Inscribed wooden block used in a cursing ritual
Bactria, 5th-6th century CE.

Wood panel with ink drawing of two demonic figures and inscription in Bactrian language and script, several nail holes and one large piercing made by a lance or arrow, hinges carved out of top and bottom of right-hand side, panel split vertically along the line of one of the nail holes, 32.5 x 23 x 2.5 cm.

This esoteric object has its origin in the pan-Indian *kilana* ritual. Known through the *Arthava Veda*, *kilana* is a rite for warding off malevolent influences and forms part of the extensive tradition of magical practices and incantations derived from Vedic mantras. The practice passed into Buddhism where the use of iron nails was prescribed for the first time. In Tibetan Buddhism the nails themselves came to be associated with the wrathful deity, Vajrapani, the vanquisher of malevolent forces. In addition to attesting the use of the procedure among Bactrian speakers, this panel is an important piece of evidence for the spread of Indian ideas and popular beliefs along the trails created by Buddhist missionaries and merchants.

In the centre of the panel are two figures, surrounded by a chain, whose long hair is drawn up and meets at a point above their heads. Their hearts, ankles, and the point at which their hair meets have been pierced with iron nails. Though the nails have largely corroded away, it is nonetheless clear that the protruding parts were once bent over to puncture the figures’ genitals. Finally, the panel has been pierced in the bottom left corner by the violent blow of an arrow or spear from behind. It is likely that the nails were meant to pin down the figures before being killed by the final blow from a weapon. The victims themselves are of human form, though the shape of the hands, eyes and mouths, as well as the presence of what would seem to be demonic donkey-ears or horns on the figure on the viewer’s right, might suggest that they were astrological illness-causing demons. Around the demons is a spiral of eight to nine lines in Bactrian language and script.

Two wooden hinges have been carved out of the top and bottom of the right-hand side of the panel, indicating that the panel was a flap in a shrine, window or chest. According to Nicholas Sims-Williams, no comparable Bactrian ritual board is known.
A group of contract sticks written in Bactrian
Bactria, c. 6th century CE

Seven wooden sticks, two sticks broken, each inscribed with short single-line texts on flat inner surface, each between 6 and 16.5 cm long.

These inscribed sticks represent receipts for the delivery of various items and are written in a form of Bactrian typical of the sixth century CE. On some of the sticks notches can be observed, probably corresponding to the measure or number of items agreed upon. The breaks in two of the sticks were deliberate, as they appear to have been partly made with a knife, and suggest a method of concluding a contract. The practice of writing contracts on sticks would seem to be in imitation of the Han Chinese use of wooden slips, though no attempt was made to reproduce the flat-style documentary surface of the latter. Instead, the sticks seem to have been made by simply splitting in half a slim branch of roughly finger thickness.

According to Nicholas Sims-Williams, the two halves of the broken contract stick at the top of the page form a complete text and read: ‘From the servant of Ormuzd: ... [name of an unidentified commodity]. Received.’

The second stick from the top is also complete and contains the text: ‘Produce (received) through the servant of Wer’. The remaining documents are also receipts of a similar nature.

Until recently little was known about either the Bactrian language or the history of Bactria. In the last ten years, however, the decipherment of Bactrian and the availability of texts like these have hugely enriched the history of this culturally and commercially important region along the Silk Road. For an almost identical group of contract sticks in the Khalili Collection, see Nicholas Sims-Williams, Bactrian Documents from Northern Afghanistan I: Legal and Economic Documents, Oxford, 2000, pp. 22, 165-9.

A Bactrian land purchase agreement with three seals
Bactria, dated 669 CE.

Parchment, sealed with three intact seals, open text of 21 lines,
further text in sealed portion, 22 x 28 cm.

This perfectly preserved parchment document,
complete with intact seals,
consists of a purchase deed for
a piece of land. Very few such
documents have survived and
this one is unusual for its large
size, strong Bactrian script and
outstanding condition. The
sellers are listed as Bayyozpur
(or Bay for short), Khay, Yoz
and Wanak the son of Khwas,
appearently all members of the
Nanan family and servants of a
certain Kanag Gozgan. The
buyers are listed as Bramarx
and Moyan, sons of Laguk,
and also servants of Kanag
Gozgan. The property in
question is named as ‘Lizg’,
and one of its boundaries is
mentioned as ‘the water
(river?) Kalf’, perhaps Kalf,
later called Kalif, on the Oxus.
This seems likely given that
the latter place is mentioned in
another known document,
which is an agreement to keep
the peace between the same
group of people.

The top of the document runs
into the sealed part of the
letter, which has been tightly
rolled over, flattened, and
sealed with three seals.

This sealed part of the letter
presumably contains a further
copy of the text, which would
have been opened before a
judge in case of a dispute.

A published edition of this
document by Nicholas Sims-
Williams is due to appear in
Bulletin of the Asia Institute,
vol. 15. For other rare
examples of Bactrian land
purchases, see Nicholas Sims-
Williams, New Light on
Ancient Afghanistan: The
Decipherment of Bactrian,
SOAS, London, 1997, and by
the same author, "Nouveaux
documents Bactriens du
Guzgan", Académie des
Inscriptions & Belles-Lettres,
Comptes Rendus des Séances de
l'Année 2002, Juillet-Octobre,
Christians, Jews and Muslims on the Silk Road

Destination for Silk Road
goods headed for the shores
of the Mediterranean, the
ancient Near East was also
the meeting point of Roman,
Semitic, Hellenic and
Persian culture.

Persia, though considered to
be the heartland of
Zoroastrianism from the time
of the Achaemenid Empire
(555-330 BC) onwards, also
hosted old and important
Jewish and Christian
communities. For the history
of the Silk Road the spread of
Nestorian Christianity
throughout Persia and Central
Asia is of particular
significance. The Nestorian
faith in Persia dates back to
451 CE when the Persian
Christian community adopted
the stance upheld by John
Nestorius, the schismatic
Patriarch of Constantinople
from 428-31 CE.

From this date onwards,
Ctesiphon, the capital of the
Sasanian Empire, acted as the
headquarters of the Nestorian
Church and the point of
departure for missions to the
East. Just as Buddhism spread
in the first centuries CE along
the trade routes between
India, China and Central Asia,
Nestorian Christianity
followed the Silk Road from
Persia to Central Asia, where
archbishops were
established in Samarkand and
Kashgar in the seventh century
CE. A stele found in Chang’an
records the introduction of
Nestorian Christianity by
Syrian priests as early as 635
CE. Along with missionaries,
it seems that Sogdian
merchants, who acted as the
intermediaries in trade
between Persia and China and
were famous for their religious
eclecticism, were also
instrumental in spreading
Nestorianism in the region.

The history of the Jews of
Persia stretches back to
anti-pity and represents the
single longest continuous
Jewish presence in any part of
the world. In addition to a
distinct and rich culture of their
own, Persian Jews also
belonged to a vast cultural
and commercial network
that bridged the Jewish
communities of the
Mediterranean, Iran and
India. The most detailed
documentary evidence of this
network comes from the Cairo
Geniza, a deposit of writings
that stretch back to the ninth
century CE, discovered in the
storehouse of a Cairo
synagogue in 1889 CE, among
which were found some letters
in Arabic and Persian from
Iran. Interestingly, the Hebrew
amulet in this catalogue bears
striking resemblance to some of
those in the Geniza collection.

The coming of Islam in the
seventh century CE
dramatically changed the
cultural and political map of
the Near and Middle East. Just
over a century after the birth of
Muhammad, an area stretching
from the Atlantic Ocean to the
borders of China had been
brought under one rule,
bringing together disparate
cultures and presenting
unprecedented trading
opportunities. During the first
centuries of the ‘Abbasid
Caliphate (750-1258 CE) in
particular, trade with India
and China flourished,
invisiting many of the exotic
and fantastic tales of The One
Thousand and One Nights.

One of the many technologies
that came west as a result
of the rise of Islam was
papermaking, allegedly learnt
from Chinese prisoners
following the famous Battle of
Talas in 751, the only battle
between the Chinese and the
Arab Muslims. The practice
spread rapidly throughout the
Islamic World, reaching the
Iberian Peninsula by the tenth
century, from where it passed
into Europe during the
twelfth. Alongside religion and
trade, one of the most
important exports of Islam was
the Arabic language.
The status of Arabic as the
language of the Qur’an, and
hence the word of Allah, no
doubt played a major role in
the spread of the language
throughout the Islamic World.
Even in Iran and Central
Asia where Persian traditions
remained strong, with the
expansion of Islam, Persians
came to adopt the Arabic
script and a large vocabulary
of Arabic words.

Photo: Portal of Rabat-i Malik,
Archaeological Commission of Uzbekistan
A Christian magical protective scroll in Syriac
Iran, 6th - 7th century CE

Single vellum leaf, nine lines of clear Syriac text, partial loss of text
in two places where leaf was once folded, intact lower margins, offset
of another Syriac text on verso which was on the outside when the
document was rolled up, c. 15 x 8 cm.

This piece of vellum is a Syriac amulet and was for a long time folded twice into a
thin strip and rolled up. Once rolled up the amulet would have been worn by its owner.
The script is in Eastern Syriac, but the orthography contains a mixture of Eastern
and Western, Jewish and Christian spellings. Such orthographic diversity is
typical of magical scrolls from this period.

The scroll invokes the Christian Trinity and Angels to heal sickness and protect
against demons. The amulet mentions Shenat-zar Shin Shat-zar, Yazdan-zadag, and
Denar among the owners of the amulet or those to be protected by it. These names
link the document to a cache of similar amulets, now in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris,
prepared for persons of the same name, as well as for members of different
generations of the same family. Their personal names are clearly Persian, which along
with the use of Persian zodiacal terminology suggests that the scrolls were made in
Iran. The Bibliothèque Nationale collection has been published by Phillip
Gignoux, Incantations Magiques Syriques, Louvain, 1987. Gignoux, on the basis
of the script, suggests a date in the 6th or 7th century for their production.

Such scrolls provide rare and important evidence of the popular understanding of early
Christianity, as well as the continuation of Jewish and Hellenistic magic among the
Christians of the Middle East. Like contemporary incantation bowls, which were deposited
in the foundations of houses, they contain an intriguing mixture of Jewish, Christian,
Persian, and more general magical concepts.
This document once belonged to some sort of school manual, giving here the various forms of the verb 'to teach'. Such documents are extremely rare and constitute some of the very few sources on the history of the Nestorian Christian communities of Eastern Iran and Central Asia. According to Sebastian Brock, the orthography of the document points to a date after the tenth century, but cannot be later than the thirteenth century when the Nestorian communities in the region disappeared.

Nestorian Christianity in Persia dates to 451 CE when the Persian Christians sided with the views held by John Nestorius, the schismatic Patriarch of Constantinople from 428-31 CE. From this date onwards, the Persian Church in Ctesiphon, the capital of the Sasanian Empire, also acted as the centre of the Nestorian church and the departure point for missions to India, Central Asia and China. In the following centuries the Nestorian Church spread along the paths of the Silk Road, founding churches and communities in Merv, Herat, Samarkand, Kashgar and Chang’an, and gaining adherents among Sogdian merchants, Turkic tribes, and the Chinese. This document sheds light on methods of teaching Syriac, the literary and liturgical language of the Nestorian Church.
This amulet is an extremely rare and rich piece of evidence for the history of the Persian Jewish community. The text is magical in nature and was written for a certain 'Joseph son of Zilpah that was born of Ramesh'. While the names Joseph and Zilpah are both Jewish biblical names, Ramesh is a well-attested Persian name. Intriguingly, the content and orthography of the amulet, such as the ligature of the letters aleph and lamed, match documents from the famous Cairo Geniza, pointing to a date between the 9th and 11th century. The implications such documents might have for establishing the degree of contact between widely scattered Jewish communities have not yet been fully explored.

The beginning of the text declares that its purpose in the protection of the above Joseph from 'the evil eye, and the evil tongue and from...and an enemy and the evil tongue and all types of destroyer and all types of retribution...forever'. For this end, ten names of the Lord are cited along with the biblical verses from which they are taken. The verses that appear in this part of the text are Deuteronomy 10:17, Isaiah 26:4, Genesis 14:22, 17:1, Exodus 20:17, 31:4, 1 Kings 2:5, Daniel 9:19, Exodus 34:6, Isaiah 6:3 and Zechariah 14:9. Following another invocation of holy names in biblical/liturgical forms, Joseph is described as being flanked by a lion on his right, a leopard on his left, with a dragon before him, possibly a bear behind him (the reading is unclear at this point), and the Shekhina (Divine presence) over his head to protect him. He is further described as doomed with the affection and grace of God. The incantation requests that he should be received with complete love and granted his heart's desire.

Then follows a list of names of angels, who are said to have blown in the face of Moses, turning it red. After this comes another invocation in the name of the 'King of Kings' (i.e. God) and an 'amen amen selah'. The following verses all contain narratives that depict blessings from God, invoked here for the sake of the owner. These verses consist of Genesis 6:8, Proverbs 3:4, Proverbs 3:16, Psalm 91:15 & 16. This is followed by two verses, Deuteronomy 6:4 and Psalm 91:1, which are written in such a way that the first word of the first verse is followed by the second word of the second verse, and so forth. The incantation concludes with a final invocation to the angels to protect the owner, called here "this boy". The text is sealed with a citation of the Hebrew alphabet in full.

This document can be compared in content and provenance to a Hebrew prayer discovered in Dunhuang by the famous French sinologist Paul Pelliot, published in Jacques Giès and Monique Cohen, Sérinde, Terre de Bouddha, Paris, 1993, pp. 78-9, no. 43. An intriguing Judaico-Persian letter was found by Stein in Dunhuang-Uilq; see The Silk Roads: Trade, Travel, War and Faith, pp. 221-22, no. 147.
A large vellum Qur'an leaf

“They shall be made to see each other…”

Near East, 9th century CE

Arabic manuscript on vellum, sepia elongated Kufic script, 7 lines to a page, red ornament and gold verse markers, c. 32 x 23 cm.

Text: Recto: Surah 70
(al-Ma‘arrīj – the Ways of Ascent): 10-13

Verse: 70.13-18

This is a leaf from a luxurious Qur'an manuscript in Kufic script, of the type that predominated in the first four centuries of the Islamic era and spread east along the Silk Road as far as Central Asia. During this period Islam became the official religion of a vast area, stretching from the Atlantic coast of Morocco to the borders of China, and stimulating the exchange of goods and ideas between Asia and the Mediterranean. Kufic Qur’ans like this one were among the cultural items that travelled with Muslim soldiers, scholars and merchants, and their presence from North Africa to Central Asia is a remarkable visual testament to the spread of Islamic religion and culture in this period.

This Qur'anic leaf was made in the Near East in the early 'Abbasid period, when both Qur'an production and trade with Asia were at their height. It displays all the stateliness for which Kufic script is renowned, with a subtle control of horizontal and vertical proportions of the letter forms. The script is very close to what Déroche calls 'Style D.1'; see F. Déroche,
The Abbasid Tradition,

A section from this Qur'an is in the Iran Bastan Museum, Tehran, no. 4289 and is illustrated in M. Lings The Qur'anic Art of Calligraphy and Illumination, 1976, no. 5.

Another leaf from the same Qur'an is in the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin, published in D. James, Qur'ans and Bindings from the Chester Beatty Library, 1980, no. 5, p. 18. James also lists other pages as belonging to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and the Pars Museum, Shiraz.

A leaf from a similar Qur'an, also a seven-line folio, which was produced by an atelier associated with the Great Mosque of Qairawan, is illustrated in De Carthage à Kairouan – 2000 ans d'art et d'histoire en Tunisie, Paris, 1982, p. 245, no. 328.
لا إله إلا هو فرعون حكمته فتح له شباك اذ لك سأولى إلى هوا فر نادى و هو و جمع
A Qur’an in Eastern Kufic Script
Eastern Iran, late 12th century CE.

Arabic manuscript on brownish paper, 242 leaves, first surah, verses 1-6 from Surat al-Baqarah, 14-19 from Surah Muhammad until end of Qur’an missing, 19 lines to the page written in Eastern Kufic script in black ink, with vocalization and diacritical dots in black and red, verses marked throughout with rosettes and medallions, illuminated panel indicating the middle of the Qur’an (Surah Maryam), trimmed, discoloration, later blue velvet covers, 24.6 x 16.5 cm.

This Qur’an, written in Eastern Kufic script, is of a style that emerged in the tenth century CE, and whose popularity was closely linked to the introduction of papermaking, one of the most important technologies to have passed down the Silk Road. The style is particularly associated with Iran where the earliest examples were produced in the early tenth century, though tenth-century examples have also been found as far west as Palermo in Sicily.

The art of papermaking in the Islamic World was allegedly learnt from Chinese prisoners of war, taken in the Battle of Talas in 751 CE. Although the use of paper quickly became popular in bureaucratic and administrative circles, Qur’an production remained conservative for some time, retaining both parchment as the writing material and an archaic Kufic script. When Qur’ans did begin to be produced on paper in the tenth century, the traditional Kufic script was at the same time replaced with Eastern Kufic, also called Qarmatian Kufic, Broken Cursive, Warrag or New Style. The latter was a script developed from the ninth century onwards, and like paper, seems to have been pioneered by the bureaucracy, presumably due to its greater legibility and practicality in comparison with older scripts such as Kufic.

This Qur’an can be compared in style and period to a small group of Qur’ans also written in Eastern Kufic. It stands out, however, due to its relatively large size. The script, diacritical and vocalization dots and verse markers of this Qur’an compare closely to a later copy in the Mashhad Library copied by Ali ibn Muhammad ibn Muhammad and dated AH 620/AD 1223; see M. Lings, The Qur’anic Art of Calligraphy and Illumination, London, 1976, no. 21. Also compare to a Qur’an folio in the Chester Beatty Library dated to the early thirteenth century; see D. James, Qur’ans and Bindings, London, 1980, p. 31. Possibly the closest stylistic comparison -- especially the marginal medallions and colours – is a twelfth-century single-volume Qur’an in the Nasser D. Khalili Collection of Islamic Arts; see F. Déroche, The Abbasid Tradition, London, 1992, pp. 180-181, no. 96.
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