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AN EARLY CHRISTIAN PENDANT
AMULET (?) IN THE COLLECTION
OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM IN
WARSAW – A PHILOLOGICAL
APPROACH

Abstract: *This text is the publication of a talisman bearing a Greek text from Miletus which has been dated using palaeography to the 2nd-4th centuries AD. The author will examine and analyse the inscription to reach the conclusion that the item probably belonged to a Christian.*

Keywords: *Miletus; talisman; Christianity; Greek inscription; religion; National Museum in Warsaw collection*

The collection of the National Museum in Warsaw contains an ancient amulet from Miletus (inv. no. 237916 MNW) which was given to the museum by a person who wishes to remain anonymous in December 2004 (Pl. 1: 1-4). Certain aspects of this artefact provide us with an interesting insight into religious mentality from the period of late Antiquity up until early Christianity.

The amulet, which takes the form of a 5.2 x 2.3 x 2.4cm elongated cube, was made of limestone, while the side surfaces and bottom surface feature a text in Greek. On the upper surface, there is a projection with a drilled-through hole for the threading of a leather strap or chain. The letters on the four side surfaces make up a coherent text in Greek:

ΑΓΑ/ΘΟΣ/ ΚΑΡ/ΠΙΟΣ

ἀγαθὸς καρπὸς or καρπὸς ἀγαθός (good fruit)

The lower surface bears an X sign.

After taking all reservations into account, palaeography seems to suggest that the object comes from the Roman period as the text is written in lunar letters, the hasta in the Alpha is broken and the bar in the Theta touches the inner edges of the bowl. On this basis, the text can be dated to the 2nd-4th centuries AD.

In literal translation, the phrase *ἀγαθὸς καρπός* means ‘good, fortunate fruit’ and the letter Chi may suggest that this is a Christian formula. This becomes even more probable when we consider that this phrase appears very frequently in Christian texts, from Septuagint¹ to numerous early Christian writers.² ‘Good fruit’ is one of the Christian rhetorical expressions which were not only used in the Bible, but which also entered the early Christian and Byzantine rhetoric. It comes as no surprise, then, that such a widespread phrase should appear on an amulet. Although this formula is hardly ever used in pre-Christian texts written in Greek, it cannot be said with certainty that this is a Christian amulet or talisman. First of all, the simple form of the talisman is so universal that it does not allow for its meaning to be narrowed down. Furthermore, it contains no Christian symbols in a visible place. The only hint may be the letter Chi, discreetly placed on the bottom surface of the pendant, which could probably also be interpreted as a simple cross. The text *ἀγαθὸς καρπός* itself is also written in such a way that it is impossible to read at first sight. All these elements suggest that an important feature of the talisman was discretion in revealing the possible Christian affiliation of the owner. If we make this assumption, it could be speculated that the amulet was created at a time when displaying the Christian faith required discretion and circumspection. In short, it could have been used during the period of Christian persecution. This would allow us to date it most probably to the second half of the 3rd century or more particularly

¹ 4.12.4: ‘ὁ καρπὸς αὐτοῦ πολλὸς καὶ ἀγαθὸς καὶ ἐχορήγει πᾶσι τοῖς ζώοις.’

² E.g. Gregorius Nyssenus, *Antirrheticus adversus Apolinarium*. In F. Mueller (ed.), *Gregorii Nysseni opera* 3/1, 131, l. 12. Leiden 1958; Eusebius Caesariensis, *Commentaria in Psalmos*. In J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus (series Graeca)* 23, 532, l. 3. Paris, 1857 or the particularly interesting Joannes Chrysostomus, *Fragmenta in Proverbia (in catenis)*. In J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus (series Graeca)* 64, 693, l. 8. Paris 1860 ‘ἀπὸ γὰρ καρποῦ διανοίας ἀγαθῆς, λόγος ἀγαθὸς λόγον δὲ ἀγαθοῦ καρπὸς, πρᾶξις ἀρετῆς, ἀγαθῶν ἐμποητικῆ-ὁ λόγος τῆς ἀνδρείας ψυχῆς εἰς ἀρετὴν ἄγων ἀγαθός, καὶ ἀγαθῶν ἐμποητικός’, with the same train of thought appearing in the writings of other authors as well (e.g. Theodorus Studites, *Epistulae*. In G. Fatouros (ed.), *Theodori studitae epistulae* 1-2, 87, l. 30. (*Corpus fontium historiae Byzantinae. Series Berolinensis* 31). Berlin 1992, and particularly Cyrillus Alexandrinus, *Commentarii in Lucam (in catenis)*. In J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus (series Graeca)* 72, 857, l. 7. Paris 1864 ‘Θεοῦ τοιγαροῦν ἀγαθοῦ καρπὸς ἀγαθὸς ὁ Υἱός’, etc.

to the turn of the 3rd and 4th centuries (the period of Diocletian persecution). This hypothesis would also be consistent with the palaeographic dating of the artefact, which is based on circumstantial evidence.

Still, one cannot be completely sure whether the formula was used on the artefact in a Christian manner. It would be advisable, therefore, to take a closer look at the process of adapting elements of rhetoric, vocabulary and notions taken from Greek culture, philosophy and religion by the Christians. An extremely interesting aspect of this matter was presented in an article written by Reinhold Merkelbach (1975, 101-148). At the very beginning of the article, he described changes which occurred in the Greek language under the influence of Christianity:

‘Als die griechische Welt christlich wurde, ist die Sprache der Menschen grammatisch die gleiche geblieben. Aber ihre Gedanken waren andere geworden, und die Bedeutung mancher Wörter hat sich im Mund der Christen sehr verändert. Sie haben die überkommenen Vokabeln oft so umgedeutet, dass sie zu ihren Vorstellungen passten; einigen Wortfeldern wurden ganz neue Bedeutungen unterlegt. Solche Prozesse der Umdeutung von Wörtern finden in allen Gesellschaften statt, die sich verändern’ (Merkelbach 1975, 101).

Further on in the article, Merkelbach performs a thorough analysis of selected Greek terms from three areas of public life – politics, sport and philosophy – in order to illustrate the above thesis.

In the case of our amulet, there are many indications that its formula derived from Judeo-Christian tradition,³ while its shape could have been a reference to pagan religious customs. In a sense, this would be an example of the process described by Merkelbach of borrowing expressions from the Greek language and placing them in the material sphere. Combining a Christian formula with pagan customs from the local area exemplifies the well-known process of the merging of different beliefs to create a ‘practical faith’, while its content and form distinguishes it from later objects of the kind, which were probably created in times when affiliation with the Christian faith could be openly displayed.

³ The phrase *ἀγαθὸς καρπός* is practically non-existent in pagan texts as a rhetorical formula, although obviously the figurative meaning of the word ‘fruit’ appears quite early, for example in the well-known fragment 2 by Mimnermus: *‘μίνυνθα δὲ γίγνεται ἥβης καρπός, ὅσον τ’ ἐπὶ γῆν κίδναται ἡέλιος’*.

References

- Merkelbach R. 1975.** Der griechische Wortschatz und die Christen. *ZPE* 18, 101-148.

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Pl. 1. 1-5 – An amulet from Miletus. Courtesy of the National Museum in Warsaw