

THE AUTHENTICITY OF THE ARSLAN TASH AMULETS

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The pair of amulets which form the subject of this brief contribution were bought in October 1933 by R. du Mesnil du Buisson from a local peasant while visiting the site of Arslan Tash, a town in northern Syria, some 160 km north-east of Aleppo, near the present-day border with Turkey. The site, which is the location of the ancient Assyrian colony Ḫadattu, had been excavated a few years earlier,¹ and it is not impossible that the objects had in fact been stolen from the excavation. Both amulets are now preserved in the National Museum in Aleppo.²

The purchase of the amulets was announced by du Mesnil in a meeting of the *Société nationale des Antiquitaires de France* in 1937³ and this was soon followed by the *editio princeps* of the first amulet.⁴ His article, often justly praised as a remarkable achievement, is accompanied by a set of very reasonable photographs, but, owing to the rounded edges of the tablet and the use of light coming from one direction only, a number of signs cannot actually be seen on them. To supplement the photographs, the editor provided handcopies of the inscriptions; these naturally reflect his own readings of the often problematical text, rather than being an accurate facsimile of each individual sign. With few exceptions⁵ most of the subsequent students of the amulet have inevitably had to base themselves on du Mesnil's photographs, and this has not always led to readings better than his.⁶ It was not until 1970 that a new impulse was given to the study of the first amulet by the publication of an article by F. M. Cross and R. Saley.⁷ These authors were able to use two new sets of photographs (each using light coming from opposite directions) provided by the Museum in Aleppo, and presented several new readings based on these photographs. It is much to be regretted that of this double set of photographs only a single one was published in their article, so that most of their readings cannot be checked. This oversight is only partly compensated by the subsequent publication of a few more of Cross and Saley's photographs by W. Röllig.⁸ The next major step forward was a short but very informative article by A. Caquot, who was able to use a cast of the amulet in the possession of R. du Mesnil du Buisson which had been made at the time of its discovery.⁹ Caquot's new readings confirm most but not all of those proposed by Cross and Saley, and subsequent treatments of the text usually follow either or both of these authorities.¹⁰

The most recent development in the eventful history of the interpretation of the amulets is an article by J. Teixidor and P. Amiet.¹¹ Teixidor studied the original in the Museum in

¹ F. Thureau-Dangin, A. Barrois, G. Dossin, M. Dunand, *Arslan-Tash*, Paris, 1931; see also G. Turner, "The Palace and *Batiment aux ivoires* at Arslan Tash: A Reappraisal", *Iraq* 30 (1968), 62–8.

² Nos. 1329 and 1330.

³ *Bulletin de la Société nationale des Antiquités de France* (1937), 203.

⁴ R. du Mesnil du Buisson, "Une tablette magique de la région du Moyen Euphrate", in: *Mélanges syriens offerts à M. René Dussaud* 1, Paris, 1939, 421–34. The second tablet was published much later by A. Caquot and R. du Mesnil du Buisson, "La seconde tablette ou 'petite amulette' d'Arslan Tash", *Syria* 48 (1971), 391–406.

⁵ A. Dupont-Sommer, *RHR* 120 (1939), 133–59, was able to study the original "pendant quelques instants" in 1939, when it was in Paris for a short period of time. H. Torczyner, *JNES* 6 (1947), 18–29, used an incomplete "gypsum copy" brought from Aleppo, as well as some additional photographs provided by E. L. Sukenik.

⁶ This is notably the case in W. F. Albright's influential article, "An Aramaean Magical Text in Hebrew from the Seventh Century B.C.", *BASOR* 76 (1939), 5–11, which introduced some new readings which have been followed by several later authors, but have subsequently been shown to be

doubtful or wrong.

⁷ Frank Moore Cross, Jr. and Richard J. Saley, "Phoenician Incantations on a Plaque of the Seventh Century B.C. from Arslan Tash in Upper Syria", *BASOR* 197 (1970), 42–9. See also J. Teixidor, *Syria* 48 (1971), 472–4.

⁸ Wolfgang Röllig, "Die Amulette von Arslan Taş", in: Rainer Degen, Walter W. Müller, Wolfgang Röllig, *Neue Ephemeris für Semitische Epigraphik* II, Wiesbaden, 1974, 17–36, Pls. II–III.

⁹ A. Caquot, "Observations sur la Première Tablette Magique d'Arslan Tash", *JANES* 5 (1973), 45–51. Unfortunately, the present whereabouts of the casts once in the possession of the late Count Du Mesnil du Buisson are unknown (Letter from Prof. Caquot, dated 13 October 1989).

¹⁰ E.g., Z. Zevit, *IEJ* 27 (1977), 110–18; G. Garbini, *OrAnt* 20 (1981), 277–94; J. C. L. Gibson, *Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions* III, Oxford, 1982, 78–88; S. D. Sperling, *HUCA* 53 (1982), 1–10, etc.

¹¹ J. Teixidor, "Les tablettes d'Arslan Tash au Musée d'Alep", *Aula Orientalis* 1 (1983), 105–8; followed by: P. Amiet, "Observations sur les 'Tablettes magiques' d'Arslan Tash", *ibid.* 109.

Aleppo and suggested several readings which are at variance with the quasi-accepted text as established by Caquot, although he did not deal with the inscriptions in small characters inscribed on the three figures depicted on the amulet. He also examined the outward appearance of both tablets and the material of which they were made. This had already been done before by X. Doucet of the Musée d'Histoire Naturelle in 1939, when the objects were briefly in Paris, and this expert had concluded that they were made of "un calcaire tendre ou marne, essentiellement un carbonate de chaux, pratiquement exempt d'autres minéraux".¹² While this leaves the question open as to whether limestone (carved from the rock) or marl clay (modelled by human hands) was used, du Mesnil himself, in the publication of the second amulet in 1971, added that the objects were carved from a piece of natural rock.¹³ Teixidor, on the other hand, thinks that "leur apparence, leur état parfait sans la moindre trace d'usure, les bords très lisses et la consistance extrêmement légère des deux amulettes font effectivement penser à des moulages". This circumstance, combined with the many anomalies in writing, vocabulary and syntax of the inscriptions and the unorthodox iconography of the depictions (studied at Teixidor's request by P. Amiet), leads both authors to cast serious doubt on the authenticity of the amulets.¹⁴

Obviously, any discussion of the texts and depictions on the Arslan Tash amulets¹⁵ must now begin with the question as to whether the tablets are indeed modern forgeries or not. Although Teixidor's reading of the texts and his uncertainty as regards the material used for the manufacture of the amulets made him suspicious, it is Amiet's iconographical analysis which clearly turned the scale. Amiet first points out that the figures on the amulets have been carved in a very maladroit way, but since they must be classified as popular art in a provincial style as opposed to the official, much more canonic, art from a main centre of civilization, this is not surprising. Furthermore, the iconography of the demonic figures on both amulets is unparalleled among the representations of such figures on Lamashtu or other amulets, nor are the she-wolf and the horned and winged sphinx found among the hybrid monsters sometimes depicted on Mesopotamian boundary stones (*kudurrus*). Most disturbing of all, in Amiet's opinion, is the figure of the striding male divinity on the reverse of the first amulet. In his right hand this god brandishes an axe, which is one of the characteristic emblems of the Storm-god; yet the latter invariably carries in his other hand a thunderbolt, and this feature is absent on the amulet, or in Amiet's words, "le dieu de l'orage a oublié son foudre!". In his opinion, this particular detail is the most serious indication that the amulets might be forgeries.

It would seem to me, however, that the weight of this argument has been greatly overrated. Amiet refers to eight representations of the Storm-god on Neo-Hittite monuments from Babylon (probably originally from Aleppo¹⁶), Kürtül, Körkün, Malatya, Til Barsip and Zincirli.¹⁷ All of these examples show the god wielding an axe with his right hand and holding a thunderbolt in his left hand, which is, however, always raised. This is in marked contrast to the depiction on the Arslan Tash amulet, where the god's empty left hand is stretched out and pointing downward. None of the Storm-gods adduced by Amiet wear the characteristic Assyrian-style costume, headdress and beard with which the god on the amulet is portrayed. In fact, the only things the latter shares with the Neo-Hittite Storm-gods are the axe and the dagger, and these elements are not at all restricted to depictions of

¹² R. du Mesnil du Buisson, *Bulletin de la Société nationale des Antiquaires de France* (1939-40), 156-61.

¹³ *Syria* 48, 391: "Il ne s'agit donc pas de pâtes moulées, mais de deux amulettes d'une roche naturelle taillée, puis sculptée pour recevoir enfin des inscriptions gravées". Contrast Albright, who speaks of a gypsum tablet into which the inscriptions were gouged with a stylus before it hardened. The term gypsum has subsequently been used by several authors. Röhlig gets around the problem by inventing the term "Gipssteintäfelchen".

¹⁴ Teixidor repeated his verdict in the addenda and corrigenda to his *Bulletin d'Épigraphie Sémitique 1964-1980*, Paris, 1986, 471-2, where he also quoted the opinion of

Georges Dossin, who was a member of the French mission at Arslan Tash at the time when the amulets came to light; according to Dossin, "il s'agit bien d'une palpante 'forgerie'".

¹⁵ The first amulet will be discussed at some length in my forthcoming book on the Canaanite god Hauron and his cult in Egypt; a preliminary article has appeared in *Göttinger Miszellen* 107 (1989), 59-68.

¹⁶ Cf. W. Orthmann, *Untersuchungen zur spät-hittitischen Kunst*, Saarbrücker Beiträge zur Altertumskunde 8, Bonn, 1971, 131.

¹⁷ Amiet, *op. cit.*, 109 n. 5, referring to Orthmann, *op. cit.*, Pls. 5b, 38e.f, 39d, 53c.d.e., 58d.

Storm-gods, even in Neo-Hittite art. In the corpus assembled by Orthmann there are several representations of divine figures wielding an axe in the manner of a Storm-god, but grasping with their left hand an animal which they are about to kill.¹⁸ Gaster, whose admirable discussion of the iconography of the first Arslan Tash amulet is completely ignored by Amiet, has moreover pointed out that contemporary Assyrian texts dealing with the making of prophylactic images frequently mention that these should be “crowned with their proper headdresses and clad in their proper robes” and “carrying in their right hand a hatchet of bronze and in their left hand a dirk of bronze”.¹⁹ He also observed that a bronze dagger is often mentioned as an emblem of the god Ashur and that oaths are commonly sworn “by the dagger of Ashur”. Gaster therefore concludes that the god depicted on the reverse of the amulet wearing an Assyrian costume must be Ashur, even though from a formal, art-historical point of view the motif of the dagger he carries at his waist and the axe he wields is borrowed from Neo-Hittite representations of the Storm-god. This interpretation is all the more likely since Ashur is the only deity actually mentioned in the text on the reverse of the tablet,²⁰ and reference is made to a “pact” which this god has made with the user of the amulet. It should also be pointed out that the god on the reverse faces right, whereas the demonic creatures depicted on the obverse face left, in other words, they are actually facing each other. This means that the god stretches his left hand towards these evil creatures and that he threatens to kill them with the axe raised in his right hand.²¹ The absence of the thunderbolt can thus be satisfactorily explained, and the unique features of the remaining elements of the iconography of the amulets can hardly be taken as an indication that they are forgeries; in fact, these features can easily be explained as being due to the already mentioned popular character and provincial style of these representations. I cannot share the difficulties Amiet has with the representation of the winged sphinx, to mention only one more detail. The shape of the horn on its head and the way it is curved forward instead of backward is paralleled in other Syro-Hittite reliefs.²² De Moor has aptly compared the horned sphinx to a description of the demonic Devourers and Slaughterers in KTU 1.12: 1, 30–1: *bhm qrm km trm*, “on them were horns like those of bulls”.²³ The hairstyle of the creature is not unlike the one worn by another winged sphinx (with a small horn on its forehead!), also from Tell Halaf.²⁴ That there is no proper indication of the sphinx’s chin seems to me to confirm rather than contradict the authenticity of the amulet;²⁵ even the beard commonly worn by male figures cannot disguise the fact that prominent chins were not the Syro-Hittite artists’ forte.²⁶

Teixidor’s reading of the text and the anomalies in its vocabulary will be discussed elsewhere; suffice it to say here that these on the whole do not present any further difficulties beyond the ones already recognized by previous scholars, and can hardly be taken as speaking against the authenticity of the amulets. What remains is the outward appearance of the amulets. Without having access to the originals in Aleppo it is impossible to judge their alleged “extremely light-weight texture”; on the other hand, the amulets are so small that they are bound to weigh very little. Teixidor does not mention an exact figure which could be compared with the weight of the casts in Paris, if they survive. The well-nigh perfect state of preservation, without any trace of usage, had already been remarked upon by du Mesnil himself, who noticed that even the holes at the top of both amulets do not show any marks left by the cord by means of which they were suspended.²⁷ However, if one assumes that instead of being worn around the neck they were hung in a room or on a door-post, as seems likely from their textual content, this becomes less surprising. And how seriously should one

¹⁸ Orthmann, *op. cit.*, Pls. 5a (with snake), from Ashara; 26b (with lion), 28d (with winged bull), both from Carchemish; 48h (with lion), from Pancarli.

¹⁹ Th. H. Gaster, *Orientalia* 11 (1942), 72–6.

²⁰ This point will be discussed in detail in the study announced in n. 15 above.

²¹ Cf. the Assyrian relief depicted in Heinz Demisch, *Die Sphinx. Geschichte ihrer Darstellung von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart*, Stuttgart, 1977, 62, Fig. 160, which shows a male deity in exactly the same pose as the one on our amulet, but wielding a dagger instead of an axe at a winged sphinx

wearing a horned helmet.

²² Orthmann, *op. cit.*, Pls. 8c, 9c (on the head of a winged lion!), 11c.e, 12a (all from Tell Halaf); M. Mallowan and L. G. Davies, *Ivories from Nimrud (1949–1963)*, II: *Ivories in Assyrian Style*, London, 1970, Pls. XXXII–XXXIII.

²³ J. C. de Moor, *JEOL* 27 (1981–2), 112.

²⁴ Orthmann, *op. cit.*, Pl. 11f.

²⁵ See e.g. *ibid.*, Pls. 5a, 6a, 10c, 14b, 15a.b.e.f, 17g, 19c, etc.

²⁶ Cf. the detail shown in *ibid.*, Pl. 72c.

²⁷ *Syria* 48, 391.

take the statement that the amulets do not show any trace of usage if at the same time Teixidor mentions several breaks and scratches in ll. 1, 13, 14 and 16 of the inscription on the first amulet? Moreover, even the worst photographs show clearly that a whole section of the lower edge of the first amulet is flaked off, taking away with it not only the forepaws of the she-wolf depicted on the obverse, but also several signs inscribed on the edges. How can one be sure that this damage is due to factors other than the actual use of the amulets? In short, none of the indications produced by Teixidor and Amiet stand up against a critical examination and the authenticity of the amulets cannot be seriously doubted.²⁸

²⁸ It should also be borne in mind that the god Hauron figures prominently in the inscriptions on the first amulet. In 1933, when the tablets came to light, practically nothing was known about this deity beyond his name; yet the role he plays in the text is in perfect agreement with what became known about him in subsequent years. This would seem to make the proposition that the amulets are forgeries very unlikely from the start. Some of the characteristics of the amulets which Teixidor found disconcerting, notably their smoothness and light weight, might perhaps be explained in a different way. Although it is difficult to compare such totally different photographs as the ones published by du Mesnil and those of Cross and Saley and Röllig, it must be admitted that on the latter the amulets themselves as well as the edges of individual signs and damaged areas look much "smoother" than on du

Mesnil's photographs. It is not without some hesitation that I make the following suggestion: Could the originals and the casts have been confused at some stage, perhaps during their short stay in Paris in 1939? Do the photographs taken by the Aleppo Museum in the 1960's actually show a cast rather than the original? The implications of such a state of affairs, including the possible loss of the originals (cf. n. 9 above), cannot be discussed here. Cf. also Zevit, *IEJ* 27, 111 n. 12, who drew attention to the fact that certain traces originally seen by du Mesnil du Buisson and again by Caquot on the cast of the first amulet are absent on Cross and Saley's photographs, and suggested "that the plaque has been damaged in the intervening years between its discovery and initial publication and the time that new photographs were taken".