelis hanc figuram in qua scripta sunt nomina dei ineffabilia sup(er) se habuerit nulla uis dyaboli aduersus eum preualebit*.²⁵ The use of the plural *nomina* clearly suggests that in addition to the name represented by the word *tetragrammaton*, the figure contains more names, none of which are legible to a human reader. Instead, the text assures its user that the figure has angelic provenance: even if the amulet's owner cannot read the names written within it, they are legible to angels. The explanatory text redefines the illegible symbols, framing them as a form of supernatural communication that will request protection for the user of the amulet. This idea—that texts might be read by supernatural beings—was common enough to cause concern among churchmen. Magical practices involving written signs were condemned not because they were superstitious, but because, unknown to their user, the signs might communicate with demons.²⁶

Illegible ‘texts’ can be seen but not read. Their power is accessed through physical contact, by carrying them as an amulet, or by looking at their designs. Their efficacy

²¹ Durham, Durham Cathedral Library, Hunter MS 100, fol. 117. The charm is for fever.

²² Ps. 117:16: “The right hand of the Lord has wrought virtue. The right hand of the Lord has exalted me. The right hand of the Lord has wrought virtue.”

²³ In London, British Library, Sloane MS 431, fol. 13 (twice) and Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 388, fol. 19. Other versions of the charm appear in London, British Library, Cotton MS Julius D viii, fol. 79 and Sloane MS 431, fol. 44^{r-v}; and Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Digby 86, fol. 15 and MS Ashmole 1447, part 1, p. 1 (an alternate copy).

²⁴ Canterbury, Canterbury Cathedral Archives, Additional MS 23, column 5.

²⁵ Translation: If any of the faithful has upon him this figure in which are written the ineffable names of God, no power of the devil will prevail against him.

²⁶ See, for example, the influential argument made in Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, eds. Gilby et al., 2a2ae. 96, 4: vol. 40, 80–85.

derives from their illegibility. Written charms that make use of illegible texts and abbreviations demonstrate that some amuletic uses of writing relied on creating distance between the charm text and ordinary text in order to foster a sense of hidden power. The texts were understood as communicating not with human readers, but with divine beings such as saints or angels or, more worryingly, with demons. Instead of using text as a way of communicating with someone too far away for a face-to-face conversation, or with a future reader, these amuletic texts attempt to transmit messages beyond the boundaries of existence, to supernatural readers who do not need the texts to be physically displayed.

In the charms and written amulets discussed above, the texts themselves are illegible, either because they use letters or non-alphabetic symbols with no linguistic meaning, or because the texts themselves must be hidden. The texts of some amulet rolls, however, are written in ordinary alphabets and could be read by any literate reader, but their unusual long, narrow format obstructs access to them in other ways. As we have already seen, their layout precludes easy reading. This is further evidence, I contend, of the same desire for illegibility or para-legibility that can be seen in the invented alphabets and pseudo-abbreviations of the charm texts.

Although not all very long and narrow rolls are amuletic (death inventories and prayer rolls, for example, occasionally take a similar format), a significant number of amulet rolls also share another feature that exacerbates the difficulty of reading.²⁷ Their texts run lengthways along the whole manuscript. In most cases, a reader has to move through the roll in its entirety in order to read a single line of the text.²⁸ This experience is clearly very different from the experience of following a text that progresses down the roll in the normal medieval English fashion, or from reading a horizontal scroll with text columns such as those from antiquity. With a limited number of words visible in each open section of the roll, the reader would have to manipulate it more often, drawing attention to its physical form. Moreover, the motion of scrolling through it would cause further defamiliarisation for its reader, who would have to hold the roll horizontally rather than in the more common vertical position.

Two examples of amuletic rolls which include text running lengthwise along them are the Wellcome Library's MS 632 and the Beinecke Library's Takamiya MS 56.²⁹

27 Among the manuscripts discussed in Edsall 2014, Chicago, Newberry Library, MS Case 32 and London, British Library, Additional MS 88929 (digitised at http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Add_MS_88929 (last accessed: 15.7.18) are both examples of long, narrow devotional rolls. London, British Library, Additional MS 30064 is an example of long, narrow death inventory.

28 London, British Library, Additional MS 25311, a seventeenth-century amulet roll containing magical signs for protection against danger and disease on one side and prayers on the other, is an exception. Although the prayers are written horizontally along the roll, the roll is divided into sections so that a single prayer can be viewed completely once the user reaches its position on the roll.

29 On London, Wellcome Library, MS 632, see Olsan 2015. On New Haven, CT, Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Takamiya MS 56, see Morse 2013b.

Both are strikingly long and narrow. Even though each seems to have lost a small amount of text at the head of the roll, Takamiya MS 56 is still about twenty-one times longer than it is wide and Wellcome MS 632 is about thirty-three times greater in length than in width.³⁰ In both cases, the text that runs lengthwise appears on the dorse, while the text on the face runs widthwise down the roll. In this change of orientation, it is possible also to see a change of purpose. Both of these rolls are examples of manuscript birth girdles—rolls that imitate the protective functions of the relic of the Virgin Mary's girdle.³¹ Manuscript birth girdles, like girdle relics, would have been wrapped around a woman's abdomen before or during childbirth, with the goal of protecting both mother and child.³² Each of these manuscript girdles combines texts that were primarily intended for devotional reading with texts that serve a more practical amuletic purpose. All the texts on these rolls are legible and written in ordinary scripts. However, the lengthwise text on the dorse is physically harder to access than the widthwise text on the face. In order to read the dorse text, the user must unroll the manuscript and hold it horizontally. From this position, it resembles the girdle relic the manuscript imitates, and is also oriented in such a way that it can be wrapped around the woman. The direction of the dorse text therefore emphasises the object's amuletic status.

Wellcome Library MS 632 is a heavily worn parchment roll, 3,320 mm long and only 100 mm wide. On the front it includes common amuletic images such as the measured cross and related prayers to Saints Ciricus and Julitta, as well as images of the three nails with which Christ was crucified, the five wounds of Christ, and the instruments of the Passion. In typical medieval fashion, these texts run across the width of the manuscript all the way down the roll. On the dorse of the roll, however, are two texts which run in two lines along almost the entire length of the manuscript.³³ One

30 New Haven, CT, Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Takamiya MS 56 is 1,730 mm long and 80 mm wide. London, Wellcome Library, MS 632 is about 3,320 mm long and 100 mm wide.

31 On birth girdles generally, see Dilling 1913–1914; Gwara/Morse 2012; Morse 2013a; Jones/Olsan 2015.

32 In Yorkshire alone the 1535 visitation of Layton and Legh recorded sixteen belts or girdles kept by churches and used for protection in childbirth, as well as eleven others whose purpose is not specified. The girdles for protection of pregnant women are those of St Francis at Grace Dieu, St Bernard at Melsa and Kirkstall, St Ailred at Rievaulx, St Werburgh at Chester, St Robert at Newminster, St Saviour at Newburgh, Thomas of Lancaster at Pontefract, St Margaret at Tynemouth, the former prior of Holy Trinity in York, Mary Nevill at Coverham, and of the Virgin at Haltemprice, Calder, Conishead, Kirkham, and Jervaulx. Legh/Layton 1789, 77–111.

33 The main dorse inscription reads: [...] *mesure of the length off ou[re] lorde [I]esu [...] of hys dere mother oure blessyd lady seynt mary whych was wryttyn in letters of gold and send ffrome hevyn by an Aungell to the pope leo that tyme beyng in Rome and sayd to hym in thys man(er) wyse / who so beryth thys mesure vppon hym wyth trewe ffayth and good devocyon sayinge v pat(er) nosters v aves 7 a credo in the worshypp of hym that thys mesure ys of / he shall never be slayne in batell nor wyth no devyll be combred by day nor by nyght / nor wyth thunder [...]ned nor wyth no soden deth be smyttyn nor dye wyth owte howsyll and shryfte / nor byfore no juge wrongefuly dampned / nor wyth no thevys be*

lists the dangers from which the roll will protect its user, including the promise that *yf a woman travell wyth chylde gyrde thys mesure a bowte hyr wombe and she shall be safe delyverd wyth owte p(ere)ll and the chylde shall have crystendome 7 the mother puryfycayon*. The other includes the claim that the roll is the length of Christ and of his mother Mary. These inscriptions make it absolutely clear that the manuscript was used, or was intended to be used, as a girdle; that a physical interaction specific to its roll form was meaningful to its use; and that its length was crucial to its amuletic power. There is therefore an inherent relationship between the roll form of the manuscript and the symbolic power of its texts.

The dorse of New Haven, Beinecke Library, Takamiya MS 56 carries a similar inscription, identifying the practical benefits offered by the roll and describing its possible use as a birth girdle.³⁴ However, the texts on the face of Takamiya MS 56 differ somewhat from those on the face of Wellcome MS 632. The dorse, with text running lengthways along the manuscript, promises physical protection from a range of possible harms, thereby emphasising the roll's amuletic qualities. By contrast, the texts and images on the front of the roll, on which the text runs in the conventional widthwise orientation, contain promises that are spiritual in nature rather than physical or material. Several prayers carry promises of indulgence, for example, while the measure of the Crucifixion nails is accompanied by a text assuring its reader that *he shall haue grete grace of allmyghty god and for to putt a waye from hym all dedely synnysx*, even though in other manuscripts its powers are said to be amuletic.³⁵ The images of the side wound and cross, usually associated with protection from harm, here carry no promises at all. For this manuscript, the movement from the front to the dorse of the roll, and the shift from widthwise to lengthwise writing, also signals a change in

robbyd on see nor on lond / nor perysshed wyth ffyer nor water / nor blastys ne wyndys on water ne on lond shalnot greve hym / nor of the pestylence dye / And yf he be in dedly synne he shalnot dye ther yn / And he shall encrease yn worldly goodd(es) / And yf a woman travell wyth chylde gyrde thys mesure a bowte hyr wombe 7 she shall be safe delyverd wyth owte p[ere]ll and the chylde shall have crystendome 7 the mother puryfycayon. A second, shorter inscription, also written in two lines but apparently unfinished, reads: *+ Thus moche more ys oure lady seynt mary lenger + by vertu of thys holy length oure Savio(r) Jhesu crist and of his dere mother oure lady seynt*.

34 The inscription reads: [...] *antyne the nobyl [...] was closyd yn golde and take to hym for these vertues. That is to wete. That whate man or woman that berythe hytt apon wythe trewe faythe and deuoc(i)on worshyppynge thys mesure euery daye wythe .iii. Pater noster .iii. A[v]e maria. In the worshyppe of hym that thys mesure ys of. For sothe th[a]t daye th[...] may go safe yn all man(er) of p(er)illis and tribulac(i)ons. And ther shall no desese greve the. And a woma(n) that ys quyck wyth chylde g[...]rde hyr wythe thys mesure and she shall be safe fro all man(er) of p(er)illis. + Iesus autem transiens per mediu illor(um) ibat in pace. + Marcus + Matheus + lucas + Iohannes + Iasper + Melchior + Balhasar + In nomine patris + et filii + 7 sp(irit)us sancti + Amen. Thys moche more ys oure lady mary [...] +*.

35 The image of the nails in the devotional rolls London, British Library, Additional MS 88929 and Harley Roll T. 11, and New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, Glazier MS 39 is associated with practical protective benefits. In Glazier MS 39, for instance, its earthly benefits include protection against sudden death, weapons, enemies, false witnesses, poverty, wicked spirits, pestilence, and fevers.

the manuscript's intended use by shifting focus from the spiritual realm to the practical, earthly one.

In both of these manuscript birth girdles the amuletic text on the dorse of the roll is legible, but its orientation is unusual and resists easy reading. In order to read the inscriptions that identify the manuscripts as birth girdles, or to read the instructions explaining how to use the girdles, the reader must change the orientation of the roll and the way in which she—or he—interacts with the object. While a reader would hold the manuscript vertically to read the prayers on the recto, it would have to be held horizontally to read the text on the back, or to wrap the parchment around a woman. Held horizontally, the manuscript's resemblance to the girdle relic is emphasised, strengthening the association between relic and roll. I argue that these inscriptions run along the length of the roll precisely because they encourage their reader to handle the roll in an unusual way—one that reveals the similarity between the manuscript and the protective relic that it imitates.³⁶

Just as the dorse texts of the birth girdles force their readers to approach their manuscripts in an unfamiliar way, so do the texts on the two purely amuletic rolls I turn to now. Both of these rolls, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS e Mus. 245 and MS Bodley Rolls 26, are exceptionally long relative to their width, and both have texts which run horizontally along their full—or almost full—length. Although Bodley Rolls 26 includes a short section in which the text runs in the roll's vertical direction, both of these rolls deliberately deviate from the normal layout expected for their form.

MS e Mus. 245, copied in England in the sixteenth century, is 120 mm wide, and 14,723 mm long.³⁷ The roll is formed of twenty-four parchment membranes. Its construction is not entirely consistent—in three of the twenty-three joins, the new membrane is added over rather than under the preceding membrane—but the same scribal hand wrote the text throughout. Although it may have been re-sewn in places, much of the stitching must be original: ink from the text has transferred to the threads, suggesting that the membranes were either sewn together when the ink was still wet, or, more likely, that the text was written after the membranes had been sewn together. The manuscript may have some connection with Salisbury, as it is now kept wrapped in a seventeenth century document settling some of the estates of William Cecil, second Earl of Salisbury, after the death of the first earl in 1612. Place names mentioned include the manors of *Ashpurton Stratton* and *Yarkehill als Yarkehall*, all in Herefordshire. Although there is no necessary connection between the roll and its wrapper, there is a transfer of ink on the dorse of the roll that includes the word Salisbury. The

³⁶ Although I argue that the dorse text is central to the amuletic function of these objects, the roll form is not. A text very similar to that on the dorse of Wellcome MS 632 appears, for example, on fol. 120^v of the medical miscellany New Haven, CT, Yale Center for British Art, R486.M43 1450, a codex.

³⁷ This manuscript is described in Madan/Craster/Denholm-Young 1937, 678, SC 3550. It is also briefly discussed in Skemer 2006, 212–13.

roll must therefore have been put on top of a document mentioning Salisbury while it was still wet.

MS e Mus. 245 opens with a large and dramatic textual diagram in red and black. Although the text runs in unusual directions, it can be read. Written in three bands around the edge of a semi-circle, for example, is the sentence + *EMITTE* + *NOBIS* + *DOMINE* + *AXILIVM* + + *DE* + *CELIS* + *VT* + *PROTEGAMUR* + *AB* + + *OMNIBVS* + *INIMICIS* + *NOSTRIS* +.³⁸ Other texts run around the edge of a large triangle, or are contained within it, or within circles or stars. For most of the roll, however, text and image are not so closely intertwined (fig. 1). A line of large text, interspersed with roundels, runs along the top of the roll and sometimes also along the bottom. Three lines of smaller text run lengthways along the body of the manuscript. The text along the bottom consists of just three words: *tetragramaton*; *agla*, a magic word derived from Hebrew; and four characters which appear to represent the Tetragrammaton in Hebrew.³⁹ The text along the top is more varied, listing names of God including *Adonay*, *Amphyneton*, and *Resamaraton*. Many of these, or variants of them, can be found in the list of one hundred names of God given in the *Liber Iuratus Honorii*, a magical treatise that existed at least by the fourteenth century.⁴⁰ At both the top and bottom of the roll, the individual names are separated by roundels containing red crosses, in the corners of which are either the four Hebrew letters representing the Tetragrammaton or the letters *AGLA*.

Fig. 1: Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS e Mus. 245 (R).

³⁸ Send out help for us, O Lord, from the heavens, to protect us from all our enemies.

³⁹ The letters *AGLA* stand for the Hebrew phrase *Attah gibbor le'olam 'Adonai*, meaning 'Thou art strong for eternity, Lord'. This phrase had become common in Church Latin. Cole 2016, 34–35.

⁴⁰ Boudet 2002, 880, 853.

The three lines of text running down the middle of the roll all extend along its entirety, so that to read them fully a reader would have to scroll through the whole manuscript three times. The top line consists primarily of invocations and prayers, some of which are spoken to the honour and glory of God's names.⁴¹ The second line principally consists of quotations from the Bible and the liturgy, starting with the opening of the Gospel of John.⁴² This text was the reading for the daytime Mass on Christmas Day. It is followed by the collect for Christmas, beginning *Concede q(uaesu)m(u)s o(m)nip(otens) deus vt nos vnigeniti tui noua*.⁴³ Then comes a text from the Gospel of Matthew, followed in turn by a collect and prayers to the Virgin and Christ.⁴⁴ There is a text from the Gospel of Luke, with prayers, and a final gospel reading from Mark.⁴⁵ These were well-known texts that an audience would have encountered before, making the difficult reading process simultaneously one of fulfilled expectations. As Roger Wieck notes, these portions of the gospels often appear in Books of Hours because of their use in Mass celebrations for the major feasts of Christmas (John 1:1–14), the Annunciation (Luke 1:26–38), Epiphany (Matt. 2:1–12), and Ascension (Mark 16:14–20).⁴⁶ As the reading from Matthew ends unfinished in this roll, it is possible that a membrane has been lost. The third line of text contains further prayers and invocations, including prayers to the sign of the cross.

While the text is already difficult to read because of its orientation along the entirety of the roll, it is even more difficult to navigate because of the frequent insertion of roundels and diagrams. These diagrams do not appear at grammatical breaks in the text, and they can separate consecutive words by quite a large distance. At one point, just before the passage from Luke, a roundel containing a five-pointed star, five crosses, several names of God, and a quotation from the Psalms partially covers the text itself.⁴⁷ If the text of manuscript was intended to be read, it was certainly not expected to be read easily—although the familiarity of the texts might have mitigated some of the obstacles to reading caused by the roll's physical layout. The orientation of the text, the disproportionate length of the roll, and the interruption by roundels all disrupt the normal reading experience.

The inscriptions surrounding the roundels in MS e Mus. 245 provide further evidence of a deliberate impediment to reading. Towards the beginning of the roll, there appear roundels with inscriptions around their edges explaining what benefit the symbol inside them will bring. At the start of the manuscript's second membrane, for

⁴¹ Latin: *in honorem et gloriam no(min)is tui*.

⁴² John 1:1–14.

⁴³ Földvály et al. 2018.

⁴⁴ Matt. 2:1–12. The collect begins *Deus qui vnigenitu(m) tuu(m) gentibus stella duce revelasti*.

⁴⁵ Luke 1:26–38; Mark 16:14–18.

⁴⁶ Wieck 2008, 400.

⁴⁷ Ps. 83:10: + *PROTETOR NOSTER ASPICE DEVS + ET RESPICE IN FACIEM XP(IST)I TVI* [Behold, O God our protector: and look on the face of thy Christ (Douay-Rheims Ps. 84:9)].

example, is a roundel that promises to dispel anger and inspire love, while another at the beginning of the third membrane assures its reader that no one who carries it will die an evil death. The last of these roundels, promising protection from visible and invisible enemies, demons, and all other perils, appears a little over two metres into the roll at the beginning of the fifth membrane. Beyond that point, the amuletic benefits of the roundels are no longer explained. Furthermore, only two of the roundels explicitly state that they must be seen in order for their benefit to take effect. One appears at the end of the second membrane, roughly seventy-five centimetres into the roll.⁴⁸ The other appears at the end of the fourth membrane, about two metres into the roll.⁴⁹ While some roundels are surrounded by inscriptions stating that their protection is activated when they are carried, nothing beyond the fourth membrane specifies that it needs to be seen in order to work.⁵⁰ This is not to say that a roll would never be read to its end, but its user could benefit from its protections without ever having to unroll its full length. The extreme length of this amulet roll thus allows for the provision of further protections that might be ‘read’, as in the case of the charms discussed above, only by supernatural beings.

The combination of extreme length and lengthwise-oriented writing also appears in Oxford, Bodleian Library, Bodley Rolls 26.⁵¹ Its catalogue entry describes it dramatically (if implausibly) as “A magical roll, written in blood”.⁵² By my measurements, Bodley Rolls 26 is 9,326 mm long. Although it is considerably shorter than e Mus. 245, its width varies between just 44 and 34 mm, making it far longer in terms of proportion. However, its present length is not its original length. Bodley Rolls 26 is now made up of fourteen membranes, but it appears to have been made in two parts. At some point, the owner of the original roll—a manuscript of four membranes, about two and a half metres long, with text written in the normal fashion—decided to modify his possession by adding ten more membranes in which the text runs lengthwise. The two sections can be distinguished not just because of the orientation of the text, but also because of their physical construction. The first four membranes are on thicker parchment, and when they are joined to their subsequent membranes the overlap

⁴⁸ Its inscription reads + *Qua die hoc signu(m) videris ab o(mn)i temtacio(n)e diaboli & ab om(n)i i(m)pedime(n)to lib(erabis)*. [+ On whichever day you see this sign, you will be freed from all temptations of the devil and all hindrance].

⁴⁹ Its inscription reads + *hoc est signu(m) filij dei viui i(n) q(ua)cu(m)que die videris no(n) p(er)ibis i(n) igne n(e)c i(n) aqua* [+ this is the sign of the son of the living God. On whatever day you see it you will not perish in fire nor in water].

⁵⁰ For example, the roundel at the beginning of the third membrane states + *Qui hoc signu(m) sup(er) se portauerit mala morte more non poterit* [+ Whoever carries this sign upon himself will not be able to die an evil death].

⁵¹ In my discussion of this manuscript, I make use of images digitally enhanced by Ian Green to improve the legibility of faded areas of text. I am grateful for his help. This roll has also been discussed in Edsall 2014, 201.

⁵² Madan/Craster/Denholm-Young, 1937, 590, SC 3115.

between the pieces of parchment averages forty-four millimetres. In the second part of the manuscript, however, the parchment is noticeably thinner and the membranes overlap by an average of just over eighteen millimetres, excluding two joins that have clearly been repaired.⁵³ Where the two sections join, the much less worn upper membrane—presumably belonging to the newer portion of the manuscript—partially covers some of the symbols on the lower membrane. A short and legible manuscript has therefore been greatly lengthened and modified in a way that makes it much less legible. While the amuletic status of the roll is enhanced by the addition of new text, the layout of that text makes it difficult to access.

The manuscript begins with images of the three nails of Christ and a text that identifies them and promises amuletic benefits to those who worship them. These benefits are typical, including protection from sudden death, swords, and enemies. Next, there is an image of the side wound of Christ, followed by a long list of the names of God, one to a line, flanked by crosses. Following these are three assertions relating to circles: that a circle has been made, established, and finally concluded. This section of the roll finishes with more of the God's names. Sewn onto this original section of Bodley Rolls 26 is a text written lengthways along the roll in a single line, with crosses above and below. It lists numerous names of God, separated from one another by crosses. These largely repeat, in the same order, the names from the first section of the roll. Next is the opening of the Gospel of John, which was popular in magical contexts, and then the same three statements about circles that appeared in the earlier part of the roll.⁵⁴ Towards the end of the roll are the Lord's Prayer in Greek, transliterated into the Roman alphabet, and more words separated by crosses—perhaps further names of God. That the texts in the two parts of the roll largely repeat each other suggests that they were not joined together with the intention that someone would read the whole roll. Apart from the well-known Gospel of John and the Lord's Prayer, every text could have been read in the first shorter section of the roll. The extension therefore changed the physical structure of the roll significantly more than it changed the text. In this case, the length of roll appears to affirm its amuletic power, for once again the later texts might be expected to exercise their protective function unread.

In all four of the rolls I have discussed, the unusually long and narrow format combines with the use of text running lengthwise along the roll to contribute to the amuletic nature of the object. In each case, this layout of text signals that the rolls should be used in ways that do not prioritise reading. For the birth girdles, the manuscripts encourage an unusual physical interaction with the parchment. In the case of

⁵³ The fifth membrane is torn and the join between it and the sixth membrane is roughly sewn. A scrap of another membrane, containing crosses clearly taken from this manuscript, is also sewn at this join, perhaps preserving a piece lost from the fifth membrane. The join between the twelfth and thirteenth membranes is now glued, but there are visible sewing holes from a previous attachment and some of the parchment has been torn and lost.

⁵⁴ Skemer 2006, 87.

the amulet rolls, the texts towards the innermost part of the roll either duplicate earlier texts or make no demands that the user read them. As the charm texts discussed demonstrate, the presence of symbols viewed as divine or supernatural text could seem more important or powerful than a decipherable meaning. Thus it would appear that the long, narrow roll format produced a similar effect in physical terms, allowing its owner to trust in the mere presence of texts whose mysterious power operated without the intervention of a reader.

Manuscripts

Cambridge, Cambridge University Library

Additional MS 9308

Cambridge, Corpus Christi College

MS 388

Cambridge, Magdalene College

Pepys MS 878

Canterbury, Canterbury Cathedral Archives

Additional MS 23

Chicago, Newberry Library

MS Case-32

Durham, Durham Cathedral Library

Hunter MS 100

Durham, Durham University Library

MS Cosin V.III.10

London, British Library

Additional MS 25311

Additional MS 30064

Additional MS 33996

Additional MS 88929

Cotton MS Julius D viii

Harley Ch 43 A 14

Harley MS 978

Harley MS 1680

Harley Roll T. 11

Royal MS 15 A viii

Sloane MS 431

Sloane MS 1314

Sloane MS 3466

London, Wellcome Library

Wellcome MS 542

Wellcome MS 632

New Haven, Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library

Takamiya MS 56

New Haven, Yale Center for British Art
R486.M43 1450

New York, Pierpont Morgan Library
Glazier MS 39

Oxford, Bodleian Library

Ashmole MS 1447
Bodley Rolls 26
Digby MS 86
Digby MS 88
Douce MS 84
MS e Mus. 245 (R)
MS Wood empt. 18

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