

TALISMAN-IMAGES

Laura U. Marks

Talismans, in medieval and early modern Islamic and European magical practice, are objects that intervene in the order of the cosmos. As the thirteenth-century Latin *Picatrix*, a translation of Maslama al-Qurtubī's tenth-century magic text the *Ghayāt al-Hakīm* (Goal of the Sage), puts it, "The talisman is nothing other than the force of celestial bodies that influence bodies."¹ Like operational images, talisman-images have their effects not (or not only) by resembling forces but by connecting directly to them. Unlike operational images, talisman-images disdain the meager confines of corporate and institutional networks, instead inviting us to imagine new ways of connecting to the planet and beyond.

Talismanic magic developed in the Islamic Neoplatonist tradition of Yaqūb ibn Ishāq al-Kindī (Basra, 801-873). Al-Kindī's influential ray-based theory of causation in *De Radiis*² argued that the stars and planets send out rays that affect everything in the sublunar world; and each thing affected also sends out rays that affect other things. Al-Kindī built on the Sabeian star magic of Thābit ibn Qurrā (d. 901) and on the *Great Introduction to Astrology* by his colleague Abu Ma'shar al-Balkhī's (d. 886), which argues that events in the terrestrial world are caused by movements in the celestial world. Their cosmologies relied on the Islamic Neoplatonist concept of emanation, whereby all of creation emanates from a unitary entity, converted from the Greek concept of the One to the Muslim God. In an emanated cosmos, every heavenly and sublunar entity maintains a link to the source that brought it into being. Nevertheless, Al-Kindī's cosmos, in which all entities emit and receive mediating vibrations, harmonizes well with contemporary philosophy and physics.

De Radiis presents two opposing ideas. First, cosmic relationships determine everything. Second, magicians are able to actively operate on the cosmos. Al-Kindī reconciles these by arguing that magical power works within natural laws.³ Understanding these, through years of study and discipline, magicians can align their powers with those of the cosmos. The magician's intention, when realized in speech or objects, creates rays by which the practitioner can manage the cosmos in

miniature.⁴ Talismanic practice spread across Southwest Asia, North Africa, and Persia and, in translation, to the Latin West.

Talismans' effectiveness depends on many factors. First, the cosmologic order of emanation enables magic by correspondence, whereby earthly things like metals, stones, plants, animals, and human powers and professions correspond to certain planets and constellations and retain the power to influence them. In order to manipulate these correspondences, magicians must be adept in many fields, from astronomy to geology to botany. They must also be literate and be party to secret transmissions of occult knowledge. Magicians must submit their bodies to years of ascetic discipline. In order to align their powers with divine powers, they accompanied each act with prayers and powerful words: directed to God, the heavenly bodies commanded by God, and the angels or jinns who intercede with those heavenly bodies. Finally, effective talismanic magic demands patience and élan, for auspicious timing, and affective investment by both magicians and their clients.

Scholars such as Persis Berlekamp,⁵ Nader El-Bizri and Eva Orthmann,⁶ Charles Burnett,⁷ Matthew Melvin-Koushki,⁸ Liana Saif,⁹ and Nicolas Weill-Parot¹⁰ examine talismans' historical formation and conditions of efficacy. I contend that the talisman's legacy remains as a minor tendency in our disenchanting times.¹¹

Here's a talisman: folio 4r from an anonymous, undated but likely contemporary copy of the thirteenth-century *Daqā'iq al-haqā'iq* by Naṣīr al-Dīn Muḥammad Ibrāhīm al-Rammāl (pseudonym Naṣīr) who lived at the court of the Seljuk ruler Ġīyās al-Dīn Kay Khusraw III (reign 1264-5) in central Anatolia.¹² Naṣīr included several pictures like this in the *Daqā'iq al-haqā'iq*: shapes with human faces, connected by lines that are inscribed with a combination of Arabic letters and apparently random marks. This is the only picture with house-shaped faces. They are connected by a curving line, like a path, and between them zigzags another line; both are inscribed with letters and marks. Between them are two symbols of lines terminating in circles. These "lunette sigla" have a deep lineage in Jewish, Persian, Arabic magical texts.¹³ Their meanings changed over time and between cultures. Initially they were letters of secret alphabets; later they became associated with Jewish holy names. In Arabic texts from the ninth century onward, they gained an association with the stellar rays of Al-Kindī. A table on folio 43 shows that the symbols correspond to letters; thus a secret alphabet.

The preceding page states that this talisman is to open up a means of attaining «work and livelihood” (*kar va kasb*, (بس کو راک) for the client. It lists the names of seven angels who should be invoked in the spell, gives the instructions for making the talisman, and begins the series of disconnected marks the magician should inscribe while performing the spell. The title in red reads تروص تپن یا لکوم, *surat-i muwakkil in-ast*. Literally, that translates as “This is the deputy’s image or form,” but in this context, the meaning is “This is the angel’s image or form.”¹⁴ Angels, jinns, or personal daīmons, passionately trapped halfway between the heavenly and sublunar worlds, were in a position to intercede with the heavenly bodies for an individual. Elsewhere the book depicts some of these grotesque angels, such as the two-headed pigeon carrying a bowl and a ladle full of fire—the jinn of the passage of the sun from Virgo to Libra.¹⁵

In order to help the magician’s client find employment, the magician must carry out the spell indicated above the talisman, appealing to the named angels who can intervene with certain heavenly bodies (more research would determine which ones), and this must be done at an astrologically auspicious moment. It likely requires the magician to first spend a long period in prayer and asceticism, then at an astrologically propitious moment to inscribe the letters and signs while reciting prayers to the interceding angel. The magician might also burn plants and other matter, themselves gathered at astrologically propitious moments, that would draw down the powers of the heavenly bodies being supplicated.

Medieval talismans worked (or if you prefer, “worked”) because the practitioners understood how earthly beings were connected to the cosmos, according to Islamic Neoplatonist cosmology: an enchanted cosmology that is difficult to embrace in our scientific and secular times. Contemporary operational images work by taking advantage of machinic, digital, and surveillant connections.¹⁶ Contemporary talisman-images discover other connections, more aspirational than the meager ends of operational images and less orderly than those of the Neoplatonists. In our time, certain artworks, performances, and movies, as well as some activist projects, act as talismans by developing connections between earthly bodies and cosmic

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forces. They may do this by operating as microcosms, managing the cosmos in miniature; for example, art and activist works that connect earthly bodies to the powers of metals, wind, ocean, or stars. Or they may identify connections among things that appear separate in space and time and re-fold these connections in new ways, compelling individual or collective action in the present; for example, some Afrofuturist films operate this way.

Talismanic images continue to function in our time, though now the magician who embodies the encyclopedia knowledge, felicitous timing, and decisive action is likely to be not an individual adept but a collective. And the interceding angels of our time, mediating between heaven and the sublunar world? They are the cosmic powers in our midst: the life of plants and fungi, animals, metals, stones, elementary particles, electricity, and other beings that suffuse human creatures yet remain elusively to us.

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- 1 *Picatrix: Un traité de magie médiévale*, trans. and introduction by Béatrice Bakhouché, Frédéric Fauquier, and Brigitte Pérez-Jean (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2003), 120.
- 2 The text survives only in Latin translation.
- 3 Pinella Travaglia, *Magic, Causality and Intentionality: The doctrine of rays in al-Kindī* (Sismel: Edizione de Galluzzo, 1999).
- 4 Charles Burnett, "The Theory and Practice of Powerful Words in Medieval Magical Texts," in *The Word in Medieval Logic, Theology and Psychology: Acts of the XIIIth International Colloquium of the Société Internationale pour l'Étude de la Philosophie Médiévale, Kyoto, 27 September–1 October 2005*, eds. Tetsuro Shimizu and Charles Burnett (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2009), 215–31.
- 5 Persis Berlekamp, "Symmetry, Sympathy, and Sensation: Talismanic Efficacy and Slippery Iconographies in Early Thirteenth-Century Iraq, Syria, and Anatolia" *Representations* 133 (Winter 2016): 59–109.
- 6 Nader El-Bizri and Eva Orthmann, *The Occult Sciences in Pre-Modern Islamic Cultures* (Beirut: Orient Institut Beirut, 2018).
- 7 Charles Burnett, "Ṭābit ibn Qurra the Ḥarrānian on Talismans and the Spirits of the Planets," *La corónica*, 36: 1 (Fall 2007): 13–40; and "The Theory and Practice of Powerful Words in Medieval Magical Texts"; and other texts
- 8 Matthew Melvin-Koushki, "Introduction: De-Orienting the Study of Islamicate Occultism," *Arabica*, 64 (2017): 287–295.
- 9 Liana Saif, *The Arabic Influences on Early Modern Occult Philosophy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).
- 10 Nicolas Weill-Parot, "Images corporéiformes et similitude dans le *Picatrix* et dans le monde Latin médiévale" in *Images et magie: Picatrix entre Orient et Occident*, eds. Jean-Patrice Boudet, Anna Caiozzo, and Nicolas Weill-Parot (Paris: Champion, 2011), 117–135.
- 11 Laura U. Marks, "Talisman-images: from the cosmos to your body," in *Deleuze, Guattari and the Arts of Multiplicity*, eds. Radek Przedpeński and S. E. Wilmer (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 231–259.
- 12 "Recueil d'œuvres en prose et en vers, probablement toutes dues à Naṣīr al-Dīn Muḥ. b. Ibrāhīm b. 'Abd-ullāh al-Rammāl al-Mu'azzim al-Sā'atī al-Haykalī (cf. f. 32, 51, 79v et 80), dont le taḥalluṣ est (f. 129v, etc.) Naṣīrī ou Naṣīr....", Bibliothèque national de France, accessed May 26, 2021, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8410888f/f16.item>.
- 13 Venetia Porter, Liana Saif, and Emilie Savage-Smith, "Medieval Islamic Amulets, Talismans, and Magic," in *A Companion to Islamic Art and Architecture*, eds. Finbarr Barry Flood and Gülrü Necipoğlu (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2017).
- 14 Thanks very much to Farshid Kazemi and Matthew Melvin-Koushki for their kind help with this translation.
- 15 "Recueil d'œuvres en prose et en vers, probablement toutes dues à Naṣīr al-Dīn Muḥ."
- 16 See Harun Farocki, "Phantom Images," trans. Brian Poole, *Public*, 29 (2004): 13–22.