Silver Amulets
with Inscriptions from Iran and Afghanistan

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Amulets can be defined as objects which bring good luck and protection. In the Muslim world these are most often engraved with Arabic inscriptions which connect profoundly to Islamic belief. The amulet collection of the Museum of Ethnology in Munich, of which a selection is documented here, shows all the characteristics of amulets (talisman, amulet) from nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Iran and Afghanistan. One extraordinary piece however may be Uzbek, either from northern Afghanistan or Uzbekistan: a rectangular brass amulet set into a turquoise mount (Fig. 119). Two of the amulets bear dates, the lock (Fig. 120), 1302 or 1303 H/1884-85 CE, and the arm amulet of the būzūzīnād-type (Fig. 128), 1331 H/1912-13 CE. These amulets were variously made to be worn as pendants, fixed to the arm or onto a belt and in one case used as a padlock. The cylindrical ones would have housed amulet scrolls and the octagonal boxes miniature Qur’ans. The material from which an amulet was made is important: carnelian, for example, was favoured by the Prophet Muhammad himself, turquoise was thought to ward off the ‘evil eye’ and is often attached to the clothing of newborn babies. In Iran and Afghanistan, amulets made of metal, in particular silver, are regarded as particularly efficacious. The inscriptions on the amulets described here are in a variety of cursive scripts some more elaborate than others. They include simple scratched inscriptions or texts written with wide letters set against a hatched ground. For the most part the inscriptions are in naskhi, but occasionally there is a trace of nastalīq, the script style most associated with the Iranian world (although it is not generally used for Qur’anic inscriptions, but more often reserved for poetry) while there is clear nastalīq on one example (Fig. 132). For the backgrounds these can consist of hatched grounds, or clusters of dots.

In common with other amulets, the texts are mostly from the Qur’an and consist of particular verses associated with their protective power. Nevertheless, it is an interesting feature how often the verses are not complete, perhaps in order to fit the available space. Most popular is the ‘throne verse’ (Yaṣṣṣ al-kursi) from Sūr al-Fatḥā (2:255) (Fig. 119, 124, 132; for the complete text see the article of Ehlī, p. 190). This verse is also known as the ‘verse of
seeking refuge’ or the ‘verse for driving out Satan’. Other popular Qur’anic texts often used in amulets are the short suras known as the ‘four declarations’, suras 109, 112, 113, and 114; the last two suras are additionally known as al-mu’awwiyaH and, the verses of ‘seeking refuge from evil’, and they provide “the antidote to superstition and fear.” The Prophet was said to have used these verses to protect himself from bewitchment. It also appears that these verses are particularly favoured among the Shi’a, perhaps stemming from the tradition that Imam Husain apparently wore these two suras around his neck before he was martyred. A clear Shi’a connection can be seen in the invocation to ‘Ali ibn abi Talib, the Prophet’s cousin and brother-in-law, fourth of the Rightly Guided Caliphs and first of the Shi’i Imams, which appears on a number of the amulets (figs 123, 128). Although it is difficult to ascertain exactly when this phrase first occurs, it begins to appear with some frequency in the Safavid period in the early sixteenth century on metalwork and seal stones. The amulets also include other more esoteric elements, such as groups of letters and magic squares.

**Locks**

The silver lock (fig. 120 A–B) is engraved on both sides. The texts include repetitions of the basmala (that means the phrase; “In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate”), a Qur’anic line “there is nothing like him” from sura 42 verse 11, and incantations to God using some of the Most Beautiful Names of God (the 99 Names of al-mukhtar) which includes al-jabbar (the Generous) and al-azîz (the Mighty), and prayers for the family of the Prophet Muhammad. These are all in the cursive script nastî. The lock is dated at the base of one side 1302 or 1303 H-1884–85 CE. In addition to this inscribed lock there is a group of much smaller leaf-shaped qaf-e alif (alphabet-locks) which are only engraved with numerals.

**Circular Amulet-pendants**

The piece illustrated here (fig. 121), is set as a pendant with carnelian beads around the edge and consists of four concentric bands with a magical square in the centre. It is engraved with Qur’anic inscriptions in a variety of styles. Starting from the outside, the first band has sura 68:31–57 inscribed in a wide cursive script.
AMULET IN THE SHAPE OF A PADLOCK ENGRAVED WITH SCRIPT
from or Afghanistan; dated 700–1091 (695–98 CE).
This amulet inscribed on both sides in naskh contains religious formulas, invocations and prayers.

ROUND AMULET PENDANT WITH VERSES FROM THE QUR'AN
Afghanistan or Central Asia; 9th/early 10th century
The amulet decorated with agate beads is engraved in different styles with verses from the Qur'an. In the center is a small magical rectangle with numbers.
ROUND AMULET PENDANT WITH INSCRIPTIONS
Afghanistan or Central Asia; end of 19th/early 20th century.
In the centre of the tile-shaped cartouche is the protective invocation "Oh You who removes obstacles!"
The border inscription contains sura 112, 'The Purity'.
Say: He is Allah, the One!
Allah, the eternally Besought of all!
He begots not nor was he begotten.
And there is none comparable unto Him.

OCTAGONAL AMULET WITH INSCRIPTIONS
Iran or Afghanistan; mid-20th century.
The inscription which runs around the rectangular inner panel contains the well-known and often quoted
courtive name 'Aliyyun - "Call Ali, who manifests wonders..." - which identifies the wearer of the amulet
as a Shi'ite.
against a hatched ground. The beginning of the verse is indicated by a plant motif. Band 3 starts with the basmala and continues with sura 65:2-3, which is completed in band 2. The text in band 2 is engraved in simple naskh, the line intersected by four decorative motifs in the shape of a horizontally placed H. Band 3 has again the basmala, and is followed by invocations to God: ya kiram (oh Generous One), ya Allah (oh God), ya Allâh al-fâlimîn (Allah Lord) (of the worlds, oh God). This is in a wide cursive script against a hatched ground as in band 1. In the centre is a 4.4 x 4.5 magick square; in whichever direction they are added, the numbers make up the number 20. A similar-shaped pendant (no. 122), but smaller and made of brass, has a cartouche in its centre with an invocation to God: ya Allâh al-mukhtar (oh You who are capable of solving difficulties). Around the edge and simply engraved is the whole of sūra al-ḥiḍas 112 ('Sincere Religion').

Rectangular and Octagonal Amulet-pendants

An octagonal silver pendant (no. 120) is engraved in naskh script with a series of invocations. Preceded by the numerals 786, which are the numerical equivalent of the basmala, the outer inscription is the popular invocation to Imam 'Ali: "Call upon 'Ali who makes wonders appear; you will find a help to you in adversity, all care will clear away through your prophethood, oh Muhammad, through your friendship, oh 'Ali ibn abi Talib." Lines 5-4 of the central square first have the basmala and the sūra 'al-ahdîd (the Profession of Faith) "there is no God but God, Muhammad is the Messenger of God" with the specific Shīa addition "Allâh is the friend of 'Ali." The rest of the amulet is inscribed as follows: "The kingdom belongs to God the One and Only, the Victorious, God is my protector, Glory belongs to God. For God shall accomplish his purpose [Qur'an 65:3]..." for every care there is something good. My hope is in God. You are my trust. My protection is from your creation. My trust is in God. As God wills, there is no power except in God. My trust is in God, the Protector, God, the King. I am witness to God, I am a proof for God."

Several smaller rectangular and octagonal amulet-pendants in the collection of the Museum of Ethnology in Munich have a 4.4 x 4.5 magick square just on one side or on both sides filled with numerals and Names of God.

Arrow-shaped Amulet-pendants

This common type of amulet-pendant, often also described as leaf- or heart-shaped, is found in varying sizes between Iran and northern India. It has smooth or foliate sides and is engraved on the front side with inscriptions and/or other signs and motifs. The example shown here (no. 124) has an inscription in cursive script (naskh) which is divided into seven lines with background of clusters of dots making up heads of flowers. It consists of the 'throne verse' (2:255) of the Qur'an. Two elongated leaf-shaped amulets, both made of very thin silver, are more esoteric in character: in addition to invocations to God and to 'Ali in the top section, they have magick squares in the centre filled with numerals and letters.

Arm Amulets

These amulets known as bâzâbdûn are worn on the upper right arm or on both arms, often for protection in battle. They are found in a variety of shapes, oval, round or rectangular, and have links through which a thread would have fastened the amulet to the arm either on the back or on the sides. The inscriptions on an oval-shaped piece are written in a careless scratched style with clusters of dots in the background. The outer inscription which follows the shape of the amulet consists, after the basmala, of Qur'an sūra 68:32 but it breaks off in the middle of the word yasîlîn and misses out the last words of the verse for lack of space. In the centre, the inscription starts with the first line of sūra 68:33 and then continues with the 'victory verse' 61:13 ("Help from God and a speedily victory"). On the front side of the oval amulet illustrated here (no. 125), which is more curved for the arm, inscriptions, largely undeciphered at present, surround a 4.4 x 4.4 magick square. There are two clusters of numbers in the otherwise decorative border. The bâzâbdûn is unusual in that there is another magick square on the underside, also 4.4 x 4.4, each square of which is divided by diagonal lines into four.

A bâzâbdûn (no. 124) consisting of three sections (the middle one a small oval-shaped box) connected by wire links and with an attached chain has the same inscription on each of the three sections: ya 'alîhî al-ḥajjât - "Oh You who settles affairs," a popular invocation to God. The script is cursive, loosely based on naskh, the flat pieces to the left and right of the box with a hatched background.

Silver arm amulets made up of three hinged sections constitute a rather common form, especially in Afghanistan, as several such examples from there are found in the Munich collection. The inscriptions on a particularly fine piece (no. 127) are deeply engraved in cursive script within horizontal lines that are enclosed within cartouches. The background is decorated with hatching.
FIG. 125
OVAL-SHAPED AMULET WITH VERSES FROM THE QUR'AN
Iran or Afghanistan; end of 19th/early 20th century

This amulet which is well-crafted but engraved and inscribed hastily was worn on the upper arm. Another 16-panel magical rectangle appears on the inner side.

FIG. 126
UPPER ARM AMULET WITH SMALL BOXES
Iran or Afghanistan; early 20th century

Each of the three parts of this amulet is inscribed with the same invocation to God. The oval box was intended for an additional amulet written on paper.
and clusters of dots. The bow-shaped section on the right begins with the 'victory verse' from Qur’an (6:13): ‘Help from God and a speedy victory. Proclaim the good tidings to the faithful, God is the protector.’ The rectangular central section contains the invocation to ‘Ali with the addition of the words ‘Oh budu’llah.’ Budu’llah is the name of the magical square in which the letters b, d, w, and n appear at each corner and has become a protective talismanic word in its own right.² The bow-shaped section on the left is inscribed with Qur’an (2:287), ‘There is no God but You, Glory be to You.’ More recent, comparatively less well-made examples of the same amulet type in the Munich collection are engraved with the ‘throne verse’ (2:255), the bismillah and magic squares.²² An interesting bçq of a somewhat broader shape (fig. 128) is engraved in cursive script (close to naskh) within horizontal lines. The inscription starts with the bismillah on the upper bow-shaped section and continues into the rectangular central part with the invocation to ‘Ali with slight variations from the usual formula.²³ This is followed in the last line of the central piece into the lower bowed-shaped section by sura 112 (‘Sincere Religion’) and the letters al-fām-mīn, followed by the words: ‘He says: pray for Muhammad’ and the date 1323 H./1912-13 CE. The letters al-fām-mīn are some of the mysterious letters of the Qur’an which appear at the beginning of twenty-nine of the 114 suras of the Qur’an.²⁴

Amulet Boxes
Octagonal and circular silver amulet cases are often attached to bands and worn on the upper arm and some contained miniature Qur’ans.²⁵ An example of this type is fig. 129, where the inscriptions are in cursive script against a hatched ground. Engraved on the slightly curved lid is part of the ‘throne verse’ (2:255, lines 1-5), while on the four vertical segments of the box are invocations and on the bottom a magic square. Around the sides, the invocations to God using the Divine Names consist of yā hānnā (Oh the Compassionate) on one side, on another al-walîhah (the Trusting One), al-ṣālih (the High), al-ṣālih (the Great) and yā dāyūn (the Devout). Such amulet boxes were often made in pairs to be worn on each arm.
Fig. 129

OCTAGONAL AMULET CASE WITH VERSES FROM THE QUR'AN

Iran or Afghanistan; 15th/16th century

According to tradition, boxes for preserving a copy of the Qur'an written in minuscule script were usually attached to both upper arms. The first part of the 'throne verse' is written on the lid.

Fig. 130

ROUND AMULET BOX WITH VERSES FROM THE QUR'AN

Iran or Afghanistan; 15th/16th century

This box on whose lid the 'throne verse' is also inscribed contains religious-magical texts presumably for additional protection. In popular belief, the 'throne verse' has as much blessing power as half of the Qur'an.
A very similar example to nos. 129 is a pair in the Nasser D. Khalili Collection\textsuperscript{26} which has the distal end split between the two boxes. On a finely worked circular box (no. 130) the whole of verse 255 has been inscribed on the lid as well as the first three lines of verse 256, which would presumably have been completed on the second box. Another example in the Munich collection is inscribed with the 'victory verse' (Qurʾān 61:13) and with most of sura 2:255.\textsuperscript{27}

**Amulet Cases**

Amulet cases from Iran and Afghanistan in the form of six-sided and round cylindrical tubes are either decorated with floral patterns or covered with Islamic inscriptions. Usually, they are suspended from cords by two or three loops to be worn around the neck, but they can also flank a central amulet box. Such tubes would have contained rolled-up paper talismans.\textsuperscript{28}

Among the six-sided pieces of the Munich collection one amulet case (no. 131) made of thick silver is especially well-executed. It is inscribed with the following prayer: "In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate. Oh renowned in the skies, oh renowned on the ground, oh renowned in this world and in the next even though tyrants and rulers work hard for the suppression of Your light and the extinction of Your world, so let it be, nevertheless, that Your light will persist and Your word be disclosed." The other six-sided amulet cases in the collection, all made of thin silver sheet, are engraved with sura 109, sura 113 as well as with invocations to Muhammad and "All".\textsuperscript{29}

Whereas inscriptions are more often engraved on the flat surfaces of the six-sided cylindrical tubes, occasionally they are also found on round tubes with fluted ends, here the inscriptions standing out in relief in repoussé technique, each line within a floral cartouche. Such pieces come particularly from Afghanistan and neighbouring regions of Central Asia where women generally wear them in pairs, but at times also in bundles on their dress. This type is illustrated by nos. 132 inscribed with the 'throne verse'.

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FIG. 131 (above)
**CYLINDRICAL AMULET CAPSULE WITH PRAYER TEXTS**
Iran or Afghanistan; last third of 10th century

The capsule of heavy silver engraved with cursive inscriptions contains a paper amulet.

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FIG. 132 (below)
**CYLINDRICAL AMULET CAPSULE WITH 'THRONE VERSE'**
Afghanistan; second half of 10th century

On round amulet capsules like this one made of chased silver sheet, the holy texts are embossed by means of stamps.