

Magic and Talismans

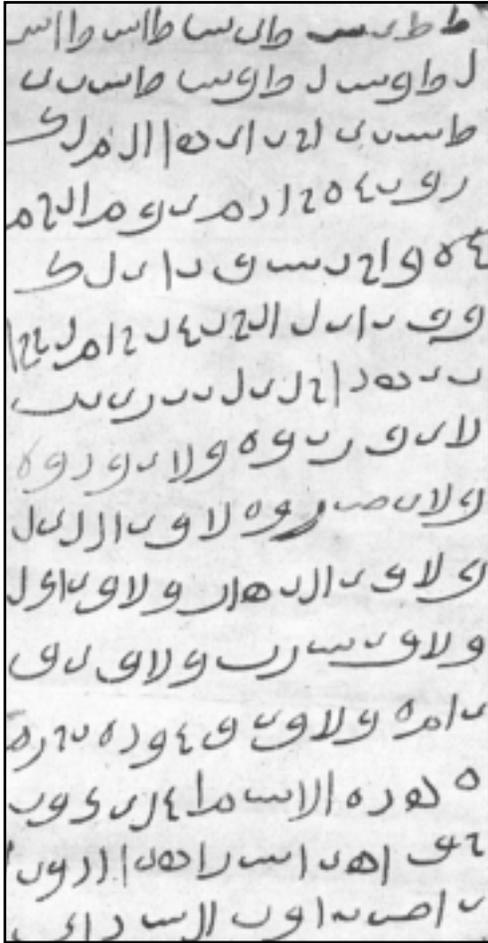
The Tawfiq Canaan Collection of Palestinian Amulets

Baha' al-Ju'beh

Captions: Palestine alone holds a special
place to which

For most people, the notion of amulets is a thing of the nostalgic past, one associated with rituals and folk beliefs. Amulets and talismans are seen as objects of superstitions, fetishes that simple folk resorted to in solving health ailments or as remedies for social or psychological problems. Dr. Tawfiq Canaan, one of the pioneers of medicine in Palestine, viewed the amulets differently. Well-known as one of the foremost researchers of Palestinian popular heritage, Canaan probed and asked questions concerning the value of amulets and talismans as a source of knowledge in interpreting the traditions and beliefs of his people. His writings in this field are an indispensable reference for researchers and all those interested in Palestinian heritage. Canaan authored numerous books, studies and articles on popular medicine and beliefs of the early twentieth century, and these have been used as sources ever since by researchers of Palestinian and Middle Eastern heritage.¹

The Tawfiq Canaan² Collection of
Palestinian Amulets is among the most



A hijab or talisman from the Canaan Collection. It reads: "Tatis... (names of supernatural powers). Answer Oh King Zoba'ah, the servant of Wednesday and make your tribes and the tribes of the djin dumb, (keep them away) from the bearer of this my talisman Djalil (or Khalil) the son of Zenab. They should not come near him nor injure him, nor hurt him, neither in the night nor in the day, neither while eating nor while drinking, neither in his getting up, nor in his sitting down. (I adjure you) by the sacredness of the words, which (words) should be upon you, and by the truth of Ahia Sharahia Adonai 'Asba'ot 'al Shadai." Source: *The Decipherment of Arabic Talismans*, T. Canaan (1938).

prestigious ethnographic collections in the Middle East. The collection, presently in the holdings of Birzeit University, Palestine,³ provides valuable information on an essential part of the Palestinian people's cultural heritage, namely folk medicine and the manifestations of magic in the popular beliefs and practices of Palestinian and neighboring Arab societies - practices that exist to this day.⁴

There are numerous reasons why the collection is significant and distinguished from other collections in the region. Most noteworthy is that it was collected single-handedly by the Palestinian physician Dr. Tawfiq Canaan who, from as early as the beginning of the twentieth century until 1947, gathered more than 1,400 amulets, talismans and other objects, all related to popular medicine and folk practices. The items he collected originated in various Palestinian cities and villages; other items came from Arab countries including Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Yemen.

Dr. Canaan collected these objects from his patients, recognizing that there was a close relationship between the popular beliefs and superstitions used in curing diseases and scientific medicine. He learned from his patients their reasons for wearing the amulets and the effects they had in curing the physical and the mental disorders they were suffering from.

Canaan documented all of this, meticulously recording and carefully attaching the items in his collection on cardboard sheets. He numbered and recorded supplementary hand-scripted information next to each item, explaining their properties as remedies and the effects they would have on their users.

Yet the collection's primary importance is neither its large number of items nor to its wide-ranging sources, but rather its richness and diversity, for it can be divided into numerous different categories. The most notable of these include:

- Amulets, *hujub* as they are commonly known, or talismans written on paper and placed in triangular cloth or leather wrappings or in cylinders or silver cases.
- A large collection of jewelry including necklaces, bracelets, rings and semi-precious stones, items that are still used today although their amulet status has since been dropped.
- Glass beads and stones of all types and colors which had many uses, particularly in healing and repelling the evil eye. Beads made in Hebron in the shape of eyes of various sizes were given names including rooster eye, baby camel eye and camel eye.
- Paper amulets that include talismans, supplications and prayers, which were hung in homes to protect them and their occupants.
- Pilgrims' certificates bearing religious symbols of the three Semitic religions, either in the form of stamps or writings, which were given to pilgrims who visited holy sites in Jerusalem and Hebron.
- Votive offerings made of silver, most of which are from Aleppo, Syria, and which are made in human form or the shape of body parts such as hands, feet, chests, hearts, heads, etc. These were hung in churches and on religious icons to heal illnesses and to protect the health of children and other such purposes.
- Organic materials often with votive talismanic writings such as animal bones, tortoise shells and other animal parts that were used primarily for treating epilepsy.
- Vessels such as fear cups,⁵ which included Qur'anic verses and supplications. Water was placed in the cup and left under the light of the moon and stars for several nights before being given to the child or frightened person to drink from.
- Ceramic dishes on which are written talismans for curing diseases and facilitating birth.

Full documentation of the collection was recently completed by Birzeit University,⁶ whereby each item in the collection was described based on Canaan's work and including its current condition and an accompanying photograph. All of this information has been entered into a modern database created in cooperation between the founding committee and the university's computing center, with the assistance of students who filled out forms especially designed for this documentation process. The database facilitates research on the collection and can generate various reports about it.

The Canaan collection of Palestinian amulets is an important resource for any artist, writer or researcher of heritage due to the fertile imagination it represents. The collection includes remarkable artistic forms and symbols that were crafted by the hands of simple folk wishing to cure a certain disease, foster love and understanding

with others, protect themselves from harm and evil, or solve various other problems and ailments. In turn, the collection represents popular art and thought as rooted in the minds and hearts of Palestinian society long ago and to this day. It is essential for any researcher of Palestinian popular heritage and social and cultural history who wants to understand Palestinian society prior to the Israeli occupation to view Canaan's pre-1948 collection and writings.

The full extent of the collection is beyond the scope of this article, but I will attempt here to address just one aspect of the writing of amulets and talismans of all types and shapes, an aspect present throughout the collection - the use of numbers and letters and their meaning.

Canaan's subsequent writings and analyses on the talismans were facilitated by interviews with individuals who actually wrote amulets, as well as specialized sources and references in sorcery and witchcraft. Canaan used the examples in his collection to support his analyses, and was able to decipher some talismanic symbols and learn the meanings of the shapes, writings, letters and numbers used in this realm of popular beliefs and medicine and magic. He wrote an article on the subject which appeared in 1937 in an antiquity studies journal published by Antiquities Museum of the American University in Beirut.⁷

When speaking of amulets, what typically comes to mind are strange, cryptic symbols undecipherable by the average person. These symbols have numerous forms and meanings, and here I will address one important category: the use of numbers in the writing of amulets. The meanings of numbers can be deciphered through lists found in amulet-specific sources, the majority of which follow a system whereby each letter of the alphabet corresponds to a certain number, according to the alphabetical ordering used in the writing of talismans. This is the order used in numeration and sequencing, and is related to Arab mathematical science. It differs slightly from the normal Arabic alphabetical order and has only 22 letters, ending with ت (t). For talismans however, six additional letters have been added to this traditional ordering, thus ending with غ (gh).

The numerical equivalents of letters are figured in the following manner: The letter أ (a) equals number one, ب (b) equals two and so on until ي (y), which is number ten. Then the numbering switches to tens, whereby ك (k) equals twenty and so on until ق (q), which is 100. Then the numeration turns to hundreds, whereby ر (r) equals 200, until reaching the final letter, غ (gh), which stands for 1,000.

To further elucidate this idea, one may view the following chart, which shows the Arabic alphabet as ordered for numeration as well as the additional six letters ordered according to sources on the science of amulets, along with their corresponding number values.

The Arabic Alphabet and its Numerical Meaning

400	ت	60	س	8	ح	1	أ
500	ث	70	ع	9	ط	2	ب
600	خ	80	ف	10	ي	3	ج
700	ذ	90	ص	20	ك	4	د
800	ض	100	ق	30	ل	5	هـ
900	ظ	200	ر	40	م	6	و
1000	غ	300	ش	50	ن	7	ز

By using the above chart, it is possible to obtain the numerical value of each of God's 99 names, as well as the names of angels and other beings that are typically written on amulets using numbers. For example, the name "God" [*Allah*] equals 66, and is figured thus:

(A + 1 + 1 + ah)

أ + ل + ل + هـ

$$1 + 30 + 30 + 5 = 66$$

To use an example from the collection, I will attempt to analyze an amulet that contains both letters and numbers. Canaan acquired it from the Nablus area in 1917. It consists of an oval brass pendant with a curved frame and a loop for hanging. On one of its faces is a 4 x 4 cm chart (called in amulet terminology *hirz*, 'amulet', or *khitm*, 'seal') of nine cells containing numbers. These numbers, when added together, equal the numerical value of the name of God, Allah, in that adding the numbers horizontally, vertically or diametrically adds up to 66. Above the seal are the names of God "*Allah Latif*" ["God, the Kind"] and below it is written God's name, "*Hafidh*" ["Guardian"].

On the other face is a chart of the same size that also consists of nine cells, except that the center cell contains the name of the person for whom the amulet was written, which appears to be a woman named Mirita, Maria or Marina. The other cells contain numbers, which, when added together horizontally or vertically equal 129, thus forming the word "*Latif*." Above the seal are the following numbers: 102, 66, 225, 289.

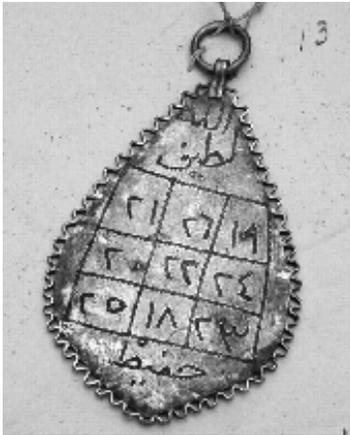
L + T + i + f

ل + ط + ي + ف

$$30 + 9 + 10 + 80 = 129$$

If we split these total numbers into numerical components and their corresponding letters, we derive the following words: "*bism*" (in the name of) = 102, "Allah" (God) = 66, "*hirz*" (the amulet of) = 225, "*al harim*" (women)

Side One



Allah
Latif

21	26	19
20	22	24
25	18	23

Hafidh

Side Two



66 102
289 225

30	89	10
79	Mirita	50
20	40	69

This example provides one measure of the wealth of this collection for researchers of popular heritage, especially in the field of popular medicine and supernatural beliefs. Lengthy studies could be written about any of its aspects, enriching both folklore studies and Palestinian and Arab literature in this rarely-studied field.

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Endnotes

¹ Canaan, T. *Aberglaube und Volksmedizin im Lande der Bibel*. Abhandlungen des Hamburgischen Kolonialinstitut, Band XX. (Hamburg: 1914).

² Canaan and his life and works were introduced in an article by Khalid al-Nashif in the *Jerusalem Quarterly File*, Number 16, (Institute for Jerusalem Studies: November 2002) 12-26. See also the sources listed in this study.

³ After the 1948 war and upon the wish of Dr. Tawfiq Canaan to keep the collection in Palestine, and eager for it to be made available to the public, particularly for the benefit of researchers and interested individuals, his family preserved the collection and donated it to Birzeit University in 1996. It should be noted that a similar but smaller collection of 230 items of Palestinian amulets was also developed by Canaan on the request of Lord Henry Welles. That collection was later bequeathed to the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford where it is now in storage.

⁴ In appreciation, the Founding Committee for the Development of Cultural Heritage at Birzeit University organized in 1998 an exhibition entitled "Ya Kafi Ya Shafi" (Oh Protector, Oh Healer) in The Ethnographic and Archeological Gallery of the library. The exhibition included select items from the collection that represented a sampling of its contents. A catalogue by the same name was also produced that included information about the life of Canaan, his contributions and writings, and about the collection and its significance.

⁵ Canaan, T. "Tasit er-Rajfeh (Fear Cup)" *The Journal of Palestine Oriental Society*; Volume 3, 122-131

⁶ In the near future, the database will be made available by Birzeit University to interested researchers and scholars.

⁷ Canaan, T. "The Decipherment of Arabic Talismans" in *BERYTUS*, IV (1937) 69 – 110.