

Bill Rebiger

‘Write on Three Ribs of a Sheep’: Writing Materials in Ancient and Mediaeval Jewish Magic

Abstract: Writing materials used for ancient and mediaeval Jewish magic include metals, stones, animal hides and bones, papyrus, paper, textiles, pottery and other objects. Inscribed finished products designated for magical purposes like amulets, magic bowls, gems, rings, pendants, seals and even skulls have been found. Moreover, numerous instruction texts are extant describing the process of writing and the producing and use of material artefacts. These instructions are attested in unsorted collections of various instructions as well as in applied manuals arranged in a more systematic manner. First and foremost, the fragments from the Cairo Geniza provide us with thousands of these texts. The question this paper tries to answer is whether there is a relationship between the choice of writing material and the intended purpose of the magical act. Another focus is on the correspondence between material artefacts and instruction texts.

1 Introduction

Fortunately, research on Jewish magic has made progress recently. New editions of magical texts have been published, conferences and workshops have been organised and the number of articles devoted to various aspects of Jewish magic has increased significantly. In this respect, two fields of research in particular seem to be inexhaustible due to the vast amount of source material available: first, Babylonian incantation bowls, and second, magical fragments from the Cairo Geniza. While almost all scholarly contributions in the field of Jewish magic have focused on editorial and philological aspects of the magical texts and on various facets such as the definition of Jewish magic, the relationship between Jewish magic and religion, Halakha or medicine, or the specifics of love or aggressive magic, for example, the study of the material aspects of Jewish magic is only

just starting.¹ This is rather surprising given that the idea of the ‘agency of things’ is one of the essential concepts in magic in general.²

To start with one aspect of the materiality of Jewish magic, I would like to present a survey of the use of different writing materials in Jewish magic in Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages.³ Unlike writing materials that are usually quite common in Jewish tradition, such as parchment and paper, this evidence can be supplemented to a considerable degree in the field of Jewish magic, as we shall see in the following. By a ‘writing material’, I mean both an artefact on which a text is written and the material side of the writing act itself, that is, the writing instrument or the ink that is used for the writing. In fact, Jewish magic is first and foremost textual magic. The title of John Austin’s famous book on performative speech acts, ‘How to do things with words’ (Austin 1962), fits perfectly when it comes to describing the essence of Jewish magic. Magical texts are intended to be either spoken or written (or both!). Even in the former case, the instructions for the speech act are written. Therefore, writing materials are crucial for the medial aspect of magic, that is, the magical act itself, from wishful thinking to the final result. However, writing materials are not only the medium of a text, but also the object of an act carried out by human beings: writing materials were used as amulets, worn as such on the body (arm, neck), buried in the earth, burnt in a fire, thrown into the sea and so on. Magical acts related to written objects will consequently be focused on as well in this article.

Almost all the examples I will present here come from the geographical area of the Middle East. The question that my article tries to answer is whether there is a relationship between the choice of writing material used and the intended purpose of the magical act and/or artefact. Another focus is on the correspondence between material artefacts as finished products and instruction texts.

1 Some useful insights are provided by Markus Hilgert’s theoretical considerations of the ‘material turn’ concerning ancient textual artefacts (Hilgert 2010). Hilgert was mainly responsible for establishing the Collaborative Research Centre 933, ‘Material Text Cultures’ at the University of Heidelberg. A first draft of my article was presented at a conference entitled ‘Text–Image Relationship and Visual Elements in Written Hebrew Sources from the Middle Ages to Early Modern Period’ at the Hochschule für Jüdische Studien, Heidelberg, on 11 November 2013. In addition, see the proceedings collected in Boschung/Bremmer 2015.

2 Cf. already Speyer 1992, and Englehardt 2013.

3 Another study should be devoted to the *materiae magicae* in Jewish magic along the lines of Lev/Amar 2008. In addition, other material results of magical activities in Jewish magic such as voodoo dolls and images also deserve further investigation. The latter topic is currently being addressed by Giuseppe Veltri and Michael Kohs in their DFG funded research project ‘Magia Figurata: The Visual Effect of Jewish Magical Manuscripts of the Early Modern Era’ affiliated to the Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures at the University of Hamburg.

Following Gideon Bohak's study of Jewish magic, I would like to distinguish between finished products or applied texts on the one hand and instructions or recipes on the other.⁴ Finished products or applied texts include amulets, magic bowls, rings, gems, seals and even skulls, for example. Ideally, material evidence of these finished products is provided by archaeological excavations, but mostly – and regrettably – by the market for antiques, which means the network of illegal digging, dubious dealers and obsessive collectors. Durable materials like metals, stones and bones naturally survive the passage of time. In addition, amulets made of parchment or paper have been preserved, first and foremost in the Cairo Geniza, the main source of texts related to Jewish magic in this cultural area from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages.

Instructions or recipes describing the production of finished products and/or the performance of a magical act or ritual are found usually in manuscripts. Again, the Cairo Geniza provides us with thousands of related fragments. In general, these manuscripts are written on parchment or paper, but the instruction texts collected in these manuscripts mention many more writing materials as well, as we shall see later on. An overlapping of both distinctions – finished products and instructions – can be seen in systematic collections of recipes and even in manuals for magical practitioners; these could be regarded as finished products as well as instruction texts.

2 Writing materials of magical artefacts as finished products

2.1 Amulets

A rather minor, but nevertheless very important corpus of magical Jewish artefacts from biblical times to the Byzantine period consists of inscribed metal amulets (Fig. 1). While only two or three metal amulets from biblical times have been found, about 50 to 60 Jewish amulets dating from Late Antiquity to the Byzantine period are currently known to us.⁵ Joseph Naveh and Shaul Shaked have published about 31 metal amulets in two volumes.⁶ These amulets are made

⁴ Bohak 2008, 144; cf. already Schäfer/Shaked 1994, 5.

⁵ Cf. Bohak 2008, 149–153.

⁶ Naveh/Shaked ²1987, 39–122; Naveh/Shaked 1993, 41–109.

of metal lamellae, that is, thin plates or pieces of foil made of gold, silver, bronze, copper or lead. The shape or format of an amulet is frequently rectangular or elongated. The text written on them is inscribed – or, more precisely, engraved – in square script with a sharp instrument, usually only on one side. The language of most of the Jewish amulets is Aramaic and/or Hebrew. Besides the verbal text, there are symbols, signs and so-called *characteres* on them, that is, letters of a magical alphabet.⁷ Obviously, the amulets were folded or sometimes rolled up and placed in a special tube or box. In some cases, the whole container with the amulet inside it has been found.⁸ Amulets could be worn around a person's neck, an arm or a leg this way. In cases where their provenance is known, we are able to tell that the amulets originated from Syria, Egypt, Sicily, Georgia and even England. Most of them come from Palestine, however.⁹ Some of them were buried in graves or placed under the cornerstones or doorsteps of people's houses. Other amulets were excavated in the ruins of a synagogue.

Normally, the text on the amulet mentions its purpose and the name of its owner. The purpose of an amulet is generally an apotropaic one: to protect the bearer against evil forces. This could even be connected with healing tasks since evil forces were (and still are) considered to be responsible for illness and bad luck; many amulets were designed to provide protection against fever or prevent difficulties during childbirth. In addition to this, there are amulets that are devoted to love or to being successful in life. A few amulets made of lead are particularly interesting as these are meant to invoke a curse on someone. While lead amulets – so-called *defixiones* – were very popular in Roman culture,¹⁰ they were rather unusual in ancient Jewish culture, it seems.¹¹ The practice of using metal amulets did not end in the early Byzantine period by any means, but continued through the Middle Ages and is still extant today.¹²

In general, the existence of amulets made of metal was primarily due to their durability. Another important aspect of metal amulets is the value of the material that was used to make them, of course. This point was related to the social status of the amulet's wearer.¹³ The majority of amulet users did not belong to the higher echelons of society, however, as most of the amulets were made of

7 Cf. Bohak 2008, 250–251.

8 Cf., e.g., Naveh/Shaked ²1987, 42 ('Amulet 1'), 58 ('Amulet 4'), 70 ('Amulet 7').

9 Eshel/Leiman 2010, 190, name fifteen published and nineteen unpublished Jewish amulets of known Palestinian provenance.

10 Cf. Gager 1992.

11 Cf. Bohak 2008, 319 and 343.

12 Cf. Schrire 1966; Shachar 1981, 237–317; Davis/Frenkel 1995.

13 Cf. Eshel/Leiman 2010, 194.



Fig. 1: Bronze amulet (4th–7th CE) for the protection of a woman called Sarah and her newborn child against demons by invoking the help of three angels. BLMJ 7052 from the Jeannette and Jonathan Rosen Collection. Courtesy of the Bible Lands Museum Jerusalem, Photographer: Moshe Caine.

organic material such as leather, parchment, papyrus, paper, other plant material or even cloth. These materials are perishable and are not resistant to humidity – or vermin, for that matter. Sometimes this is the reason why only the metal con-

tainer that an amulet was kept in has survived, not the actual amulet itself. The exception to the rule here is the existence of dozens of amulets – perhaps even hundreds of them – written on parchment or paper, which were preserved in the Cairo Geniza for centuries.¹⁴ An early example of sustainability is provided by an amulet written on a sheet of used paper.¹⁵ Furthermore, there is clear evidence of the mass production of prefabricated amulets in the Cairo Geniza.¹⁶ In general, the texts on these amulets exhibit the same features as the metal amulets inscribed several hundred years earlier.

The production of amulets was a business conducted by professional and semi-professional scribes. In some cases, there are many mistakes in the magical text and the unskilled script used also reveals that the scribe who worked on the amulet was obviously inexperienced.¹⁷ Amulet texts were usually composed by magicians or scribes based on magical formulas used as a kind of template and on the specific wishes of their clients.

2.2 Rings, gems, pendants and seals

To complete the picture, I would like to mention at least a few more magical artefacts that have survived: rings, gems, pendants and seals.¹⁸ Most of these items are non-verbal and many of them are only engraved with images, signs and symbols; only a few of them are inscribed with a couple of magical names or words. Rings, pendants and seals are usually made of gold, silver or bronze. The ‘ring’ or ‘seal of King Solomon’ is especially prominent in texts on Jewish magic.¹⁹ Only a dozen of

14 Cf. the edition of Geniza amulets in the collections in Naveh/Shaked ²1987, 216–217 (‘Geniza 1’), 220–225 (‘Geniza 3–4’), 237–240 (‘Geniza 7–8’); Naveh/Shaked 1993, 152–157 (‘Geniza 10’), 164–166 (‘Geniza 12’), 209–212 (‘Geniza 19’), 233–234 (‘Geniza 27’), 238–242 (‘Geniza 29’); Schiffman/Swartz 1992, 64–164; Schäfer/Shaked 1994, 151–234; Schäfer/Shaked 1997, 232–277.

15 See Schäfer/Shaked 1997, 274–277: CUL TS K 1.106 containing an amulet on fol. 1a and remains of an Arabic contract on fol. 1b; cf. also Naveh/Shaked 1993, 230–234: CUL TS Misc. 10.35 together with CUL TS Misc. 10.122 (‘Geniza 26’), and CUL TS Misc. 29.4 (‘Geniza 27’) containing recipes or an amulet on one side and several lines in Arabic characters, apparently unrelated, on the other side.

16 Cf. Bohak 2009, focusing on CUL TS AS 143.26.

17 Cf., e.g., Naveh/Shaked 1993, 152–157 and plates 35–36: CUL TS K 1.18 + TS K 1.30 (‘Geniza 10’); *ibid.*, 164–166 and plate 39: CUL TS K 1.42 (‘Geniza 12’); *ibid.*, 172–174 and plates 44–45: CUL TS K 1.80 (‘Geniza 15’); *ibid.*, 174–181 and plates 46–48: CUL TS K 1.91 + TS K 1.117 (‘Geniza 16’); Schäfer/Shaked 1994, 171–175: CUL TS 8.275; *ibid.*, 176–182: CUL TS Misc. 10.31.

18 Cf. Bohak 2008, 158–165; Shachar 1981.

19 See Torijano 2002, 76–78, and 2013, 115–117.

the 5,000-odd magical gems from Late Antiquity²⁰ that are known are written in Hebrew or Aramaic; most are written in Latin or Greek. The gems are sometimes made of rare and precious stones, and sometimes we find semi-precious stones such as jasper and carnelian, too.

2.3 Babylonian incantation bowls

One rather separate field in Jewish magic is related to Babylonian magic or incantation bowls.²¹ All of these magical bowls were found in an area now encompassed by Iraq and western Iran (Fig. 2, Fig. 3). The phenomenon of magical bowls is limited to the period from the 5th to the 8th century CE. Currently, thousands of incantation bowls are known to exist and about hundreds of their texts have been published to date, e.g. by James Montgomery²², Joseph Naveh and Shaul Shaked,²³ Dan Levene²⁴, Christa Müller-Kessler²⁵, Shaul Shaked, James Ford and Siam Bhayro,²⁶ and Marco Moriggi²⁷. The bowls have been collected by public libraries or are owned by private collectors now. The material of which they are made is clay. The common size of a magical bowl is approx. 16 cm in diameter and 5 to 6 cm in depth. The bowls are inscribed and often have an image of a demon on them in the centre.

The script written on them usually runs inside the bowl, spiralling from the outer rim to the centre of the bowl. The language on the bowls is usually Babylonian Aramaic. In addition to this, there are also bowls that are written in Mandaic, Syriac, Pahlavi or Arabic; this means that Jews were not the only ones to use such items. Most of the texts in the bowls are incantations. The purpose of the bowls was usually to protect the owner's house and all its inhabitants against evil forces. In cases where the bowls were found *in situ*, they were turned upside down; in analogy to mouse traps, the bowls can therefore be fittingly described as 'demon traps'. When called by his (or her) name, the demon was attracted to the bowl. He (or she) followed the direction of the script until he got caught in the

²⁰ See Bonner 1950; Michel 2004a and 2004b; also: The Campbell Bonner Magical Gems Database (CBd): <http://www2.szepepmuveszeti.hu/talismans/> (last accessed: 20 April 2017).

²¹ Cf. Bohak 2008, 183–193.

²² Montgomery 1913.

²³ Naveh/Shaked ¹⁹⁸⁷; Naveh/Shaked 1993.

²⁴ Levene 2003; Levene 2013.

²⁵ Müller-Kessler 2005.

²⁶ Shaked/Ford/Bhayro 2013.

²⁷ Moriggi 2014.



Fig. 2: University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Hebrew Bowl B2965A, Iraq, Nippur, c. 6th–7th CE, terracotta. The bowl shows the image of a chained demon surrounded by eleven to twelve lines of Hebrew text. Courtesy of Penn Museum.



Fig. 3: University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Hebrew Bowl 85-48-905, Iraq, Nippur, c. 6th–7th CE, terracotta. The bowl shows the image of a bearded (?) demon whose arms are chained (?). The demon is not situated in the middle of the bowl but at the side between seven lines of pseudo-script. Courtesy of Penn Museum.

middle of the bowl.²⁸ In addition, pairs of bowls have been found that were put together like a ball, the idea doubtless being that the demon could be trapped inside.²⁹

2.4 Magical skulls

Perhaps the most puzzling – and macabre – evidence of Jewish magic is that of human skulls inscribed with magic texts in Aramaic (Fig. 4). Recently, Dan Levene published the texts written on five skulls.³⁰ Unfortunately, the provenance of these skulls is not attested precisely, but judging by the script, language and content of the texts, which are very similar to those on Babylonian incantation bowls, a late antique or early mediaeval date and Babylonian origin are possible. There can be no doubt whatsoever about the ‘Jewishness’ of these artefacts,

²⁸ Cf. Naveh/Shaked² 1987, 15.

²⁹ Cf. Levene 2011.

³⁰ Levene 2006.

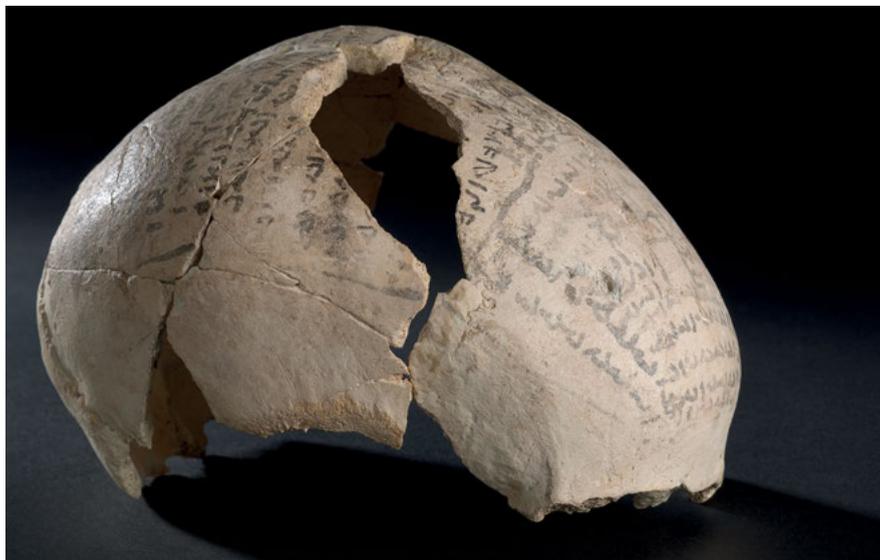


Fig. 4: Magical skull inscribed with Hebrew letters and pseudo-script; Berlin, Vorderasiatisches Museum VA 2459. © bpk / Vorderasiatisches Museum, SMB / Photographer: Olaf M. Teßmer.

however. The purpose of these skulls is rather uncertain, but there seems to be no relation to necromancy. The text on one skull includes the words ‘healing from Heaven’, which is very common in Jewish magical texts. At least some of these skulls have been shown to be female, but at present we have no explanation as to why they were used. It should be stressed that inscribed human skulls are highly unusual in a Jewish context; no instruction text on Jewish magic has been published so far that describes the use of human skulls. All we have is evidence of writing on animal bones, as we shall see later.

3 Instruction texts used for Jewish magic

As a rule, one can generally find two main topics in instruction texts: first of all, the performance of magical acts described in varying detail, and second, in a narrower sense, the preparation of a specific magical artefact such as an amulet. Fragments from the Cairo Geniza provide us with thousands of miscellaneous manuscripts related to Jewish magic, currently making it the main source of information at our disposal. Besides the amulets already mentioned, hundreds of instruction texts dealing with the performance of magical acts and rituals have mainly been found. These are usually written on parchment or paper. We cannot

say which instructions were actually carried out, of course, as this information is usually missing.³¹ Sometimes the common phrase ‘checked and proven’ or a similar remark was written at the end of an instruction text. This could merely be advertising, however. While many of the described rituals are related to performative speech acts, others are focused on writing acts. In this regard, almost anything conceivable can be used as writing material. I shall mention a few examples in the next section.

3.1 Writing materials

In terms of the finished products discussed so far, only amulets, rings, gems, pendants and seals are actually mentioned in the instruction texts; there is nothing in these texts referring to writing on magical bowls or human skulls. According to the reviewed instruction texts which have been published to date, most amulets are made of parchment or paper. Sometimes the parchment is specified as kosher parchment or as fine parchment, that is, vellum. This practice is somehow related to the making of phylacteries (*tefillin* in Hebrew). The skin of various animals is mentioned, such as that of gazelles (deer came later), sheep, calves, oxen, lions and even cats and dogs. In the very popular Jewish handbook called *Sefer Shim-mush Tehillim* (‘Book of the Magical Use of Psalms’), the skin of a dog should be inscribed according to one instruction text devoted to creating hatred between a man and his wife.³² Without any explicit explanation in the text itself, it seems that the widespread image of dogs as evil, demonic creatures is at the heart of this usage.

Furthermore, amulets could be made of textiles such as a rag, piece of cloth, a shirt or piece of cotton. In one instruction text from the Cairo Geniza describing the production of an amulet, for instance, it says this:

It is for love. Write it on a piece of cloth from his garment.³³

On the next page of the same Geniza fragment concerning another instruction on how to separate two people from each other, we find the following:

³¹ Cf. Rebigier 2010b.

³² Rebigier 2010a, 111* (s. 173 concerning Psalm 140: Sephardic recension).

³³ Naveh/Shaked 1993, 231: CUL TS Misc. 10.35, 1:1 (‘Geniza 26’).

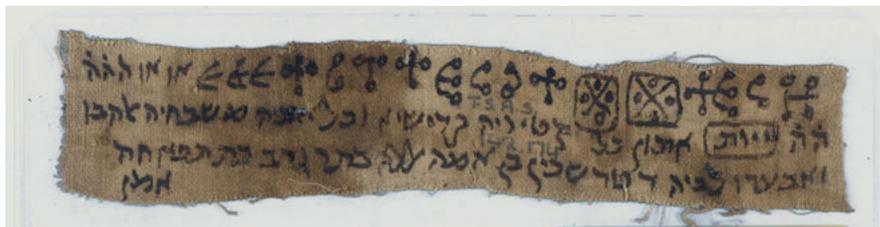


Fig. 5: Cambridge University Library, TS AS 142.174, fols 1r and 1v. Cloth amulet. Reproduced by kind permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.

Write on a piece of cloth from the garment of whoever you wish.³⁴

Obviously, the cloth from the garment of the respective person symbolises the person him- or herself. It can therefore be used in magical acts especially concerned with personal affairs. There is, indeed, evidence of this practice, as can be seen in a love amulet written on cloth that was found in the Cairo Geniza and published by Naveh and Shaked (Fig. 5).³⁵ (Unfortunately, we do not know whether this piece of cloth once belonged to the beloved person.)

A variety of metals are mentioned in instruction texts describing writing materials, such as gold, silver, bronze, iron, lead, tin and copper. The *Sefer ha-Razim* I ('The Book of the Secrets'), for instance, which is probably the best-known magical manual in Judaism, reads as follows in paragraph 160:

Write (the names of) these angels on a gold lamella and put it into a silver tube.³⁶

While this instruction corresponds with the surviving finished products, it must be emphasised that the long series of angelic names mentioned in the *Sefer ha-Razim* I is not actually found in the corpus of ancient metal amulets.

As mentioned above, lead amulets were very common in Hellenistic Greek and Latin magic in Late Antiquity. The purpose of these so-called *defixiones* was an aggressive one, viz. to harm or even kill somebody. The rather rare evidence of a Jewish lead amulet has a fine counterpart in an instruction text from the Cairo Geniza:

³⁴ Ibid., 2:2.

³⁵ Naveh/Shaked 1987, 216–217; CUL TS AS 142.174 ('Geniza 1').

³⁶ Rebiger/Schäfer 2009, 54*–55* (my translation).

For extermination: [Take] a lamella of lead [and] write [on it] in the first hour of the day and bury it in a fresh grave.³⁷

Then the incantation text for the killing of the victim follows. A later scribe tried to 'soften' the purpose of this incantation by adding the gloss: <[For] a disease>. Gideon Bohak presented an amulet containing a textual parallel to this incantation text.³⁸ In his analysis, he stressed the point that this Jewish amulet is not made of lead, but of vellum. In his opinion, Jewish magicians tended – for unknown reasons – to avoid manufacturing lead *defixiones* in general.³⁹

Furthermore, in other instruction texts, various metal products are mentioned which are to be inscribed, such as rings, pendants, seals and even a cold-water pipe. Other writing materials mentioned in the instruction texts from the Cairo Geniza include stones like the so-called *shoham*⁴⁰ stones, marble, gems such as sapphires, and elements like sulphur. Shards of pottery (ostraca) were very popular as writing materials in Late Antiquity. Potshards from a river,⁴¹ the sea⁴² or a junction⁴³ are mentioned frequently in the instruction texts. Other instruction texts require unbaked shards to be used to destroy a dovecot⁴⁴ or a shard to be used that had been dried in the sun.⁴⁵

Various plants that were used as writing materials are mentioned, too. One instruction concerning impotency reads as follows, for example:

To release [magic]: Write it on three leaves of an elm tree and wipe it away with water from a jar. And give the bridegroom and bride [the water] to drink.⁴⁶

The list of other plants proposed as writing materials includes laurel, thornbush, pomegranate, fig, reed and willow. One very typical instruction for strengthening the memory⁴⁷ – referred to as 'opening of the heart' – reads:

Opening of the heart: Write Psalm 119:97 on an apple or an ethrog and eat it.⁴⁸

37 Schäfer/Shaked 1994, 32: CUL TS K 1.56, fol. 2a/6–7 (my translation).

38 Bohak 2008, 144–148.

39 Ibid., 155.

40 Probably the carnelian; cf. Gen 2:12; Job 28:16.

41 Schäfer/Shaked 1999, 146: CUL TS NS 317.18, fol. 2a/19f.

42 Ibid., 145: CUL TS AS 142.13, fol. 1a/7 and 1a/18.

43 Ibid., 289: CUL TS NS 216.23, fol. 1b/3.

44 Ibid., 204: CUL TS Ar. 36.122, fol. 1b/3f.

45 Ibid., 360: CUL TS NS 324.92, fol. 1b/20.

46 Ibid., 70: CUL TS K 1.162, fol. 1d/1f. (my translation).

47 Cf. Trachtenberg 1970, 190–192; Swartz 1996, 43–47; Bos 1995; Harari 2004.

48 Schäfer/Shaked 1999, 340: CUL TS AS 143.169, fol. 2a/19f. (my translation).

As I mentioned earlier, there is no evidence of the use of human skulls in instruction texts, but animal bones are mentioned. One instruction text from a collection of magical recipes stemming from the Cairo Geniza says this, for example (Fig. 6):

To change [a] man's mind: Write on three ribs of a sheep or cow, and there should be no flesh on the ribs. [Then an incantation of Satan and various angels and a specification of the purpose follow:] in order to turn the heart and kidneys of NN to great fear [of God] and love of Heaven. Then throw the ribs into the fire or into an oven.⁴⁹

The editors of this text did not explain the meaning and relationship between the purpose of the spell and *materiae magicae* in their commentary. In Christian tradition, at least, it is reasonable to imagine the sheep as a symbol of piety, but I would suggest that a sheep is not essential here, which is why the instruction allows a cow to be used. The ribs *are* crucial, though, and they are the hidden link. The Hebrew word for rib is שֵׁלָא (šela'), written with the vowels šere and qamaš. There happens to be another Hebrew word with the same consonants, but with a different vocalisation: שֵׁלָא vocalised with *segol* and *pataḥ*, which is pronounced only slightly differently. This lexeme means 'fall' or 'sin', which is more appropriate for the purpose of our instruction text, namely to become a pious man, that is, a man without sin. So we can assume a kind of hidden pun here concerning the relationship between the purpose of the instruction and the recommended writing material. The additional instruction that there should be no flesh on the ribs is also clearer now, too: probably, the sins of the flesh are being alluded to in this case. Accordingly, the fire is meant to consume the person's sins when the ribs are thrown into it. Another example of the use of an animal bone for a magical act is the following:

For hate: You shall write on the shoulder of a dog with the blood of a donkey, and you shall bury the shoulder under the head of the person(s) you wish hate to fall upon.⁵⁰

The stereotypical evil character and symbolic meaning of a dog has already been mentioned. It is interesting that an alternative is presented in the continuation of this instruction:

If you do not manage to get that, you should write it in a bowl, which you should wash with the water of a well which has not seen the sun.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Schäfer/Shaked 1994, 137–138: CUL TS K 1.28, fol. 2b/13–21 (my translation).

⁵⁰ Naveh/Shaked 1993, 149–150: CUL TS K 1.15, 1:11-13 ('Geniza 9'). The shoulder is also attested in Greek magic (omoplatoscopy).

⁵¹ Naveh/Shaked 1993. Note that this bowl is not the same as the so-called magic bowls discussed above.

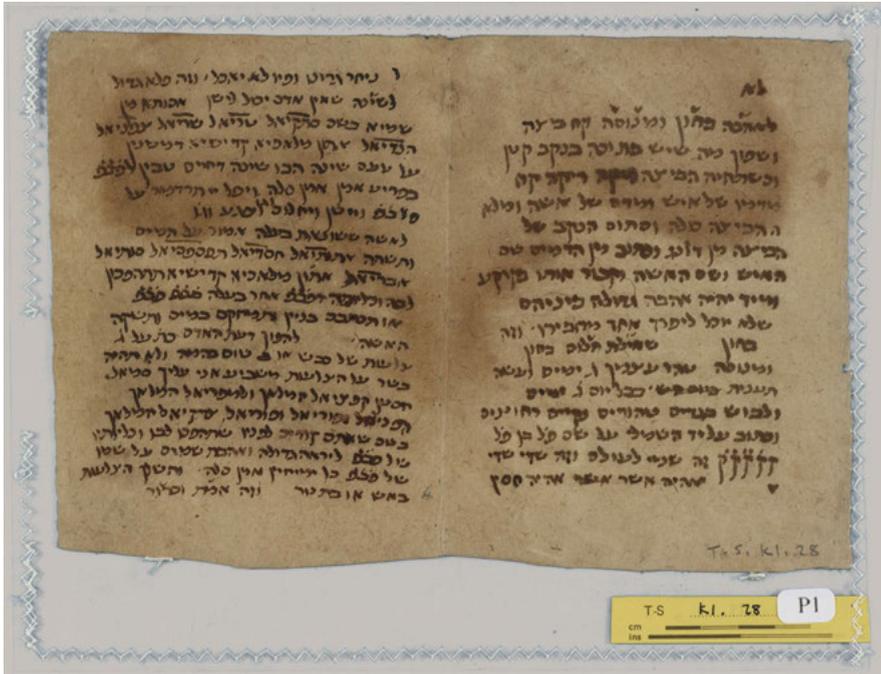


Fig. 6: Cambridge University Library TS K 1.28, fols 1r–2v. Fragment of a magical handbook (*segullot*). Reproduced by kind permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.

Another part of an animal is used as writing material in the following instruction, but the meaning of the words is not absolutely unclear:

Take a hoof [?] and write on it.⁵²

One animal product is used very often in Jewish magic: an egg. The symbolic meaning of this very accessible and cheap food is manifold. In one case, for instance, an instruction for malediction reads:

To cause fever: Proven. Take an egg laid on the sixth day and write [names] on it.⁵³

⁵² Naveh/Shaked 1987, 233: CUL TS K 1.73, 3:8 ('Geniza 6').

⁵³ Schäfer/Shaked 1999, 32: CUL TS Ar. 44.26, fol. 1b/3f. (my translation).

In fact, eggshells inscribed with Hebrew letters were found in Babylonia close to magic bowls.⁵⁴ Another text concerning ‘positive’ magic says the following:

For love: Checked and proven. Take an egg and pour what is inside it through a small hole. When the egg is empty, take the blood [of the] man and the blood [of the] woman and fill the whole egg [with it]. Close the hole of the egg with wax, write the name of the man and the name of the woman [on the eggshell] with the blood and bury it in the earth. Great love will immediately be felt between them so that neither of them can leave the other. That is proven.⁵⁵

Here, obviously, the egg is a symbol of fertility and the blood is a symbol of life. Another text dealing with difficulties in childbirth gives this advice:

Write on the skin of an unborn animal.⁵⁶

In this case, the link between childbirth and the unborn animal is obviously the analogy of giving birth.

A direct connection between the writing material and the intended purpose can be seen in healing magic. In one example, some instructions exist on writing names directly on the side of the person’s body that hurts. According to James Frazer, this technique of magical ‘tattooing’ could be called ‘contagious magic’.⁵⁷ In the *Sefer Shimmush Tehillim*, paragraph 135 concerning Psalm 119:49–56, we find the following instruction:

Write [the verses of the psalm] on the side of the spleen.⁵⁸

In a similar way, the following instruction from another collection of recipes reads as follows:

For the sting of a scorpion, write over the pain[ful spot].⁵⁹

In fact, this writing technique is not only attested in healing magic, but also concerning a request to have a specific dream, as in the following instruction:

54 Cf. Hilprecht 1904, 447–448; Bohak 2008, 184.

55 Schäfer/Shaked 1994, 135–136: CUL TS K 1.28, fol. 1a/2–11 (my translation).

56 Schäfer/Shaked 1999, 137: CUL TS AS 143.171, fol. 2a/6 (my translation).

57 Cf. Frazer 1998, 26–28 and 37–44.

58 Rebigier 2010a, 88*–89* (O1531b and S1551; my translation).

59 Naveh/Shaked 1993, 178: CUL TS K 1.117, 5:12 (‘Geniza 16’).

A dream request, tested and proven. Purify yourself three times and fast once every three days and wear pure, clean, washed clothes and write on your left arm: concerning the name of N, son of N, QQ Q Q Q, *This is my name forever, and this is* (Exodus 3:15), Shaddai, Shaddai, I am that I am, Ḥasin Yah, one whose name is YY of Hosts, YY of Hosts, YY of Hosts, YY, God, YY God, who is seated on the wheels of the Merkava. I call you Michael, the great prince, to come to me and show me all I request of you on this night, truly. Fast – do not eat or drink for 42 days and one night. Then sleep in a pure place and he will tell you everything you wish to know.⁶⁰

In this spell, the incantation is written directly on the person's left arm, where phylacteries are usually worn by an observant male Jew during morning prayer on weekdays.

3.2 Writing techniques and the agency of writing

The usual writing techniques were inscribing, scratching and engraving. In magic, however, the writing act can be related to the agency of the writing itself. Thus, a very common technique in Jewish magic is to use the script and writing material as a channel for expressing powerful magical words; the inscribed object could be eaten or the writing could be licked off, for instance. The technique of dissolving the writing in a liquid and then drinking the liquid was very widespread.⁶¹ One instruction text concerning the strengthening of the memory says this, for instance:

For opening of the heart: Write on a fingernail and lick [the writing] off with your tongue.⁶²

There is a popular habit among Jewish schoolchildren of eating inscribed cakes for this reason.⁶³ In another instruction text for the purpose of acquiring grace and beauty, the production of a cosmetic ointment containing rose oil and magical names is described:

[Write] on the palm of a hand and wash it off with rose oil, then smear [the oil you have used] over your face.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Schäfer/Shaked 1994, 136: CUL TS K 1.28, fol. 1a/11–16 (my translation); cf. Swartz 2006, 315–316.

⁶¹ Cf. Rebigier 2014, 103–107.

⁶² Schäfer/Shaked 1999, 169: Westminster College Misc. 117, fol. 1a/8 (my translation).

⁶³ Ibid., 108: CUL TS Misc. 11.12, fol. 1a/4; cf., e.g., *ibid.*, 169: Westminster College Misc. 117, fol. 1a/4; cf. Marcus 1996, 47–73.

⁶⁴ Naveh/Shaked 1993, 200: CUL TS K 1.143, 13:7–9 ('Geniza 18').

It was common to drink magically manipulated liquids, especially in instructions for healing a person:

Write it inside a cup and give [it] to the sick man to drink.⁶⁵

3.3 Inks

The list of inks mentioned in the instruction texts includes plain ink, *rubia tinctorum* ('dyer's madder'; *pu'a* in Hebrew), blood (from a fowl⁶⁶ or chicken,⁶⁷ for instance), myrrh and wine.

Furthermore, we can add an example showing the symbolic meaning of inks. In a chapter of a magical manual dedicated to love and sympathy, it says:

Write with musk and saffron.⁶⁸

Saffron is also used as a kind of ink in other love spells.⁶⁹ These very expensive ingredients were thought to be appropriate for a love charm.

To end my overview of various writing materials and inks mentioned in instruction texts from the Cairo Geniza, I would like to give a fine example of a misunderstanding. In paragraph 58 of the *Sefer ha-Razim* I, we can read the following instruction:

Take hieratic paper and write on it with ink [made] of myrrh.⁷⁰

The slightly corrupted words used here for 'hieratic paper' and 'ink of myrrh' are of Greek origin: *χάρτης ιερατικόν* and *συμυρνό-μελαν*. 'Hieratic paper' means the papyrus of the Egyptian priests inscribed with hieroglyphics. The ink made of myrrh is a black mixture of ink and myrrh also known as the 'ink of Hermes'. This kind of papyrus and ink is well attested in the *Papyri graecae magicae*.⁷¹ It is easy to reconstruct the understanding of this vocabulary in the Egyptian context of Late

⁶⁵ Schäfer/Shaked 1999, 162: CUL TS NS 175.58, fol. 2b/2 (my translation).

⁶⁶ Naveh/Shaked 1993, 179: CUL TS K 1.117, 7:2 ('Geniza 16').

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 7:12.

⁶⁸ Schäfer/Shaked 1999, 57: JTSL ENA 1177, fol. 20b/6 (my translation).

⁶⁹ Cf. Naveh/Shaked ²1987, 229: CUL TS K 1.70, 4:4 ('Geniza 5'), 233: CUL TS K 1.73, 2:8 ('Geniza 6').

⁷⁰ Rebiger/Schäfer 2009, 20*–21*: paragraph 58 (my translation).

⁷¹ Cf. PGM I/23f.; II/61; IV/2393; V/305ff., and XIII/314. In the context of Jewish magic from the Cairo Geniza, 'hieratic paper' is also attested in Schäfer/Shaked 1999, 250: CUL TS NS 312.118, fol. 2b/10.

Antiquity, but in the later transmission of the *Sefer ha-Razim* I, the knowledge of the Greek language and the cult of the Egyptian priest that one needed was totally lost. Consequently, the Judaeo-Arabic translation of this passage attested in the Geniza fragment Oxford, Bodleian Library, Heb.f.45 (G22) reads:

Take paper from a place called Iritiqon.⁷²

And the rather late Yemenite manuscripts Ms. Tel Aviv, Bill Gross 42 (TA42), and Ms. New York, Public Library, Ms. Hebr. 40, dated in the 18th–19th century, read:

Take a new sheet of paper and write on it with boiled ink (*deyo mevushal* in Hebrew).⁷³

The scribes of the parallel European manuscripts did not understand anything in this case and interpreted these words as *nomina barbara*, that is, strange, but powerful names. So it is no wonder, one may joke, that this magical instruction did not work, at least not in later times.

4 Summary

In many cases, there is a clear correspondence between the writing materials recommended in magical instruction texts and the finished products found in excavations or otherwise known from collections and the antique market. This is especially true of amulets, magical rings, gems, pendants and seals. The most common writing materials of all that were used for amulets were parchment, paper, potshards and various types of metal. Sometimes even textiles were used, like the love amulet on cloth from the Cairo Geniza mentioned above. Furthermore, metals were used for the fabrication of rings and pendants. Gems were made from stones and seals were prepared from wax. The advantage of using these materials rather than others is their relative durability. In contrast, amulets that were once written on parts of plants such as leaves, twigs or pieces of bark have been lost completely due to natural decay. In general, the same is true of animal products like eggs, but eggshells inscribed with Hebrew letters have luckily been found together with magical bowls. As for writing on bones, we have

⁷² Rebigier/Schäfer 2009, 20*: paragraph 58 (G22; my translation).

⁷³ Ibid., paragraph 58 (TA42; my translation).

already discussed evidence of magically inscribed human skulls and know that animal bones are mentioned specifically in instruction texts.

Furthermore, we need to take into account the loss of writing materials due to typical magical techniques like dissolving magical writing in a liquid so it could be drunk afterwards.

Abbreviations

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| AS | Additional Series, Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit, Cambridge University Library |
| BL | British Library |
| CUL | Cambridge University Library |
| Misc. | Miscellaneous, Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit, Cambridge University Library |
| NS | New Series, Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit, Cambridge University Library |
| PGM | Papyri Graecae Magicae |
| TS | Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit, Cambridge University Library |

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