

## A history of amulets in ten objects

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### Abstract

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

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### Keywords

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

### Introduction – a hare's foot and a Billiken

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

Westminster Hall – Sir William Batten, Member of Parliament and surveyor to the Navy ([Pepys, Latham \(ed\), 2003, p xlv](#)).<sup>[2]</sup>

Batten had given Pepys medical advice regarding his latest ailment, a most painful bout of colic, for which he showed Pepys the mistake he had made with the hare's foot and guaranteed the perfect modification to his remedy. Originally, the foot had not been cut properly, and 'hath not the joynt to it'; this was where the problem lay.<sup>[3]</sup> Eager to try anything to alleviate his swollen belly and 'grudgings of wind', Pepys handled Batten's correctly cut hare's foot, and noted in wonder:

[Batten] assures me he never had his choliqve since he carried it about him: and it is a strange thing how fancy works, for I no sooner almost handled his foote but my belly began to be loose and to break wind, and whereas I was in some pain yesterday and t'other day and in fear of more to-day, I became very well, and so continue.<sup>[4]</sup>

The next day, having obtained a new animal and taken Batten's advice, Pepys was finally convinced: 'To my office till past 12, and then home to supper and to bed, being now mighty well, and truly I cannot but impute it to my fresh hare's foote.'<sup>[5]</sup> One thing was clear; the hare's foot had worked. Pepys was cured of colic.

**Figure 1**



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Amulet One – Hare's foot, object number A666124

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This object is not unfamiliar to us. This particular hare's foot, which forms part of the Science Museum's amulet collection, is originally from Norfolk and dated 1870–1920, but hares' and rabbits' feet can still be bought as 'lucky charms' and are widely available on the internet.<sup>[6]</sup> Populist literature similarly continues to reference the use of these items; *Scientific American* published an article on 'What Makes a Rabbit's Foot Lucky' in 2011 (D'Costa, 2011). Such objects remain a part of popular culture – that is, part of recognised cultural traditions – over three hundred years after being employed by Pepys. Yet we can observe a shift in function. In Pepys' world, the various elements that constituted sickness and health were broad and wide-ranging. Illness, like health, could be affected by an extensive range of things from an imbalance of the bodily humours, environmental factors such as sleep, food, emotions and exercise, supernatural or preternatural forces, and even the stars.<sup>[7]</sup> Whilst Pepys sometimes consulted learned medical practitioners, the variety of people from whom he could seek counsel was extensive. In this case, he took the advice of his friend Sir William Batten.<sup>[8]</sup> Pepys' story is part of a larger narrative of healing in which learned medicine, religion, astrology, magic, fate and fortune all played a role. As part of healing, objects could be invested with power from any one or more of these various sources, and employed to cure or protect. These objects have often

been called amulets, both historically and today, although our interpretation of them has changed over time. The healing potency of amulets has not always been entirely understood, and their means of operation often hidden from comprehension. Yet within their own contexts, this functional complexity has not detracted from the items' curative or protective effects. The narrative of healing that included amulets continued throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and only when modern medicine necessitated 'scientific', empiric evidence of the mechanisms of objects' efficacy did this change. In other words, amulets were relegated from the domain of authorised healing once it became a requirement to know and explain *how* cures worked, not just that they *did* work.

The word 'amulet' originates from the Latin 'amulētum', and was used by Pliny the Elder (23–79 CE) to denote an item worn on the body for therapeutic, apotropaic or exorcistic benefit (Skemer, 2006, pp 6–7). Whilst many have noted the belief that the word can be traced back to Arabic, the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) has refuted this (OED, 2018, 'amulet'). Whilst definitions vary, 'charm' is often used synonymously with 'amulet', whilst 'talisman' features less frequently. For instance, the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford has implied a semantic similarity between 'amulets' and 'charms', noting that an amulet is defined by the OED as: 'Anything worn about the person as a charm preventative against evil, mischief, disease, witchcraft, etc.', whilst a charm is described as 'Anything worn about the person to avert evil or ensure prosperity' – 'though a charm may also be a spell or incantation believed to have a magical power' (Pitt Rivers Museum, 2017). 'Amulets' and 'charms' are also used synonymously by the Horniman Museum in London, and the Oxford English Dictionary's definitions further allude to this; one entry noting that a charm is 'Anything worn about the person to avert evil or ensure prosperity; an amulet' (Horniman Museum, 2017).[9]

Evidently, amulets cannot be easily and simply defined, in part because the ways in which they have been used and understood have changed from antiquity to today. What, then, is the defining feature which makes an object an amulet? The answer to this is, its power. In the most basic and fundamental way, amulets are invested with the potency to heal. Healing centres around cure and protection, but where once these two actions were closely related, now they are more distinct. Historically, healing has not been monolithic and has taken many forms, relating to and deriving from faculties of fortune, fate, astrology, religion, magic, luck and more. Healing could therefore constitute anything from curing a specific disease, to averting a malevolent force, or fostering good fortune. This functional variation is valuable, as it can tell us a great deal about the practices and cultures in which objects are situated, as well as the objects themselves. For instance, around 250 years after Pepys cured his colic with our first amulet, the hare's foot, an amusement park opened in Paris. As part of their brand *Luna Park* adopted a mascot known as a 'Billiken', a creature devised by an American artist who reportedly saw the mysterious figure in a dream and patented it in 1908. The Billiken, known as 'God of Things as They Ought To Be' was said to bring the customer luck, indicated by the inscription upon our second object, the park's token: *Si tu me gardes je te porterai bonheur* ('If you keep me I will bring you good luck/happiness') / 'I smile at you bad luck can't harm you'.<sup>[10]</sup> This amulet offered protection and generated auspicious effects to the person who possessed it. Evidently, it had been considered important enough to be kept. Thus whilst culturally, temporally and materially distinct, the hare's foot and the Luna Park Billiken are nevertheless united by their curative and protective potency, and demonstrate the wide spectrum of healing.

**Figure 2**



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Amulet Two – Luna Park Billiken, object number A665090/1

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Yet where once healing and amulets went hand in hand, modern discussions tend to treat them as distinct. Labelling certain objects as ‘amulets’ questions their power to work, and when these items and their potency are challenged, they are ‘othered’, relegated and disassociated from the realms of healing. The hare’s foot provides an example of this. Whether situated in museum collections or referred to in common parlance, this amulet is not commonly recognised today as a curative object, nor regarded as an effective remedy for the colic. Instead, the feet of rabbits and hares are now bought, used and regarded often merely as ‘lucky’ items. This hare’s foot from the Science Museum’s collections is recorded as an amulet employed ‘for protection against cramp’.<sup>[11]</sup> To label something as prophylactic, an item ‘against’ a particular affliction exemplifies typical language employed within museum catalogues in relation to amulets. Often, protective rather than curative functions of these objects are highlighted, perhaps because of the changing place of amulets in the narrative of European healing (for instance, [Rowlands, 2001](#)). If we therefore take this into consideration, the classification of the Science Museum’s hare’s foot and Pepys’ hare’s foot are similar, colic and cramp sharing many characteristics.

We do not yet have a full history of the hare’s foot. It may be that this object has been affected by historical changes and cultural discontinuities hidden by the passage of time. Yet whether vague semantics or functional progression, the hare’s foot also epitomises the modern tendency to *assume* we know what an object is for, as many museums catalogue hares’ and rabbits’ feet as ‘lucky’ regardless of the era from which they originated, and without acknowledging any evolution of use.<sup>[12]</sup> Historians, too, often erroneously refer to Pepys’ practice of carrying his ‘lucky hare’s foot’.<sup>[13]</sup> Through this tendency to infer an item’s purpose, assumptions are made about the power and value of objects; a trend applicable to *many* objects that are similarly regarded today as ‘amulets’.<sup>[14]</sup>

In short, when removed from their original contexts, amulets do not fit within modern, Western, rigidly defined notions of healing. As such, they often have their mysterious apotropaic values highlighted and sensationalised, whilst their fundamental healing power can be denigrated and trivialised. One common manifestation of this is the connection of amulets and their practices with superstition. Indeed, there seems to be a tendency to group anything vaguely esoteric, supernatural or unexplainable into the category of ‘amulets’.<sup>[15]</sup> This is in some sense prudent, as doing so provides scope for a great level of subjectivity afforded to these objects. However, to class amulets in general in this way disregards their disparate and diverse provenances and functions, undermining the fact that they were legitimate items within their own contexts, and leading to pejorative connotations being formed.<sup>[16]</sup>

The reasons for this anachronistic categorisation could be multifarious. As discussed, objects such as hares’ feet do not align

within the modern Western boundaries of healing, and the fact that objects' value and power evolves and changes over time is often forgotten. In part, sensationalising 'things' is attractive; the idea of looking back on the objects and practices of a mystical past is captivating. Maybe scant information about distinct items or groups of objects and their contexts means that a term like 'amulet' simply becomes a useful catch-all category when specific functions, provenances or meanings cannot be inferred. Moreover, whilst amulets are necessarily defined by collectors and museum curators, often the descriptions they give are promulgated uncritically. Both within the Science Museum and within similar institutions that hold a substantial collection of amulets such as the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, the debt owed to twentieth-century collectors cannot be overstated. Men including Henry Wellcome (1853–1936) and Edward Lovett (1852–1933), who both harboured a passion for collecting alongside other occupations, amassed objects from across geographies and temporalities which went on to form part of the Wellcome Trust's and Science Museum's collections[17] (Cadbury, 2012). However, the sheer volume of their stock often led to vague and questionable cataloguing, and it appears that dates given to Science Museum amulets often relate not to the object themselves, but rather to the dates of the collector (usually around 1870–1930).[18] Ultimately it is likely that these are self-perpetuating actions, in that once the purpose of an object has been misinterpreted or disassociated from the realms of healing, this then continues amongst other institutions and individuals until it becomes the default, primary function of the item in question.

All of these possible reasons affect the way that amulets are thought of and defined today by academics, museums and members of the public. How far are such approaches necessary to allow audiences such as museum visitors to more easily engage with and relate to such seemingly unfamiliar objects? And how far is this approach intrinsically condescending, by patronising these things, their users, and the world from which they originated? Museums want visitors to be able to respond to their material, but in doing so they may sacrifice some of the 'truths' of some of the objects' lives (see Kopytoff, 1986). Research on these items is rich and wide-ranging. Their analyses range from their situation within a particular culture, region or time-period, to more broad ranging studies of amulets within the disciplines of archaeology or anthropology.[19] Other articles examine specific amulets, whether as an object-study or as a means of elucidating a facet of ritual or practice.[20] Fewer historicise them, or consider their changing definitions or functions over time or space.[21] Yet this facet of study is crucial for museums that deal with a large, disparate group of objects all labelled as 'amulets'. They are complex, ambiguous and subjective objects that have differed and continue to differ according to social, spatial and temporal geographies. As such, their functions, materials and cultural significances vary enormously. However, this interpretative challenge is concurrently what makes amulets so rewarding and worthy of study, as their examination can reveal facets of a particular culture or time's methods of healing that cannot be afforded by reference to textual sources alone.

Just as the boundaries of what comprises an amulet are open enough to allow for a wide definition of healing, museums and academics should accept and recognise amulets and their contextual evolution as part of the history of healing. It is important, as far as possible, not to 'other' amulets – not think of them as bizarre, folkish pieces of the past, and instead recognise that they form parts of the broad and varied history of healing. The Science Museum is helping to lead the way. During my time as a Wellcome Trust Secondment Fellow, I was afforded the opportunity to work closely with this museum's amulet collection, building upon my doctoral research on magic and the material culture of healing in early modern England. The Science Museum has over two thousand amulets, many of which were donated by collectors like Lovett and Wellcome, providing an invaluable source base. My interest in this group of objects arose after I had noticed that many of the seventeenth-century medical objects I was studying were categorised as amulets and also disassociated from healing, whether by scholars, museums, archaeological organisations or populist literature. While institutions such as the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford house an equally significant collection of amulets (see their 'Small Blessings' project), the Science Museum is one of the only organisations which actively and explicitly recognises the important relationship between amulets and healing. In fact, amulets are being spotlighted in the new Medicine galleries opening in 2019, as an integral part of the institution's motives to situate these objects within 'scientific' *milieu*. Amulets from across cultures and times are shown as real, potent facets of healing – even if not what we expect. They are challenging our (perhaps pre-formed) assumptions, and making us think. In the same way, this study explores how this complex, heterogeneous group of objects can help us understand the curative and protective worth and potency amulets had and continue to have.

This article aims not to give a comprehensive history of amulets, but to present one of many possible histories in order to show how amulets form an important part of healing. The hare's foot, the Billiken, and the eight remaining objects that form the focus of this paper are classed as amulets within the collections of the Science Museum, and were chosen for their material, functional and contextual variability. All were created and used from around the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries, a more

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

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## A gold angel

Around the same time that our first object was used by Pepys, a healing practice that similarly drew upon hidden powers was taking place. The disease was known as ‘scrofula’ or ‘King’s Evil’, and its remedy was based on the notion that monarchs had the power to heal by touch. This ‘Royal gift of healing’ had been a tradition in England and France since the eleventh century, and continued for around 700 years ([Lindemann, 1999, pp 80–1](#); [Ettlinger 1939, p 161](#); [Toynbee, 1950](#)).<sup>[22]</sup> Whilst centred on the invisible haptic powers of the sovereign, in the early modern period (around 1500–1750) a tangible material also played a central role in this cure. This object – our third amulet – was a metal coin, usually gold and often called an angel, strung through with a ribbon and placed around the sufferer’s neck after he or she had been touched, as ‘a Token of His Sacred Favour, and Pledge of His best desires for them’.<sup>[23]</sup>

**Figure 3**



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Amulet Three – Gold angel, object number A641050

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This particular example was gifted by Charles I, on the throne between 1634–49.<sup>[24]</sup> The theory behind this curative practice was clear; it was the royal touch that held the curative power. Yet the reality differed. Testimonials were common in early modern texts (whether medical or otherwise) and were almost always ordered according to the characters’ rank.<sup>[25]</sup> As such, primary texts discussing the ‘King’s Evil’ including John Browne’s *Adenochoiradologia* written in the later seventeenth century are littered with first-hand accounts of those who, upon losing their gold coin, were re-inflicted with the illness and only recovered once the material process was repeated, or the original coin was found. Whilst Browne’s scepticism for the gold forming an effectual part of the cure is evident, the examples he provides are nonetheless carefully selected by people ‘of Quality’ – esquires, ‘honoured’ doctors, members of Cambridge colleges, knights, and those of respected social standing:<sup>[26]</sup>

One *Thomas Costland*, (as another remark of His Majesties favour) living near *Oxford*, and having many Strumous Swellings about his Neck, for which he had been touched and cured; but upon leaving off his Gold, his Swellings seized him afresh: the Gold being new strung, and put again about his Neck, his Swellings suddainly abated, and he to his dying day continued ever after in health, without any appearance of relapse.[\[27\]](#)



Figure 4



© Wellcome Collection

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

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For one so careful to disregard the sole power of the coin, it is interesting that Browne provides a multitude of personal

examples of the cure only working if the gold remained in contact with the body, eagerly and fervently noting the correspondent or patient's high social status as if to legitimise the use of and belief in the material facet of this cure. Moreover, Browne's very impetus for writing this treatise – in part to argue that gold was *not* the essential or most important part of the remedy – indicates the widespread fervour of this very belief.[28] He would not have needed to argue with such ardour if not vexed by the weight of power given to the gold angel in this cure for scrofula. What this amulet tells us is that despite the elaborate nature of the ceremony, those from the lowest to the highest strata of society made the journey to be healed, were granted audience with the monarch, and given a gold token. This was a disease where an object played an undeniably crucial part of a process of healing, universal across social rank and irrespective of wealth.[29] Perhaps most importantly, this gold angel exemplifies two important interconnected notions about the power of amulets – the significance of their situation, and their important relationship with the corporeal. Just like Pepys' use of the hare's foot, and like the Luna Park Billiken around 250 years later, the gold angel was efficacious only when kept on the body.

**Figure 5**



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Amulet Four – Caul in envelope, object number A132443

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## **A caul, a whelk shell and hag-stones**

Like the gold angel, medals, coins and other objects made from metals have often formed amulets, probably in large part due to their inherent portability and durability.[30] Yet the Science Museum collections show that amulets could consist of a great variety of materials, whether human, animal, vegetable or mineral, durable or fragile. Just like the hare's foot, the efficacy of some amulets depended on the inherent potency of the material. For a later and materially varied example of this, let us turn our attention to our fourth amulet – a carefully preserved caul.[31] A tissue-like membrane enclosing the foetus in the womb, a caul is occasionally found around the child's head at birth. Through time and across geographies, this object has been considered curatively and protectively potent simply due to its inherent and symbolic materiality (Roud, 2006, pp 71–2).[32] Those born with the caul in nineteenth and twentieth-century England were considered immune from drowning, with sources

reporting incidences in which, if the caul was kept safe, the child to whom it belonged was spared from a watery death (Muir, 1995, pp 27–8; B A, 1950; Hole, 1957; Tongue, 1965).[33] This example from the Science Museum is ‘regarded as lucky’, a widespread belief.[34] If the caul was sold, its potency transferred to the buyer. Notices in newspapers and ‘dock-side shop windows’ abound advertising this popular amulet; in 1835, the *London Times* marketed ‘a Child’s Caul to be disposed of, a well-known preservative against drowning, &c., price 10 guineas’ (Moore, 1891, p 157; Roud, 2006, p 72). Others made direct appeals; in 1920, around the time from which this example is dated, one notice read: ‘sailors will still buy cauls when they can, and have been known to give as much as £20 for one...no ship that contains a caul will sink at sea’ (Hole, 1957, pp 412–13).[35]

**Figure 6**



© Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Locket containing a caul

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This material method of prophylaxis was longstanding. Seventeenth-century physician and polymath Sir Thomas Browne recorded the knowledge of the caul’s power since antiquity, stating that in the life of Antonius this ‘natural cap’ was sold by midwives for their advantageous effects (Browne, 1671, pp 314–5). Browne similarly provides evidence of the caul’s potency in his own lifetime. Whilst doing so with contempt, noting that ‘great conceits are raised of the involution or membranous

covering, commonly called the Silly-how', Browne nonetheless records how this object was 'preserved with great care, not only as medical in diseases, but effectual in success, concerning the Infant and others' ([Browne, 1671, pp 314–5](#); [Muir, 1995, pp 27–8](#)).<sup>[36]</sup> At the same time, Sir John Offley's will recorded a bequest to his 'loving daughter'; 'one jewell done all in gold enameled wherein is a caul that covered my face and sholder when I first came into the world' ([Hackwood, 1924](#)). Unlike the durable gold angel, the caul needed protection, and cauls were therefore preserved in varying ways. Just as the Science Museum example is safeguarded within an envelope, Offley's sample was incorporated into jewellery, a similar example of which can be seen in Figure 6, a locket containing a caul from the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, dated 1597.<sup>[37]</sup> Whatever the method of preservation portability seemed pivotal, important when remembering amulets' fundamental relationship with the body.

The caul also provides us with an example of another common feature of amulets – that they were often rarities. Throughout history, children born with a caul have been so infrequent as to be considered important; in the twenty-first-century, they are known to occur in less than one in every eighty thousand births (Crawford-Mowday). Thus whilst the caul was inherently potent due to its prophylactic capacity, it was also invested with value as a rare object, thereby increasing its desirability as an amulet.<sup>[38]</sup>

**Figure 7**



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Amulet Five – Whelk shell with reversed spiral, object number A666095

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The worth of uncommon and exceptional items had long been recognised. In the Renaissance, ‘nature’s jokes’ were often collected in the form of flowers, seahorses, fossils, giants, unicorns’ horns, loadstones, zoophytes and of course shells and stones (Findlen, 1990, pp 292–3; p 303). ‘Rich elements of the quotidian’ such as shells were revered, and material irregularities were recognised as ‘sophisticated deceptions played out by nature in her leisure’ (Findlen, 1990, pp 302–3). Examining our fifth amulet – this whelk shell – the reversed spiral forms the focus of attention, and the description draws attention to its quality as a rarity.<sup>[39]</sup> Reportedly carried to ‘promote good health’ by a fish porter in Billingsgate, London (1850–1920), this type of amulet does not appear frequently in museum collections or among literary references, and so is perhaps an example of an item with less popular renown, yet with more personal value to the owner. Indeed, Lovett noted the ‘mascots’ carried by soldiers in the First World War, which included a ‘left-handed’ whelk shell. The word ‘mascot’ was used here to denote an object with a strong personal link between the luck-bringing and its owner (Lovett, 1925, pp 10–15, 18, 30, 34, 41–3, 70–2; ‘Mascot’, in Simpson and Roud, 2003).

Why did the Billingsgate fish porter value this rare whelk shell? Whilst we cannot be certain, objects such as this were anomalies, not in accordance with the established order and laws of the world, and have often attracted human curiosity.[40] As such, many rarities and wonders of nature such as this whelk shell could be imbued with value and potency. Access to these kinds of objects was restricted by their very scarcity, and they therefore carried a great weight both in terms of social and healing power. The owner of a rare object like this could possess and control that power, and had the capacity to monopolise it (Daston and Park, 1998, p 81).

**Figure 8**



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Amulet Six – Hag stones, object number A666087

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The same trend can be seen in our sixth object, this similarly natural amulet recorded as ‘eleven stones with natural holes, threaded on wire, hung at head of bed as charm against nightmare’.[41] Whilst the specific origins of their power remain unclear it is evident that these stones formed with organic irregularities, were known to have intrinsic potency, with examples of their use recurring all across Europe for hundreds of years (Roud, 2006, p 438).[42] In England this practice is evident from around the seventeenth century, yet sources show that the belief in the stones’ power was already renowned by this time. The use of holed stones was recorded by Pliny in *Natural History*, 77BCE, in which he records ‘a sort of egg in great repute...called “the serpent’s egg”’ (Pliny, 77BCE, Book XXII). Certain sources cite this object as functionally equivalent to the ‘hag-stone’, and materially they are the same.[43] Termed ‘ephialtes’ in the early modern period, Sir Thomas Browne noted of this nocturnal affliction: ‘what natural effects can reasonably be expected, when to prevent the ephialtes or night-mare we hang up an hollow stone in our stables.’[44] The stones had two main uses but protected against the same affliction, in which a witch or hag was believed to torment the sufferer at night.[45] The patient could be human or equine. When horses were found ‘sweating, exhausted and frightened’ in the morning, it was a common notion that they had been subject to nocturnal terror, often known as being ‘hag-ridden’. Similarly when humans suffered the ‘night-mare’, this did not simply signify a bad dream but a terrifying affliction in which a colossal weight could be felt on one’s chest (Ettlinger, 1939, p 152; Roud, 2006, pp 225; 437).[46] These holed stones (thus often known as ‘hag-stones’) were believed to prevent the nocturnal suffering for both beings. Although not

apparently requiring any material alteration or preparation to render them efficacious, such stones were often used by being strung on a thread and hung in close proximity to the body in need, in stables or by beds ([Grose, 1781, pp 57–8](#); [Roud, 2006, p 438](#)).

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

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## An astrological sigil

Whilst the value and potency of the amulets we have encountered so far lay in their very form and matter, others functioned due to the way they had been materially modified. Evidence for this lies most clearly in objects inscribed with symbols, words and pictures. Amulet number seven is a circular metal disc known as a ‘sigil’, invested with power due to the inscriptions made upon its surface.[\[47\]](#) Whilst this object is dated 1850–1920, there is no firm evidence of its provenance, although designs for amulets like this date from at least the sixteenth century.[\[48\]](#) The manufacture of sigils enabled the power of the stars to be represented and harnessed materially, for curative and protective benefit.[\[49\]](#) Engraved with images or words, these amulets were often worn on the body – indicated in this example by a suspension hole ([Kassell, 2005a, pp 43–57, esp. pp 43–4](#); [Roos, 2008 pp 271–288](#)).

**Figure 9**



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Amulet Seven – Sigil, object number A657575

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

According to Paracelsian cosmology, through what was known as ‘astral magic’, sigils were one of several objects (along with rings, images and swords) that via association with the power of the stars could be made to remedy diseases, enhance health, triumph over enemies, protect, or improve one’s fortune (Kassell, 2005b, p 48). As stated by astrologer-physician Simon Forman, sigils were believed to enclose ‘som parte of the virtue of heaven and of the plannets according to the tyme that it is stamped caste or engraven or written in’.[50] That is, the knowledge of astronomy and judgements of astrology came together in the creation of sigils, made according to particular positions of the heavens, at significant moments, with the virtues of the stars and planets physically stamped upon them.[51]

Sigils and their many functions and powers were explained by sixteenth-century German polymath and physician Henry Cornelius Agrippa, in a book detailing different facets of *Occult Philosophy* (Agrippa, Tyson (ed), 1993). Described as ‘the magical encyclopaedia of the Renaissance’, this work brought together Greek and Roman occultism drawn from classical sources with medieval Jewish Kabbalah, aiming to provide technical explanations and procedures for practical magic.[52] *Occult Philosophy* explained in detail how magic could be employed practically, laying bare the secrets of the natural world including stones, herbs, trees and metals, the celestial and mathematical world encompassing the influence of planets, stars and numbers, and the intellectual world of pagan gods, spirits, angels, devils (Agrippa, Tyson (ed), 1993, pp xl-xli). The heavens were seen to move according to a strict mathematical and geometric relationship, and so were considered part of mathematical magic. As such, magic tables were attributed to each of the seven planets (as they were known at this time), which could in ‘no other way be expressed, than by the marks of numbers, and characters’ (Agrippa, Tyson (ed), 1993, p 318).[53]

This sigil, our seventh amulet, expressed and employed the power of Jupiter. Imprinted on one side are the planet’s sign, seal and ‘intelligence’, the other revealing its table, surrounded by Hebrew names relating to Jupiter’s numbers.[54] Agrippa noted that if these symbols, words and numbers were impressed upon silver plate at a time when Jupiter was powerful and ruling, ‘it conduced to gain and riches, favour and love, peace and concord, and...appease enemies, confirm honours, dignities, and counsels’. Sigils relating to other planets had other specific functions – with he who wore the table of the Sun becoming ‘potent in all his works’, and Mars stopping blood and chasing away bees (Agrippa, Tyson (ed), 1993, p 319).

Sigils present a different method of healing to the previous amulets we have analysed, as they harnessed the force of the stars and magic for cure or protection. Objects utilising this form of healing power have often been classed as amulets. Yet most significantly, items like the sigil demonstrate how material alteration (in this case inscription in the form of words, numbers and symbols) can imbue an object with power. This is similarly true for many different amulets across time and space; our second object – the Luna Park Billiken – also evidences material modification in the form of words and images, yet rather than employing astrological power instead uses its inscription to draw upon the faculties of fortune and luck.[55]

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## **A wheel of fortune and a pendant against rabies**

Fortune forms an important facet of healing and protection, and the ability to alter one’s fate has therefore often been accorded to amulets. Some could target specific illnesses, like our third object – the gold angel that treated King’s Evil. Others could protect against potentially harmful events, like our fifth object – the ‘hag-stones’ preserving against night-mares. In a similar way, an amulet created and used to propagate good fortune (or prevent misfortune) might attend the common human desire to control one’s own fate. Whilst there have historically been various ways in which to do this, this amulet may provide an example of one.



Figure 10



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Fortuna with her wheel, 1535, from Gregor Reisch's *Principles of Natural Philosophy*, part of the 'Margarita Philosophica', image No. 10305720

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

including Beauvais and Amiens in France.[56] Physical manifestations of wheels were even created, a twelfth-century French abbot reportedly installing a mechanical wheel of fortune in his monastery, so that ‘his monks might ever have before them the spectacle of human vicissitudes’ (Roberts, 2013; Mâle, 1962).

**Figure 11**



© David Dixon

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

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The popularity of the wheel of fortune in popular culture reinforced the wish of some to steer both the consequential and the quotidian occasions of life; or their acknowledgement of life's inevitable highs and lows. This is shown here in the tympana in a gallery of Tudor manor Little Moreton Hall, Cheshire, which are decorated with plaster depictions of 'Destiny' and 'Fortune', in direct imitation of those in mathematician Robert Recorde's *Castle of Knowledge* (1556), an astronomical textbook on the sphere (Lake and Hughes, 1995; Angus-Butterworth, 1970; Figueiredo and Treuherz, 1988). Many objects have been made specifically to aid 'good fortune', as evidenced by our second object, the Luna Park Billiken. Whilst perhaps not manifesting an attempt to control fortune, a physical wheel may have served as a material reminder of one's powerlessness against one's fate in the face of God. Our eighth amulet represents a French example, acquired by the Science Museum from a chapel called 'Notre Dame Du Riollou' in Brittany, near to St Nicholas-du-Pélem in the north-west corner of France. This is a 'Roue saint à carillon, dite 'Roue de Fortune' – Saint Carillon wheel, called 'Wheel of Fortune', dated 1777.

**Figure 12**





Amulet Eight – Wheel of Fortune, object number A74800

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The craftsmanship of this carillon wheel is uncertain, with sources stating that the name ‘Alain Le Roux’ carved next to the date on the wooden frame relate either to the carpenter’s name, or the rector of Botoha (the district encompassing St Nicholas-du-Pélem) from 1583–1638.[57] Principally functioning as a musical instrument, carillons have typically been housed in bell-towers of churches or municipal buildings, formed of ‘at least 23’ cup-shaped bells (Nelson, 1980; Rombouts, 2014). Once a widespread feature of churches in France and across Europe, these wheels are said to have originated in Brittany, and according to René Couffon were used during services, baptisms, celebrations and pardons.[58] Tradition notes that ‘Alain Le Roux’s’ wheel also had therapeutic uses. Apparently offered in *ex-voto* by parents after their child was healed of muteness, this wheel went on to help other children with speech disorders. Stories record youngsters troubled with verbal ailments who were led to the wheel, where the bells were turned above their heads to promote its curative effects (Hélias, 1975).[59]

Several concepts operate in conjunction within the oak frame, brass bells and carved brackets of this object. The names by which it has been known are varied and its history is somewhat ambiguous.[60] Several forms of power are brought together by its manufacture and use; created in the form of a musical instrument, it was accorded religious status, perhaps donated as an *ex-voto*, and certainly used within a church. A material representation of the perennial wheel of fortune, this object drew upon long-standing beliefs in the capricious nature of fate and man’s sole lack of command over it. In combination with the reputed ability to cure certain disorders, and housed within a religious setting, this object had power. An amalgamation of forces integrated to evidence its supposed healing power. But is it an amulet?

Figure 13



© Wellcome Collection

'Holy wheel or Carillon', 'The Rose of Fortune'

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Carillon wheels were once common within churches, especially in Brittany. But the situation of this particular 'wheel of fortune' within the Science Museum's amulet collection is questionable. Through exploring the history of the amulet, we have so far identified that these objects have a clear relationship with or proximity to the body, can be materially varied – comprising of mineral, animal or vegetable and inscribed, manmade or natural – and occasionally valued as rarities. Yet most importantly

(as described by Pliny since the first century CE) amulets were worn and used for therapeutic, apotropaic or exorcistic benefit. They are invested with the power to heal or protect. Just as the hare's foot has often been uncritically labelled as lucky, does this wheel of fortune provide an example of an object that has been classed as an amulet because it could not easily be categorised within other collections? In this way, the 'Alain Le Roux' wheel of fortune helps us ask important questions about the position and categorisation of amulets within museums today.

In a similar vein, the relationship between amulets and religion is often inconsistent within museum collections. At the Science Museum, many amulets are connected with religion; from objects used by Hindu pilgrims, to Jewish manuscripts, to skull-caps printed with Catholic saints, as well as several items relating to less established religious practices.[61] Votive objects form a significant proportion; also known as *ex-votos*, these were objects acting as offerings given to a saint or divinity in gratitude, devotion or fulfilment of a vow.[62] Henry Wellcome is credited with having collected five hundred fourth- to second-century BCE terracotta votives alone, with several hundred more votive offerings in the Science Museum collections.[63] Of these, only some are credited as amulets.[64] A similar pattern can be discerned; within the collections of the Pitt Rivers Museum (Oxford), Horniman Museum (London), and British Museum (London) there are several hundred objects classified as votives or *ex-votos*, yet only a small proportion are also recognised as amulets.[65] Of the votive objects that are not classed as amulets, many seem to be distinctly categorised as religious objects. This group of objects therefore epitomise the problematic relationship between religion and amulets, highlighting potential mutual exclusivity. Yet votive objects only represent one facet of religious material culture. Religion has undeniably played (and continues to play) an important part in healing, exemplified materially by amulets from across different centuries, geographies and cultures. It would be foolish to disassociate religion and amulets, when both provide analogous forms of protective and curative power. This symbiotic potency is demonstrated by our ninth amulet.

**Figure 14**



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Amulet Nine – Rabies pendant depicting Virgin and Child, object number A666096

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

affording protection against 'bites from mad dogs'.<sup>[66]</sup> Whilst cited as being Italian, 1870–1900, this brass amulet is Spanish. This is discernible due to the inscriptions on each side stating: 'VIRGEN DE VALDEGIMENA' (obverse)/ 'ABOGADA DE LA RABIA' (reverse); the amulet utilising the prophylactic support of the Virgin Mary of Val de Gimena, Spain.<sup>[67]</sup> Rabies has been written about for at least four thousand years, with writers in classical antiquity such as Galen, Aristotle, Pliny and Hippocrates lending their own medical theories for its cure and prevention ([Tarantola, 2017](#)). One comparative method of protection was offered by amulets known as 'St Hubert's Keys'. These objects, shaped like nails, were apparently hung on the walls of houses to offer prophylaxes against rabies, or heated and placed on the wound afflicted by a rabid dog as a means of remedy. St Hubert (656–727 AD) was one of several Christian saints said to cure rabies. Examples can be seen in both the Pitt Rivers and Science Museums, and show how – like the pendant depicting the Virgin – religious power was employed to remedy this disease.<sup>[68]</sup>

Marian protection against rabies is materialised by this amulet. The religious power invested within this pendant is not distinct from the physical devices of imagery, inscription and means of bodily suspension it uses to convey and facilitate its amuletic potency. These different types of healing power were synonymous in the medieval and early modern periods, until those like John Browne – who contended that a gold angel was not a necessary part of the cure for scrofula – argued that they could be divided. The conflation and symbiosis of disparate sources of potency is common within amulets, and is exemplified definitively by our final object.





Figure 16



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Amulet Ten – Breverl, object number A666092

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Component DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15180/191103/006>

## A breverl

Our tenth object combines many of the efficacious features of amulets discussed in this article. This is an item thought to protect against the plague, made in Bavaria, Germany in the eighteenth century. Commonly known as ‘breverl’ (Austrian/Bavarian), ‘brevia’ (Latin), ‘briefs’ (English) or ‘brevi’ (Italian), and also by other vernacular expressions such as the Italian ‘lettera di preghiera’ (‘prayer letters’) or Latin ‘charta’ (paper), this group of objects was made formulaically and consisted of various religious or magical components, both manmade and natural (Tycz, 2018). [69] Breverl were composite

amulets acting as prophylaxes for their users and owners, often promising defence from diseases such as plague, with most following a similar design: a religious statement of protection (a rubric) followed by short prayer formulas or holy names, a sheet showing images of several saints, and a central composite amulet consisting of a variety of small objects and materials. [70] Produced in many different countries, ‘breverl’ enjoyed widespread popularity among Catholics in eighteenth-century Bavaria and Austria, and were produced in convents for sale to visitors (Tycz, 2018).[71] These objects were intended to remain sealed – not read or looked at – for fear that opening them would render their preservative potency ineffectual (Ettlinger, 1965, p 111). Instead, the amulet was permanently folded (often into decorated paper cases) and worn on the person (Tycz, 2018; Ettlinger, 1965, p 111).[72]

The printed text on this particular example from the Science Museum begins: ‘Breve super se portandum ad gloriam dei, suorumque sanctorum contra daemones’, suggesting this amulet would provide the wearer with saintly protection from demons, demonic possession, and/or harm from those who were possessed.[73] However, it also contains list of formulae and names that were common to many different types of amuletic texts at this time, and suggests it was approved by Pope Urban VIII in 1635 (Tycz, 2018; Skemer, 2015, pp 127–50; Skemer, 2006, passim). The images on the underside sheet of paper include the Virgin Mary and saints including St Francis, St Ignatius, St Antony of Padua and St Francis of Solanus; the latter, canonised in 1726, situating this amulet chronologically.[74] The central composite is affixed with metal pendants, crosses, cloth, coral, seeds, wax, silk, and perhaps even hair and plant materials. The two Zacharias cross or ‘pestkreuz’ in the central portion were known, at this time, to be effective against the plague, confirming the amulet’s multi-functional nature (Skemer, 2016).

Other materials embedded in the paper demonstrate this further; coral, for example, was recognised for its magical, medical and protective effects in the early modern period, and often used to heal (Handley, 2006).[75] The reasons for the inclusion of other materials such as seeds and plant fibres, whilst unknown, perhaps suggest how the breverl drew upon several different types of healing power, combining religious potency with elements of magical power. Other objects in the central composite may have been related to a particular pilgrimage site; pieces of bone or hair may indicate personal relic collections, with names of saints in each corner perhaps indicating a connection with the named figures (Tycz, 2018).

## Video 1



© Bridwell Library Special Collections, Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University

A breverl from the Bridwell Library being folded

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This breverl, dated 1690–1710, brings together many of the important features of amulets that this article has explored. Its

efficacy depended on several components. Like the gold angel, it was to be worn on and kept close to the body it was intended to heal or protect, manifest in its portability. The use of manmade, natural, animal, vegetable and mineral substances demonstrates the multiplicity of materials that amulets could consist of. Like the sigil, its words and images were invested with dynamic potency such that they even worked when never directly read or viewed. Like many amulets, different types of power were combined in the creation and function of the breverl, conflating religious potency with secular and magical forms of potency; demonstrated by the things affixed within the central composite. The variety of materials that make up this amulet and the several curative methods it draws upon render it multi-functional; reputedly protective against both demons and plague, and perhaps even more ([Ettlinger, 1965, p 111](#)).<sup>[76]</sup> Microcosmic of amulets in general, its complexity constitutes its power.

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## **Conclusion – amulets as a part of the history of healing**

These ten objects have provided a glimpse of how amulets can tell stories about the history of healing. They have demonstrated their diversity in many ways. Their material composition ranged from natural to manmade, or human to animal; to metals, papers, woods and plastics. Some were inscribed and stamped, denoting symbols, images, numbers and words. Most were suspended from bodies; others from buildings. Some material properties were featured often, commonly available and sought after; whilst the value of others was determined by their status as rarities. The primary function of some amulets was to heal or protect a body, animal or home. In other cases, the curative or prophylactic role of an amulet was a secondary function, established and perpetuated by the owner, collector, possessor or wearer. Some aligned with religious and spiritual potency; others drew upon the faculties of astrology, magic, fate, fortune or luck. Yet despite this great variety, culturally and materially distinct elements work in symbiosis in the manufacture and use of an amulet. No single material, feature or source of power is incompatible with another. In many cases, these objects gained potency and value precisely by combining several elements together (we need only remember our last two amulets).

This is not to argue that we cannot identify cultural shifts and historical discontinuities with regard to these things. When viewed together, these ten amulets lived through a period of monumental change as well as continuity. The Reformation and Counter-Reformation brought religious turbulence and upheaval to Europe from the early sixteenth to the mid-seventeenth century, as Protestant reformers attempted to reform the church and a schism was generated within Western Christianity. More recently, the increasing secularisation of society had effects that are reflected in material objects. Astrology receded from established employment, and luck became more prominent. New materials such as plastics appeared. Yet many elements remained constant – words and inscriptions have been used to render and represent curative and prophylactic power from the earliest amulets in our examination to the most recently manufactured. Rarities continued to be revered as potent items. Many still drew upon human materials; many used or were intended for animals. Most continued to be potent only when worn close to the body. All relied on faith in the power of material objects. And all formed a part of the history of healing.

These are by no means black and white statements. Just as these ten amulets present one history, other narratives could be found from the analysis of another ten. Yet this article has demonstrated the often-overlooked complexities of amulets, and their situation as a real, potent facet of healing and prophylaxis within their own contexts. The ten objects analysed in this paper evidence important features of illness, health, protection and life that would be lost if we sought answers from texts alone. They show us that from the early modern period to the modern day, healing and protection employed many different sources of power, and took various different material forms. Amulets do not have to be considered universally according to every institution or individual; part of the appeal of using objects in historical research is precisely that different contexts and narratives can be unfolded using the same thing. However, it is important to question these objects and explore their histories; to remember that the status, function, value and cultural meaning of amulets are not fixed but ever-changing; not to disregard or uncritically accept their complexities, but actively engage with them. This article has argued for the dismissal of anachronisms and of treating amulets as a monolithic group of bizarre, mysterious objects, belonging to an enigmatic, alien past. Instead, by exploring their differing powers and values, we can discover not only about the things themselves, but their various social and functional contexts, and their legitimate place in the history of early modern healing. If we give amulets a chance, like the sceptical Pepys did with his hare's foot, we too might be pleasantly surprised.

## Tags

- [Museum collections](#)
- [Material culture](#)
- [History of medicine](#)
- [Science and society](#)

## Footnotes

1. Wednesday 4 January; Sunday 8 January; Monday 9 January; Wednesday 18 January; Thursday 19 January (1664/5). Pepys, S; Wheatley, H (ed), 1660-9; 1893, found at P Gyford (ed).
2. Pepys, S; Wheatley, H (ed), 1660-9; 1893, found at P Gyford (ed), <https://www.pepysdiary.com/diary/1665/01/20/> (accessed 21 April 2018); Knighton, C S, 2008, 'Batten, Sir William (1600/01–1667), naval officer' *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (Oxford University Press, 2019), <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-1714> (accessed 7 February 2019).
3. Friday 20 January 1664/5. Pepys, S; Wheatley, H (ed), 1660-9; 1893, found at P Gyford (ed), (accessed 29 April 2018).
4. 20 January 1664/5. Pepys, S; Wheatley, H (ed), 1660-9; 1893, found at P Gyford (ed) (accessed 14 December 2017).
5. 21 January 1664/5. Two months later, Pepys wrote once more in celebration of his 'very perfect good health', marvelling: 'Now I am at a losse to know whether it be my hare's foot which is my preservative against wind, for I never had a fit of the collique since I wore it'. Despite his ambivalence, he was still cured of colic. Pepys, S; Wheatley, H (ed), 1660–9; 1893, found at P Gyford (ed) (accessed 14 December 2017).
6. For instance on ebay, 'LUCKY Rabbit Foot Good Luck Charm': <https://www.ebay.co.uk/i/222775139002?chn=ps&adgroupid=49939730778&rlsarget=pla-380792705024&abclId=1129946&adtype=pla&merchantid=6995734&poi=&googleloc=9060160&device=c&campaignid=9> 9 January 2018).
7. For a recent introduction to early modern English medicine, see Andrew Wear, 2000. For an overview of Renaissance medicine more generally, see Nancy Siraisi, 1990. For a useful social history of medicine in this period, see Harold Cook, 2006, pp 407–34.
8. For an overview of the different types of healers in early modern England, see Mark Jenner and Patrick Wallis 2007; Margaret Pelling, 2003.
9. charm, n.1". OED Online. March 2018. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/30762?rskey=oupvW1&result=1&isAdvanced=false> (accessed March 31, 2018). For historiographical references to amulets and charms used synonymously, see Peter Murray Jones & Lea T Olsan, 2015, pp 406–433. For a discussion and definitions of each, see Skemer, 2006, esp. pp 6–19.
10. Author's own translation. Science Museum Group, 2018 'Protective amulet consisting of nickel medall', <https://collection.sciencemuseum.org.uk/objects/co103212/protective-amulet-consisting-of-nickel-medall-amulet> (accessed 13 March 2018).
11. Science Museum Group, 2018, 'Hare's foot amulet', <https://collection.sciencemuseum.org.uk/objects/co108096/hares-foot-amulet-used-as-protection-against-cra-amulet-foot-animal-component> (accessed 1 February 2018).
12. For instance, Pitt Rivers Museum object numbers 1985.51.305, 1985.51.355; Museum of Witchcraft object number 202, 'Hare's foot: charm'.
13. For example, Olivia Weisser, 2015, p 2.
14. An example of this from the Hunt Museum in Limerick, Ireland is the 'Archer Butler Luck Stone'. Archival information sent to the author confirms there is no evidence of the item being used for luck, or the original owners referring to it as lucky. The provenance of the appellation 'luck' is unknown; instead, the stone was used to protect cattle from disease, and often hung from the neck of the cow in need. See <http://www.huntmuseum.com/collection/archer-butler-luck-stone/> (accessed 24 September 2018).
15. For instance, Museum of Witchcraft object 1709, where the object's classification as an amulet is specifically questioned: 'amulet(?)', found at <http://museumofwitchcraftandmagic.co.uk/object/amulet-charm-3/> (accessed 3 March 2018).
16. On magic and superstition, see for instance Michael D Bailey, 2006.
17. For biographies of Wellcome and Lovett, see 'Henry Wellcome 1853–1936' found at <http://broughttolife.sciencemuseum.org.uk/broughttolife/people/henrywellcome> and 'Edward Lovett' found at <http://england.prm.ox.ac.uk/englishness-Edward-Lovett.html> (both accessed 4 April 2018). Whilst the remit of this article prevent a detailed discussion of these two collectors, further information can be found. Secondary analysis of Lovett is scant, but his monograph provides an excellent starting point (see Edward Lovett, 1925). Also rich in information about Lovett is Cadbury, 2012. For more on Henry Wellcome, see Robert Rhodes James, 1994; Helen Turner,

1980; Ken Arnold and Danielle Olsen, 2003.

18. See for example the astrological sigil discussed on pp 10–12 of this article. A highly prevalent date range for amulets in the Science Museum collection is around 1870–1930, encompassing the lives of Wellcome, Lovett, and other prominent collectors who provided objects for the Museum such as Adrien *de Mortillet* (1853–1931).
19. For instance, Campbell Bonner, 1950; E A Wallis Budge, 1961. For an example of amulets in a particular time period, see Don Skemer, 2006.
20. See Cummins, 2016, pp 164–187, Stefan Münger, 2013, pp 66–82 or W L Hildburgh, 2012, pp 178–195 for examples. Some pieces are even written to provide instruction as well as historical context, for instance Robert Dancik, 2009.
21. For an example, see Cadbury, 2016.
22. The phrase ‘royal gift of healing’ is from John Browne, 1684, document images 14; 23. For an exception to the monarchical ability to heal ‘King’s Evil’, see Peter Elmer, 2013.
23. Indeed, the coins used in this remedy were merely referred to as ‘gold’ by contemporary authors. See for example, Browne, 1684, document image 237 *et passim*.
24. Science Museum object A641050 is an example from Charles I’s reign (1634–1649), but other Science Museum examples include A152330 (Henry VII, 1485–1509); A152329 (Elizabeth I, 1590–1603); A641046 (Elizabeth I 1582–1603); A125613 (Elizabeth I, 1582–1603). For similar examples in other museums, see for instance ‘Angel’, Museum of London, object number SRP98[33571]<3421> .
25. For a contemporaneous example including testimonials, see John Evans, 1651.
26. See Browne, 1684, pp 138–9; 148–9; 167; 171; 184 *et passim*.
27. Browne, 1684, p 181
28. For instance, Browne, 1684, p 71 discusses in this treatise the ‘unresolved at the efficacy of the Gold put about the Patients neck’.
29. For more on scrofula, see James F Turrell, 1999, pp 3–36; Marc Bloch, 1973; Stephen Brogan, 2015; Scrofula and the royal touch: Hope and Fear at KCL; ‘The King’s Evil’, <https://recipesandmedicineinearlymodernengland.wordpress.com/2014/03/30/the-kings-evil> (accessed 28 February 2018); Daniel Fusch, 2008, pp 34–39.
30. Michael Hunter and Anna Marie Roos have noted that coins and medals were often collected as amulets or for cabinets. See Anna Marie Roos, 2008, pp 271–288, esp. pp 271–2.
31. Similar examples of caul can be seen for instance at the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford, i.e. object number 1907.1.13.
32. Also known as a mask, baby’s veil, silly-how(e) and haly-hood.
33. Edward Muir has speculated that the reason for this potency stems from the fact that since before birth the caul had permitted the foetus to live within fluid, it could prevent drowning in water for adults.
34. Science Museum Group, 2018, ‘Amuletic Caul’ <https://collection.sciencemuseum.org.uk/objects/co104541/amuletic-caul-piece-of-tissue-like-membrane-in-an-amulet-human-remains> (accessed 3 January 2018). For a reference to cauls being used merely as prophylactic ‘lucky’ items, see this rhyme from 1875 in J Fairfax-Blakeborough, 1923, pp 9–10: ‘But a lass if born with a caul in July, Will loose her caul & young will die. Every month beside luck comes with a caul If safe put by, If lost she may cry: For ill luck on her will fall.’
35. We also see references in popular literature, most notably Charles Dickens’ *David Copperfield*, in which Copperfield describes the potency of the caul, its sale at auction for the ‘low price of fifteen guineas’, and popularity with sailors. Charles Dickens, 1849; 2001, pp 13–14
36. Muir has also noted the ability for the child born with the caul to have ‘visionary powers’; citing the ‘benandanti’ in Italy.
37. For John Monson, see corresponding entries in Ashmole 230, f. 219r, and Ashmole 235, ff. 67v-69v (followed, after blank pages, by a nativity for William Monson, born two years later, ff. 72r-73v) which say he was born at midnight on 10 September 1597. Reference from Lauren Kassell, Michael Hawkins, Robert Ralley, John Young, Joanne Edge, Janet Yvonne Martin-Portugues, and Natalie Kaoukji (eds), ‘Casebooks’, *The casebooks of Simon Forman and Richard Napier, 1596–1634: a digital edition*, <https://casebooks.lib.cam.ac.uk>, accessed 11 October 2018. Also see ‘Locket’, V&A Museum, <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O11007/locket-unknown/> (both accessed 22 September 2018).
38. For context on such rarities in cabinets of curiosity, see Findlen, 1990, pp 292–331; p 307 *et passim*.
39. Science Museum Group, 2018, ‘Whelk Shell with Reversed Spiral’, <https://collection.sciencemuseum.org.uk/objects/co108067/amulet-whelk-shell-with-reversed-spiral-rare-ca-shells> (accessed 16 December 2017).

40. 'It is the majesty of Nature which cultivates human curiosity', Gaspar Schott, 1662; 1986, p 18. Findlen, 1990, p 303.
41. Science Museum Group, 2018, 'Stone Charm', <https://collection.sciencemuseum.org.uk/objects/co107922/stone-charm-london-england-c-1801-1900-amulets-protective-amulets>, (accessed 16 December 2017).
42. Known 'as an amulet' or to cure all across Europe, 'with similar examples seen in Scandinavia'. Roud, 2006, p 438; Ettlinger, 1939, p 152. For examples in other museums, see Horniman Museum object number 19.106, 'Soldier's holed stone mascot' and 31.28, 'Curative charm'.
43. See for instance, John Trotter Brockett, 1829, pp 3–4: 'Adder-stone – A perforated stone, imagined by the vulgar to be made by the sting of an adder... hung up at the bed's head, to prevent the night-mare.'
44. Browne, 1646, Book 5, Ch. 21. John Aubrey repeated this in his *Remaines of Gentilisme and Judaisme* of 1686, citing Browne: 'to prevent the ephialtes or night-mare, we hang up an hollow stone in our stables'.
45. Cited by various sources as giving protection against 'witches, evil spirits and nightmare', for instance in Self Weeks, 1910, pp 104–110; 107–9.
46. For a thorough analysis of this practice, see Dent, G, 1964a & 1964b.
47. Although in Collections Online it is called a 'pendant'. Science Museum Group, 2018, 'Circular Metal Pendant', <https://collection.sciencemuseum.org.uk/objects/co107433/circular-metal-pendant-pierced-for-suspension-en-pendants> (accessed 29 February 2018). For a similar example, see 'magical disc', British Museum, object number 1888,1110.11.
48. For instance, see Agrippa, H C, Freake, J (trans), Tyson, D (ed), 1531; 1993.
49. See Kassell 2005a, pp 47–8 for the various values of a sigil in early modern England; 'The value of a sigil was inherent to the object but it was not constant.'
50. Kassell, 2005a, pp 50–1. Kassell cites Simon Forman here, Ashm. 392, fol. 46; (see also Ashm. 390, fol. 30). For Forman, like other astrologer-physicians, such practices were at the core of his medical practice; see Kassell, 2005b, p 225.
51. Astronomy, knowledge of the heavens, and properties and motions of the stars and planets, worked in conjunction with astrology – the reading of the significance of the stars and planets 'judging by their motions, places, natures, beings and aspects'. Kassell, 2005b, p 52.
52. Donald Tyson notes, 'The Kaballah was to Agrippa the magic of God'. Classical sources included Pliny the Elder, Ovid, Virgil and Hermes Trismegistus, as well as later writers such as Ficino; Jewish Kabbalistic sources derived from the writings of Reuchliun and Pico della Mirandola. Agrippa, H C, Freake, J (trans), Tyson, D (ed), 1531; 1993, pp xl-xli.
53. The seven 'planets' known at this time were Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Sol (the Sun), Venus, Mercury, and Luna (the Moon).
54. Divine names answering to the numbers of Jupiter included '4 – Aba', Agrippa, Tyson, 1533; 1993, p 320. Table of the 16 signs are found on p 104; seal, intelligence and table on p 322; full sigil on p 329. On the magic square pattern like the one on this sigil, see Roos, 2008. The Latin inscription '*Confirma O Deus potentissimus*' approximately translates as 'Give me strength God Almighty' (author's own translation). Also Barrett and Trithemisu, 1801, esp. p 174.
55. On coins as magical objects, see Maguire, 1997. On stamping, see Park, 1998. On sigils as items of curiosity, protective and curative objects, and amulets, see Roos, 2008.
56. When the rose is also a wheel, this could symbolise the up and down movement of human life. They may also have a profound religious message; Kingdoms rise and fall, but the Kingdom of God abides forever. Roberts, 2013.
57. All information from <http://www.infobretagne.com/saint-nicolas-du-pelem.htm>, (accessed 8 June 2018). The former theory about the rector is attributed to Yves de Boisboissel, but no work is referenced.
58. It is not clear to which specific work by René Couffon this information is from. The wheel is known in Breton dialect as 'Rod ar fortun' (Wheel of fortune). Original source: Jean-Yves Cordier, 'La Roue à carillon de Confort-Meilars, celle de Locarn et de Priziac', <http://www.lavieb-aile.com/article-la-roue-a-carillon-de-confort-meilars-90677670.html> (accessed 21 June 2018).
59. On his blog, Jean-Yves Cordier notes somewhat cynically that this might sound like 'old nonsense...but today we even surround babies' cots with music and rattles!' (author's translation): <http://www.lavieb-aile.com/article-la-roue-a-carillon-de-confort-meilars-90677670.html> (accessed 21 June 2018).
60. The catalogue notes that this wheel was accorded a 'holy' status and known as 'The Rose of Fortune'.
61. For instance, catalogue numbers A641893; A665466 and A665699 respectively. For ties to smaller religious denominations, see for instance A657374.
62. 'votive, adj. and n.'. OED Online. March 2018. Oxford University Press <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/224725?redirectedFrom=votive> (accessed 29 May 2018)
63. Natalie Coe, 'Object of the Month: Acts of Faith', 2013: <https://wellcomecollection.wordpress.com/2013/11/11/object-of->

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64. One object classed as an 'ex-voto' is also an amulet (A665472), and of the votives, some ancient terracotta items also appear to be amulets.
65. Pitt Rivers, Oxford: Votive = 876 objects; Votive + amulet = 14 objects. Ex voto = 287 objects; Ex voto + amulet = 101 objects. Ex-voto = 106 objects; Ex-voto + amulet = 89 objects. Horniman, London: Votive = 707 objects; Votive + amulet = 7 objects. Ex-voto/ex voto = 2 objects; Ex-voto/ex voto + amulet = 0 objects. British Museum, London: Votive = 5,559 objects; Votive amulet = 130 objects. Ex voto = 70 objects; Ex voto amulet = 0 objects. Ex-voto = 59 objects; Ex voto amulet = 0 objects. Figures correct at time of writing, 16 April 2018. Whilst catalogues are not completely accurate, this nonetheless this provides an interesting pattern.
66. Science Museum Group, 2018, 'Brass pendant amulet', <https://collection.sciencemuseum.org.uk/objects/co108068/brass-pendant-amulet-with-representation-of-virgi-pendants> (accessed 13 June 2018).
67. Translated as 'Virgin of Val De Gimena'/'Protector against rabies' (author's own translation).
68. See for instance object numbers 1985.52.615 and 1985.52.2305 at the Pitt Rivers Museum, and A666132 at the Science Museum. 'St Hubert Key', *Small Blessings: Amulets at the Pitt Rivers Museum*, <http://web.prm.ox.ac.uk/amulets/index.php/keys-amulet3/index.html> (accessed 8 February 2019); '1970-56', *Brought to Life: Exploring the History of Medicine, Science Museum*, <http://broughttolife.sciencemuseum.org.uk/broughttolife/objects/display?id=4596> (accessed 8 February 2019).
69. For a concise description of this general formula, see Ettlinger, 1965.
70. For work on Italian examples, see Tycz, 2018.
71. Tycz has noted that there were also non-religious examples, and that the practice dates to before Christianity and might be linked to the Jewish practice of *tefflin*. Tycz, 2018. 'Amulet', Bridwell Library, Southern Methodist University, <https://www.smu.edu/Bridwell/SpecialCollectionsandArchives/Exhibitions/ShapeofContent/ReadableObjects/Amulet> (accessed 26 January 2018).
72. However, Tycz notes that sometimes there was a differentiation between the 'brief' texts and longer texts or combined texts, and were sometimes referred to by other names, such as prayer letters, letters of revelation, spell letters, etc., which scholars suggest could have been opened for prayer or to enact the efficacy of the text by reciting it. Tycz, 2018.
73. Same as Bidwell Library example: 'This writ shall be carried to the glory of God against demons' (author's own translation).
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75. See Handley, 2006, on coral's ability to traverse different environments and states of being, and its use against demons, night-mares and those sleeping.
76. Ettlinger, 1965, notes that whilst originally a plague amulet, the breverl became in the course of time a panacea owing to its composite character.

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