

WAR CHARMS AND KINDRED AMULETS.¹

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“*Je sais certainement que tu reviendras.*” A Bavarian aviation officer when driving over a battlefield read this legend on a golden amulet found on the body of a dead French soldier. An anxious mother or fond sweetheart must have bestowed the charm with her parting tears and blessings upon this scion of a noble house. It is said that talisman letters written in Arabic characters are often found on fallen Turcos, and it accords with the irony of a merciless fate that the deadly lead sometimes reaches the very spot where the protective letter is lying, piercing through it to the breast of the wearer. Since the diplomats and statagists of the Entente Powers have chosen the ancient historic ground of France for the location of their ethnological exposition, a collector and antiquarian in this locality could make an interesting collection, or at least a varied one, on the battle-fields of to-day.

From times immemorial superstition has flourished in war-time, and the same is true again to-day, and on one side as much as on the other. For instance, in some localities in Saxony there is said to be a busy trade in “letters from heaven” (*Himmelsbriefe*) at prices ranging from twenty to twenty-five marks each, and even in the very first days of the war in 1914 the press took occasion properly to brand the recommendation of protective charms as a conscienceless exploitation of superstition and ignorance. All these tools of occultism and magic must have existed in secret for many years and decades hidden away in chests and shops. As soon as the fanfare of war sounded these also hastened to the colors to join the standards of every belligerent army. It has been the same in all European wars of the last century, not excepting the War of Liberation nor that of 1870-71. In the Crimean War every French soldier from the simplest *poilu* to General Canrobert carried his charm with him. In those days physicians found whole collections of the most various kinds of amulets combined in the closest intimacy on many a fallen Frenchman; next to a Christian charm a Turkish one and sometimes even a Hebrew one besides. Two French generals carried fragments of the holy cross with them, and Prince Napoleon, the well-known “Plon-Plon” who was in the

¹ Translated from *Das Weltall* of January, 1915, by Lydia G. Robinson.

forefront of the expedition, was likewise said to have carried a charm supposed to make him invulnerable.

The formula in which we invariably find this superstition expressed in all occult writings is "To make proof against blow, shot and thrust" (*hiebs-, schuss- und stichfest machen*). An executioner in Passau, Kaspar Neithart by name, is said to have discovered this art three centuries ago, so it was called after him the "Passau art." It was defined as a secret art whose adepts "could not be wounded by rapier nor dagger, and who could receive musket balls in their sleeves and catch them with their hands," in the words of Bartholemew Anhorn in his *Magiologia*, a work of the year 1674. To tell the truth, the priority of Master Neithart may well be contested, as Gustave Freytag, among others, has justly observed in his *Bilder aus der deutschen Vergangenheit*. For this war superstition is much older; it was current in ancient Egypt, and in German antiquity Tacitus tells of tiny images representing boars which the Aestii carried with them as war charms.

In modern times during the seventeenth century this superstition reached its zenith in the long wars. Executioners and monks especially plied this trade and sold the famous "Passau slips" which the superstitious warrior either wore upon his person or even, for greater security, swallowed. For the most part the dealers found willing and grateful customers, and that duke who was so cautious as to try the efficacy of the highly commended amulet on the venter himself and thoroughly test its merits was probably almost the only skeptic of his time. In contrast to him Charles XII regarded himself as immune, and the old Duke of Dessau and Frederick the Great were surrounded by halos of invulnerability in the eyes of their soldiers.

The Croatians were obliged to invent a special mode of death for a certain equerry of Bernhard of Weimar who likewise bore the reputation of being proof against shot or thrust. Since he could not be killed by gun or sword they buried him in the earth so that only his head showed above and then they bowled him to death. Nor did the people in those days stop with man but also turned their magic arts upon the animal that is preeminently the beast of war. Thus we hear of invulnerable horses and occasionally also of dogs, and one chronicler even tells about a herring that was immune, so that it could not be sliced and therefore could not fulfil the purpose of its existence.

Special salves (*Waffensalben*) were also used by soldiers to make them invulnerable, and "magic shirts" served and still serve

a similar purpose in the Orient. A magic shirt of this kind is preserved under glass in the municipal armory in Vienna. It was worn by no less a person than the Grand Vizier Kara Mustafa who laid siege to Vienna in 1683. Another Turkish dignitary, a certain Beg who had been taken prisoner at Warna in 1828, was of the firm conviction that he owed his rare good fortune in surviving this battle unwounded to the magic shirt he wore, and this same shirt is preserved to-day in the Neukloster monastery at Wiener-Neustadt. The famous Orientalist Josef von Hammer-Purgstall has described these two magic shirts in detail—by no means a simple task, especially in the case of the latter. This one is completely embroidered over with the longest and most strenuous formulas of conjuration, prayers, talismanic numbers and symbols, so that it represents a whole prayer book, a regular encyclopedia of talismanic utterances from the Koran, and benedictions whose mere repetition would fill an imposing pamphlet.

These magic shirts were made in Arabia and for the most part in Bagdad, and very definite prescriptions must be observed punctiliously in their manufacture if the talisman is really to serve as a positive protection. The shirt must be made from start to finish on one certain definite night in the year, to be determined by magicians and astrologers. It must be completed by sunrise from the spinning and weaving of the cotton to the embroidering of all the countless prayers, etc. Forty pure virgins must perform this entire labor, which is no slight task, and if afterwards the magic shirt should fail to afford its wearer the expected protection, this only proves that some one of the indispensable prescriptions and conditions for its manufacture has not been obeyed or carefully fulfilled.

Coins have also been utilized as war amulets to a large extent. In the Thirty Years' War the Mansfeld dollars with St. George and the Dragon, especially those of 1609 to 1611, were greatly in demand, and soldiers gladly paid twenty or thirty current dollars for one of them. A well-founded report relates how one officer succeeded in escaping with his life from an engagement only because he had carried a St. George dollar (*Görgentaler*) of this particular kind. Then, too, medals with the figure of the grim and warlike Mars and often covered with cabalistic names and symbols served warriors as amulets of offense and defense, and since this particular class of war amulet arouses a greater interest on account of its relation to astrology and often to arithmetic as well, we have here set ourselves the task of illustrating and explaining some of this sort of

medals. Figures 1 and 2 represent two such Mars amulets. The originals are to be found in the history of art department collection of Austria Hungary at Vienna in the division of coins and medals, which is probably the richest collection of amulets in the world.



Fig. 1.

Turning now to describe the two amulets the first thing that strikes us is the figure of an armed warrior with sword, helmet and shield. It is impossible to have any doubt about the personality of the warrior. He carries his visiting card with him, so to speak, in both instances. In Figure 1 at the left below the sword we recognize the well-known symbol which stands both for the planet and the planetary deity Mars and in Figure 2 we find the same symbol above the head of the warrior in the center of the star supposed to represent his planet, and then too between its rays we can even read the name MARS. The Hebrew word to be seen on either side of the war-god's head in Figure 1 reads "Camael," and

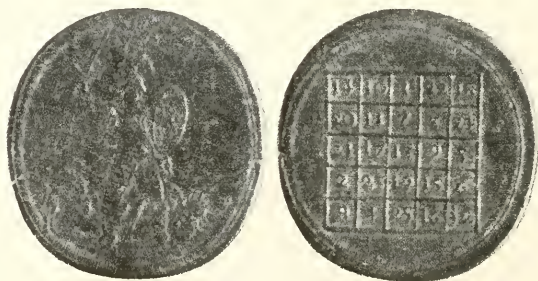


Fig. 2.

according to the strange teachings of the Cabala it denotes the tutelary angel of Mars, just as Gabriel for instance was the angel of the moon. The animals that we see on both amulets at the feet of Mars are a ram and a scorpion. These denote the two constellations of the zodiac which have a place on our Mars amulet, because Aries and Scorpio are regarded by astrology as the mansions of Mars, just as Leo was the mansion of the sun and Taurus and Libra

the mansions of Venus. The animal above Mars's head on Figure 1 may be similarly accounted for. It is a goat and belongs here because according to a strange teaching of astrology it is in this constellation of Capricorn that Mars attains his elevation, his so-called *ἕψομα*. Most of the other strange names and signs to be seen in our Figure 1 have also some special reference to Mars. Here, to select at least one instance, we read in the letters around the edge of the obverse the word ANNABIL, and the same word is also found on the reverse. It is probably a corruption of Amabiel which in the writings of the Cabala was the name of one of the angels of the day of Mars, i. e., Tuesday (*mardi* = *Martis dies*). Likewise the magic squares to be found on the reverse of both of our amulets bear a special relation to Mars, since each contains the numbers from 1 to 25 in magic construction.

So everything on these two amulets refers to the god of war and is definitely dedicated to Mars and war. The first one is intended to be worn around the neck as is shown by the hole, and its possessor, some soldier or other, must have worn it in the confidence that this trinket inspired by Mars would give him the power to slaughter the enemy and yet to remain himself unharmed by any hostile "shots, blows or thrusts."

Through the traditionally close relation between Venus and Mars in Grecian antiquity the goddess of love also furnishes amulets of protection to fighting men. To be sure most Venus amulets are not thought of as war charms but as love charms. I shall here take



Fig. 3.

the liberty of presenting in Figure 3 a specimen of Venus amulets from the collection of medals in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. On the obverse we see the goddess of love pictured in the usual way with long streaming hair, though apparently covered with

a sort of veil, a long arrow in her right hand and in her left a flaming heart. At her feet we find a balance, *Libra* being one of the two mansions of *Venus*, as was incidentally mentioned above. The numerical square on the reverse is given in Hebrew characters, as is often the case in these charms. It is of course the planetary



Fig. 4.

seal belonging to *Venus*, that is, a magic square of 49 cells. Figure 4 translates it into our own numbers, each row, each column and each of the two diagonals all yield the sum 175.

Vienna and Paris, friend and foe, have furnished us the specimens of war charms which we have discussed and illustrated hitherto, so now in conclusion a neutral country offers an amulet which is very remarkable and certainly unique in its way. The royal collection of coins and medals in Copenhagen possesses an amulet of gilded silver which we reproduce in Figure 5. Its distinctiveness lies in the fact that its obverse and reverse sides are of entirely unrelated character and of absolutely different origin. On the obverse we see *St. George* mounted on a charger and before him the mangled form of his conquered foe. The picture shows the battle scene at the moment in which the knight is thrusting his lance down the dragon's mouth while poisonous fumes are issuing from the monster's yawning throat.

We have already mentioned certain sorts of *Mansfeld St. George* dollars that have been used as war amulets, and although our special picture of the knight is not found on any of the *Mansfeld* or *Kremnitz* coins, yet this *St. George*, together with the astrological and cabalistic character of the reverse side of the medals, leaves no doubt that we have here to deal with an actual amulet, and it is equally certain that it is a war amulet. The maker of the charm evidently wished to heighten the efficacy of the miracle-working trinket and so combined the *St. George* motive with a reverse borrowed from a certain astrological charm, as we

shall soon see. I was most kindly informed by Colonel von Kretschmar in Dresden, the owner of the richest collection of St. George coins and medals, that the representative of St. George on the obverse of our amulet was taken from one of the lead models for goldsmiths so plentiful in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and that this medal was in the old museum at Berlin as late as in



Fig. 5.

the seventies, although I cannot say anything about its further whereabouts except that it is not to be found in the collection of plaques in the Emperor Frederick Museum. So much for the obverse of our St. George amulet.

Its reverse, on the other hand, is taken from an astrological cabalistic amulet which we reproduce in Figure 6 for purposes of

comparison. To discover the nature of this medal we must first of all study its obverse which shows a crowned king sitting on a throne with his scepter in his right hand and in his left hand an image of the sun. This together with the symbol of the sun near

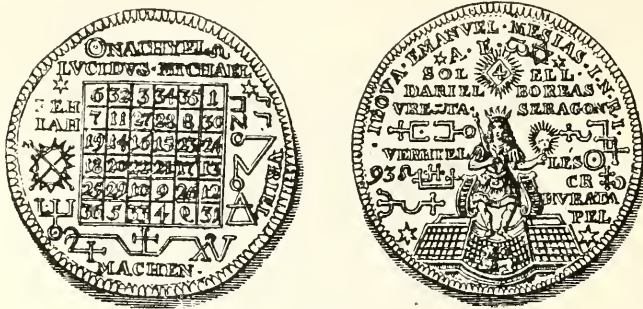


Fig. 6.

by at the right and the name Sol above at the left show that the king represents the sun-god in a favorite treatment. Many of the other names and symbols refer to the sun, but we will not enter into them more closely here, since this entire amulet is of only incidental interest to us on account of its connection with Figure 5.

Let us mention only one more point here in connection with an earlier observation. We have already said incidentally that Leo was selected by astrology as the mansion of the sun. This choice is exceptional in having—in contrast to the other decrees of astrology—a certain astronomical and meteorological justification, for in the dog days when we are most intensely conscious of the sun it actually stands in the constellation of Leo. So it is a matter of course that the lion should form an essential element of our medal. We see a lion below the sun-god's feet; the familiar sign of its constellation is to be found on both sides of the amulet; the name VERHIEL (on the obverse) denotes the angel that controls the lion. According to all these indications Figure 6 depicts a typical sun-amulet. Since gold was regarded by alchemists and astrologers as the metal sacred to the sun the strict rules of magic decreed that our sun should be produced only in gold, and indeed this particular amulet, which is by no means rare, is found in gold for instance in the royal Saxon coin cabinet in Dresden (two specimens), in the Germanic national museum at Nuremberg and also in two specimens in the Vienna collections mentioned above. The numerical square on the reverse is of course corresponding to the character of the whole, the typical *tabula solis*, the 36-celled magic square which in all its rows, columns

and diagonals yields the sum 111. Now this reverse, or possibly that of another closely related sun-amulet, has served as a model for the reverse of the Copenhagen war-charm in Figure 5, little as one can regard a sun-amulet as usable for war purposes. The only difference between the two reverse sides is that the two central columns of the numerical square are interchanged, a variation which in no wise disturbs its magical properties, that is, the equal summation of the various rows.

These are strange and curious doctrines at which we have briefly glanced: science and superstition bound together into a strange hybrid formation, arithmetic and astronomy in league with magic and astrology. Indeed these services which science and her representatives were compelled to render to superstition in past centuries and which are nevertheless only too easily comprehensible in the setting of a period in which scholars were often forced into such by-paths in the struggle with the material necessities of life—furnishes a picture in the history of civilization which is by no means a gratifying one. Even a Kepler was forced to complain of the unworthy dependence of astronomy upon her degenerate daughter, astrology. "Indeed this Astrologia is but a foolish daughter, but, good Lord! where would her mother, the highly reasonable Astronomia, be if she did not have her foolish daughter? The world is much more foolish, so foolish in fact that the sensible old mother must be talked over and deceived by her daughter's folly. And the *mathematicorum salaria* is so small that the mother would certainly suffer hunger if the daughter earned nothing."

Such astrological amulets as we have here described may not be found among soldiers to-day or only in isolated cases, but instead of them there are war charms of every other possible form. Generals of all times, even when themselves entirely devoid of superstition, have willingly given free rein to such follies, for the more firmly the soldier trusts in his secret remedies the greater bravado will he show in plunging into the tumult of battle. Of course in a war that is waged with the weapons of the most advanced technique not much success can be expected of soldiers whose courage is rooted in superstition and brutal savagery. Among modern soldiers, and particularly Germans, proficiency and valor rest upon a strict sense of duty, upon virile training and above all on a good education in military and other affairs, and it is exactly these things which must deliver them from all superstition.