



Report on the Habilitation thesis "*Greek-Inscribed 'Solomonic' Amulets from Late Antiquity and Early Byzantium*" by J.Franek

The Habilitation Thesis, entitled "*Greek-Inscribed 'Solomonic' Amulets from Late Antiquity and Early Byzantium*" by J.Franek deals with an especial sort of amulets featured by referring to the figure of Solomon by either iconographical themes or inscribed text or both of them. A constituent part of ancient magic indeed is formed by amulets, whose number enormously increased since the post-classical period, that form the focus of this research. Among them a very important role was played by the Solomonic motifs, as a result of merging Jewish, Christian and Classical themes, that spread from the eastern Mediterranean regions to the western European countries. The overall importance of this research emerges essentially at the crucial crossroad of the cultural history of both Mediterranean and European world.

The type of magic artefacts, taken into account, consists of materials of different shapes, mostly gems, pendants, medallions, which are suitable to be dressed or transported by everyone in any moment of the everyday life. Iconography is represented by images and symbols, mostly depicting the 'Holy Rider', whereas texts consist in formulaic expressions, often mentioning the Solomon' name itself and, less frequently, his Christian embodiment Sisinnius. Solomonic themes involve the main languages and their respective epigraphic habits of antiquity, namely Greek, Latin and Semitic ones, with regard to magic practices

The Habilitation thesis focuses on the Greek-inscribed documents, which largely form the most abundant, world-wide circulating and valuable set of this type of materials. Such a subject is not confined to a limited or marginal field, but as clearly shown by the Author, is intimately connected with the most important issues of the religious thought, of social history and cultural interaction since antiquity until Middle age of both side of the Mediterranean area. The complexity of problems raised by magic beliefs and religious faith, whose boundaries are difficult to be fixed, lies at core of this work, which is featured by a wide-ranging perspective on the origin, spread and impact of those documents in the course of history especially since late antiquity until the early Middle Age.

For those reasons a considerable part of this research appropriately pays a particular attention to the paths of transmission of those artifacts over generations and the manners of preservation due to both superstitious beliefs and collection aims. That is why objects of this type are nowadays dispersed in numberless public and private collections. The primary goal of this research is the achievement of an inventory of this kind of documents, that really marks peculiarity and originality of this work. Its result is an excellent catalogue, which provides not only the indispensable base for an in-depth analysis of those documents in themselves, but also an invaluable tool for other fields of investigation and disciplinary domains.

Scrutinizing this kind of documents has its scientific foundations on the following facts: a) as a result of intersection of multiple trends of the Jewish, Christian and Classical culture and its spread from the eastern parts to the western ones of the Mediterranean basin since the late antiquity until to Medieval age; b) as border line, difficult to be drawn, between religion and magic, as conceived and applied in popular practices; c) as interaction of superstitious beliefs with the philosophical and scientific thought.





The Habilitation thesis, firmly established within this conceptual and historical framework, is divided in two main parts. The first one is devoted to an analytical presentation of the topic, the state of arts, the reasons, and objectives of the research. In this section the historical background and cultural base underlying the selected corpus of documents is exhaustively illustrated, including insights into the concrete use and social functions of the artifacts at issue. Also, the fate of those artifacts over time is accurately considered in terms of continuity/discontinuity, interpretation/misinterpretation, reuse/disuse/revival in both Latin and Byzantine world. All that is constantly accompanied by a rigorous criticism of today's state of arts, that reveals foundations, necessity, and novelty of the research, that is carried out.

The second part is devoted to the corpus, consisting of over 360 items, whose collection forms an extraordinary and magnificent catalogue. Such a catalogue is based on the rigorous application of both philological and epigraphical criteria requested by editing documents, that combine iconography and written messages. This catalogue is featured by a clear and consistent organisation, that enables an easy access and immediate consultation. Each item is provided by a twofold set of basic information, namely, on the one hand, the textual data, such as image and inscription and their reciprocal interpretation, and, on the other hand, the contextual data, such as findspot, location, dimension, chronology. Especially appreciable is the magnificent equipment of photographs (partly made by the Author himself), accompanying each document.

Undoubtedly, the overall topic is relevant to diverse fields of the academic research. More specifically, a particular relevance concerns some disciplinary areas, namely Classical Philology, Greek epigraphy and script, history of religions and magic in the Mediterranean world, Biblical studies, historical and comparative linguistics. The Author displays a high competence within this multidisciplinary horizon, where he appears to master appropriately the different methodological approaches.

Nevertheless, the main disciplinary field and methodical framework underlying this research are convergently those of the Classical Philology. In this respect, the Habilitation thesis matches the standard requirements of the international research in the field of the Classical scholarship within a wide-ranging perspective. The highest quality of this work emerges in comparison with the current state of investigation on this topic, as shown by the bibliographical references, which are exhaustively listed, critically quoted and commented. Its results make a significant contribution to the advancement of the knowledge of the origin and growing of superstitious beliefs and magic practices, as a consequence of blending of diverse cultures. Furthermore a greatest benefit of the work at issue derives from having filled a gap, that is a lack of a handy and detailed catalogue of texts of this kind. Such an output marks originality and novelty of the work, which offers an invaluable tool for further research in different domains.

The topic is clearly formulated and consistently organised, so that it is easily accessible in each part, enjoyable to read and perfectly understandable. The language standard and terminological appropriateness are impeccable, and the formal level is totally adequate to the academic style. References and bibliographical information are carefully selected, appropriately applied to each concerned subject, and fitting the overall topic. The focal points of the state of arts, methodology and objectives are accurately described.





Materials are classified and presented according to the most objective data provided by shapes and types of artifacts, namely gems, pendants, medallions, armbands, rings. Among them each class and individual item are analysed basing on uniform and consistent criteria, that are materiality, iconography, formulaic strategies, and text contents.

Methodology perfectly fits the requirements of the disciplinary fields involved in the research themes, namely Classical philology, religious studies, Greek epigraphy and both semitic and Biblical philology. More precisely, the principles of the Classical philology are rigorously applied in editing and interpreting Greek inscriptions in their connection with Biblical passages. Methodically impeccable and appropriately relevant to the topic are the analysis of the iconographic types and their classification according to formal aspects, techniques of engraving, geographical and chronological distribution, interaction with writing. This part makes a particularly helpful contribution to the knowledge of some cultural patterns, of their impact on the popular imagery, of the history of this kind of handicraft and its interaction with the more prominent artistic products.

On the whole, the pursued objectives of the habitation thesis are completely attained, the conceptual basis and methodical paths are solidly established within a multidisciplinary perspective, and results are original and innovative.

Just some remarks and suggestions. First, language features and epigraphic details of individual documents or their groups are partly neglected partly insufficiently investigated. Therefore, a closer attention to this type of variation could be helpful to better define ways of transmission and formulaic repetition in both oral and written levels with repercussions for evolutionary aspects of the materials. Second, a deeper insight into the semiotic distribution of the written formulas combining use of alphabetic and non-alphabetic symbols, iconographical themes and materiality of the artifacts would be needed. Contrasting tendencies toward preservation and changes of formulas, alphabetic signs and images in their reciprocal interaction contributes to detecting important clues for consciousness and perception of both producers and users. Third, a more extensive and analytical comparison with other magic artifacts would be helpful to highlight different functions and socio-cultural distribution. Finally, in order to make an easier consultation it would be desirable to provide the volume with manifold indexes, especially a word and subject list.

In conclusion, for the reasons above said, this work largely meets the standard requirements placed on the Habilitation thesis in the field of Classical Philology. All those characteristics outline a fully developed researcher figure and an experienced scholarly personality, provided with all suitable requisites for both teaching and researching activities.

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Paolo Poccetti,

Full Professor of Comparative Philology