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## As Above, So Below: Italian Amuletic Practices Following the Black Death

Danielle Pigeon

*Southern Methodist University*, [dpigeon@smu.edu](mailto:dpigeon@smu.edu)

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AS ABOVE, SO BELOW: ITALIAN AMULETIC PRACTICES  
FOLLOWING THE BLACK DEATH

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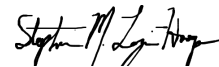
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Dr. Abbey Stockstill  
Assistant Professor of Art History



---

Dr. Randall Griffin  
University Distinguished Professor of  
Art History



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Dr. Stephanie Langin-Hooper  
Assistant Professor of Art History  
and Karl Kilinski II Endowed Chair of  
Hellenic Visual Culture

AS ABOVE, SO BELOW: ITALIAN AMULETIC PRACTICES  
FOLLOWING THE BLACK DEATH

A Thesis Presented to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Meadows School of the Arts  
Southern Methodist University

in

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts

with a

Major in Art History

by

Danielle Pigeon

B.A., History of Art, Bryn Mawr College

May 15, 2021

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This thesis would not have been possible if not for the guidance and wisdom of my advisor, Dr. Abbey Stockstill, as well as the feedback received from committee members Dr. Randall Griffin and Dr. Stephanie Langin-Hooper. Their support of my research interests during my time at SMU has been invaluable. I also want to thank my family and friends for their endless support and enthusiasm for my work: if not for them I would not have been able to make my pursuit of knowledge and academic goals a reality.

Pigeon, Danielle M.

B.A., History of Art, Bryn Mawr College

As Above, So Below: Italian Amuletic Practices  
Following the Black Death

Advisor: Dr. Abbey Stockstill

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This thesis explores the production of amuletic rings in the Italian peninsula following the arrival of *Yersinia pestis* during the mid-fourteenth century. By examining patterns of ornamentation on a selection of Italian rings, I establish connections to the trauma experienced by individuals left in the wake of the plague and argue that these objects offered a sacralized model of protective adornment to counteract the threat of a fatal and seemingly unstoppable illness. Italian amuletic rings can thereby be read as a material response to the anxieties of mass death and bodily horrors that accompanied outbreaks of the Black Death.

The labile nature of the medieval amuletic object is such that the combination of potent materiality, protective charm formulae, and comforting material beauty could offer protection on multiple fronts. Amuletic rings collapsed the potentiality of the natural world and divine forces into a compact object that allowed their bearer to engage with the workings of the universe on their terms. Compounding apotropaic and prophylactic properties into amuletic rings produced a physical panacea that could actively adapt to the needs of their owner. It is through their ability to augment the body and invoke the wonders of the universe that I present these rings as a tactile and phenomenological device utilized to alleviate the anxieties that emerged in the midst of a plague that thinned the barriers between life and death.

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This thesis is dedicated to Gogo and Abuela.

## INTRODUCTION

The arrival of *Yersinia pestis* – colloquially referred to in later writings as The Black Death – was an event that altogether shattered the nature of dying in medieval Europe. An encounter with death is a unifying and universal experience: all living creatures are afforded a finite time on earth and all things must come to pass. The experiences of those left behind mark a period of upheaval in their lives, but it is an aspect of the human experience so inevitable that death becomes a part of a shared cultural experience. Death is normal, it is natural, and it is final. The arrival of *Yersinia pestis* through trade routes in the fourteenth century wholly transformed the culture surrounding death. The plague arrived suddenly and rapidly spread out of control. Given its status as a major Mediterranean trade center in the fourteenth century, Venice was among the first of the European cities to experience the indiscriminate and all-consuming destruction of the plague. The turmoil left in the wake of the plague was utterly unfathomable: the Black Death killed 40 to 60% of all people across Europe, the Middle East, as well as North Africa upon in the initial outbreak.<sup>1</sup> Death became an all-too-familiar figure to individuals across societal standings. It could visit at any moment – invisible and indiscriminate – and lay waste to families, towns, and cities. The plague brought about a confrontation with death that is evident throughout the mournful tone of historians and chroniclers in the years that followed. Despair is

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<sup>1</sup> Green, Monica Helen. *Pandemic Disease in the Medieval World: Rethinking the Black Death*. Kalamazoo: Arc Medieval Press, 2015: 9. She states that “the mortality caused by the Black Death is the highest of any large-scale catastrophe known to humankind, save for the impact of smallpox and measles on indigenous peoples in first-contact events of the early modern period. The Black Death killed an estimated 40 to 60% of all people in Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa when it first struck there in the mid-fourteenth century.”

palpable in visual depictions of the plague and that sorrow is further expressed in letters and poetry. There is an acute sense of grief for immediate family lost, and a far more expansive mourning for the loss of a lived experience untainted by the pestilence. The impact of the plague sent shockwaves rippling through every facet of the human experience and lead to a collective trauma that necessitated innovative forms of preventative care.

This project seeks to explore the material response to the arrival of the plague in the Italian peninsula. There is a substantial corpus of Italian amuletic rings dating from the fourteenth century onward, however, they have not yet been explicitly linked to the impact of the plague. A deep-seated fear of illness and death is expressed in the function of these objects, and it is highly likely that such anxieties emerged following the outbreak and rapid spread of *Yersinia pestis* throughout Europe. The distinct turn towards apotropaic and prophylactic amuletic objects reveals the methods through which communities addressed the shared trauma and mortal reckoning in the face of an unknown illness that transformed the infected into the living dead. The widespread resurgence of practices intended to mitigate harm and ward off disease reflect a lived experience transformed by the presence of mass death and harrowing illness. This thesis examines the production and use of apotropaic and prophylactic amulet rings in Italy as a material response to the Black Death. The adoption of charm invocation, natural philosophy, and ritual practices illustrate a heterodox approach to protection that allows an individual to gain a sense of control over their own fate. The experience of mass death emphasized and exacerbated anxieties surrounding illness, mortality, damnation, and the malleable nature of the human body. The plague resisted medicine, did not falter following fervent prayer, and did not resolve despite the shifting of stars: the process by which the plague challenged rational constructs deeply undermined the pillars of knowledge that informed the

medieval understanding of the world. Wellness thus came to depend on the actions of the individual themselves. The increased presence of amuletic rings produced from the fourteenth century onward reflects that shift towards personal agency through apotropaic and prophylactic practices. The volume of extant rings suggests their popularity and their deliberately rendered features communicate how adornment could afford security and safety in a world ransacked by trauma.<sup>2</sup> Amuletic objects intended to protect the body from the plague are a material byproduct of an intense need for a tangible link to protective forces that would act on the wearer's behalf.

There are patterns evident in extant amuletic rings that indicate a common knowledge and increased practice of protective adornment in the fourteenth century. Within this project I have placed a range of protective characteristics into three major groupings: rings that feature charm inscriptions, rings that bear potent mineralogical components, and rings adorned with symbolic images that call upon classical, astrological, and emblematic figures to suffuse these objects with protective power. It is extremely important to note that these categories are not mutually exclusive: amuletic rings appear in a number of forms with one or all of the characteristics listed and are as singular as the individuals who had once worn them. Indeed, the presence of protective signet rings embody a sense of identity and add an additional layer of sentimentality and complexity to these small objects. Amuletic rings ultimately augment and form an extension of the wearer's body. The possession of such an item elicits a phenomenological experience that acts not only upon the body but the mind as well: to touch, feel, and observe the presence of a protective object when worn operates as a catalyst for meditation on the divine and virtuous nature of the forces that have been employed to aid them.

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<sup>2</sup> Chris Gosden, "What Do Objects Want?" *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* 12, no. 3 (2005): 197. Gosden observes that "objects shape people and their social relations" and that instances where "objects change their forms and types markedly and rapidly should be of considerable interest." His approach towards reading object patterns and changes serves as a model for the reading of the amuletic rings at the center of this study.

The increased use of amulet rings reflects a shift towards fourteenth-century Italians taking matters of personal protection – quite literally – into their own hands. David Herlihy’s observation on the transformative nature of the Black Death suggests that “the fear of the plague and of unforeseen death intensified the religious consciousness of the population and disseminated it across larger sectors of society ... but it also favored the development of a kind of medicine, even magical religion.”<sup>3</sup> A turn towards a mystic, individualized iteration of devotion as a form of both spiritual and physical healing increased the popularity of material objects as nexuses of power and catalysts of divine imagination. Fear and isolation cultivated an individualized form of spirituality that emphasized an individual placing themselves in close proximity to the divine through ritual, meditation, and powerful objects. Superstition and idolatry became incorporated into religious practice outside of the church, and amuletic adornment reflects that turn towards a concept of a mystic, individualized religion. The utilization of ritualistic charm practices in the form of scripture formulae and employment of material virtues of stones and metals placed the ability to mitigate harm in the object-bearer’s hand. Particularly valuable amuletic rings utilized intaglios and images from the ancient world to create a temporal link between the present and the past. These objects were intensely personal devices that initiate divine intercession after the failings of learned institutions to address matters of mortality and to stop the plague.

This project begins by surveying amuletic practices in Europe – covering the use of lapidaries, charm formulae, and ties to the ancient world – as a means of understanding how personal protection fit into societal practices prior to the Black Death. The forces and knowledge from which amulets derived their power reflected the philosophical underpinnings of the known

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<sup>3</sup>David Herlihy and Samuel Kline Cohn. *The Black Death and the Transformation of the West*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997: 81.

world and complemented a Salernitan medical practice which turned towards causal interpretations of natural phenomena to understand the human body.<sup>4</sup> The plague disrupted this order – manifested as it was from multiple causes and defying learned sciences – and elicited a dynamic response from lay people in order to address the urgent need for protection. The ways in which amulets acted upon the body, and the way the body acted upon it, revealed a richness to the medieval conception of the body and spirit. The response to an intensely transformative trauma necessitated an equally transformative response. The patterns of protection formed through the conjunction of materials, charm formulae, and sacred intentionality generated a body of objects whose functions extended beyond their physical forms. These objects, a material byproduct of a lived experience defined by the trauma of mass death, reflected a keen awareness of the finite and unpredictable nature of mortality. These objects are tactile and intimate; their size and shape fosters an impulse to touch, and their absence would be acutely felt when removed. The amulet ring augments the human body and actively responds to changes in the environment. The need for such a responsive device reflects a sense of anxiety, a recognition of mortality, but also a sense of hope in the face of a blight that was so destructive it became a portent of the apocalypse.

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<sup>4</sup> Nancy Siraisi, *Medieval & Early Renaissance Medicine an Introduction to Knowledge and Practice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990): 55-58. The Salernitan approach to medicine, established in the eleventh century, shaped the major medical universities at Bologna, Montpellier, and Paris. The *articella* – a collection of Galenic and Hippocratic treatises – was established as a standard curriculum through commentary on these documents.

## Chapter 1

### WHAT IS AN AMULET?

Medieval amuletic objects produced in Europe embody a physical nexus of natural philosophy, medico-magical practices, and devotion to the divine in a compact object.<sup>5</sup> The purpose of an amuletic is both protective and consolatory; they shield from harm while offering a distinctly tactile reminder of their presence to comfort the bearer in times of duress. Fine jewelry, such as the objects that this project centers on, was one of many forms of protection available in the fourteenth century. An amulet could be a ring, a stone, a scrap of fabric, a piece of parchment, a fragment of wood, or a sliver of metal.<sup>6</sup> Materially rich amulets, such as protective jewelry, generally featured a combination of a natural precious material alongside an intentional inscription. These items could be activated in a number of different ways: the support material could be naturally suffused with hidden virtues, the object could have been blessed at a holy site, or physically manipulated to become a vessel of protective intent. Early modern plague treatises dating from the sixteenth century describe these objects as being separated into three categories: natural, preternatural, and supernatural.<sup>7</sup> They operate within the boundaries of nature while also

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<sup>5</sup> John M. Riddle, "Lithotherapy in the Middle Ages: Lapidaries Considered as Medical Texts," *Pharmacy in History* 12, no. 2 (1970): 40. Riddle states that "magic, superstition, and pharmacology" are intertwined in the applications of amuletic stones as a form of treatment or prophylactic material. He observes, on page 42, that the connections within amulets I have described above are largely a result of eleventh-century developments in medicine.

<sup>6</sup> Claude Lecouteux, *The High Magic of Talismans and Amulets*, Translated by Jon E. Graham (Rochester: Inner Traditions, 2014): 16. Lecouteux's description of amulets, drawing heavily upon Pliny's *Natural History*, states that "the function of amulets is protective, and second, that almost anything can be used to craft one." What is most important about the efficacy of the amulet is that they are carried or worn through binding.

<sup>7</sup> Karel Černý, "Magical and Natural Amulets in Early Modern Plague Treatises," *Sudhoffs Archiv*, bd. 97, h. 1 (2013): 83.



being preternatural – suffused with hidden powers from heavenly bodies – and these objects touched upon the different realms of existence based on the functions expressed through their form.<sup>8</sup> Amulets were responsive objects intended to address a diverse range of concerns. This understanding of hidden virtues and the benefits of physical objects in medical practice is largely a byproduct of the *vis medicatrix naturae* – the healing power of nature – derived from the ancient world.<sup>9</sup> The transmission and relevancy of ancient pharmacological practices in compendia and later treatises reflects the enduring belief in natural materials as effective forms of medicine, and it is that scholarly framework which informs the operations of objects crafted to protect. Within this tradition of knowledge certain materials are privileged above others, and it is with the healing powers of gemstones described as being superior in potency and potentiality.

The lapidaries of the Middle Ages provide a broad scope of literature concerning the hidden virtues of gems and minerals. These treatises were a part of a longstanding study of natural philosophy that originated in the ancient world and retained relevance in the Late Middle Ages. The early belief in the virtues of natural substances can be seen in cuneiform tablets documenting what materials facilitated birth and love, and interest in the topic is maintained in the works of philosophers such as Hippocrates, Plato, Theophrastus, Dioscorides, and Pliny.<sup>10</sup> This knowledge moved from the ancient world to the Islamic world and then entered the European world having been commented on and contributed to by a multitude of scholars over time. *De Lapidibus* (“On Gemstones”), written by Bishop Marbode of Rennes in the late eleventh century,

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<sup>8</sup> Černý, 83.

<sup>9</sup> Christiane Nockels Fabri. “Treating Medieval Plague: The Wonderful Virtues of Theriac.” *Early Science and Medicine* 12, no. 3 (2007): 249. This tradition, as described by Fabri, is largely derived from the pharmacological treatises of Galen and Dioscorides as well as Greco-Arabic compendia and medieval botanicals. This reflects a widespread and uniform belief in the healing power of nature prior to the arrival of the plague.

<sup>10</sup> Joan Evans, *Magical Jewels of the Middle Ages and Renaissance particularly in England* (London: Oxford University Press, 1922), 13-16.

cites the Hellenistic lapidary of Damigeron as the ancient source from which his work was derived. Damigeron is regarded as the first lapidary author to explicitly outline the impact of astrological bodies upon stones and it is in Marbode's text that the firm link between celestial bodies and gemstones is introduced to the medieval Christian world.<sup>11</sup> Subsequent lapidaries, such as the work of Marsilio Ficino, follow the lead of Marbode: from the eleventh century onward gemstones are largely tied to the stars in the catalog of their properties and corresponding celestial bodies clearly inform their function.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, in this treatise Marbode asserts that gemstones have a greater potency than that of any other natural substance: they are granted power directly from God and are considered more potent than even the most precious and marvelous herbs.<sup>13</sup> Lapidaries, produced both in Latin and vernacular languages, propagated this knowledge as well as belief in the power of gemstones throughout Europe. More significantly, these texts preserved and communicated the belief in mineralogical amulets as particularly valuable objects of protective power and offered guidance for their usage in medieval scholarship.<sup>14</sup> Inventories and literature referring to the properties of precious stones and amulets further reflects the significance of lapidaries; the presence and influence of this knowledge outside of a purely theoretical setting indicates that they were a part of a shared cultural understanding of the natural world.<sup>15</sup> Natural, brilliant substances were clearly

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<sup>11</sup> Evans, 22.

<sup>12</sup> Francis Young, *A Medieval Book of Magical Stones: The Peterborough Lapidary* (Cambridge: Texts in Early Modern Magic, 2016): XXXVI. Young makes note that Ficino's work emphasized the power of astrological bodies over stones and advised engraving the stone to amplify the object's power. This, as Young states, was criticized by his peers as "designed to attract demonic attention."

<sup>13</sup> Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014): 103. Kieckhefer references the Book of the Stones and states, "God himself, Marbode asserts, has endowed stones with singular power. While herbs contain great strength, that of jewels is far greater."

<sup>14</sup> John Cherry, "Medieval Jewelry: From Collections to Consumerism," in *From Minor to Major: The Minor Arts in Medieval History*, ed. Colum Hourihane (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012): 143. He states that lapidaries were "responsible for passing onto the medieval world the classical belief in amulets, and, most importantly, on magical jewels."

<sup>15</sup> Evans, 111-115. Evans states that "the lapidaries of the Middle Ages shew [sic] ... how constant was the belief in the magical virtues of gems, and the evidence of literature and the inventories of the period prove that this belief was

understood to be potent materials granted power at the discretion of God, independent of human manipulation, but when combined with precious settings and inscriptions their functionality expands.

Mineralogical amulets are a particularly rich form of protective objects. Fine gemstones – commonly recognized as bearers of hidden and divine power – were not accessible to the majority of the population in the medieval period. A much more common form of amuletic protection took the form of textual and symbolic imagery to create charms on any surface. This type of compound object was not without precedent: sources such as the fourth-century medico-magical *Kyranides* describes the combination of mineralogical materials and magical inscriptions in the construction of Gnostic amulets.<sup>16</sup> One of the key characteristics and features of medieval amulets is the inclusion of Latinate textual formulas. These textual inscriptions were most effective when in close proximity to the body. More specifically, the placement of the written word on the body is performed so as to ensure that a layer of continuous protection is literally bound to the individual like a ligature.<sup>17</sup> Textual charms are imbued with a multisensory quality: the power of the spoken word contributes to their efficacy, and visual perception of the text incites a call to contemplate. The appearance of the word *carmen* and Middle English “charme” in healing texts, as described by Lea Olsan, indicate that deliberate phrases can be effectively independent of material virtues.<sup>18</sup> A charm can be spoken, it can be engraved, or it can be

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not merely theoretical, but played a real part in everyday life.” She points to the *Romance of Ser Perceval de Galles* referring to a magic stone-set ring as well as Chaucer’s *Romaunt of the Rose* as explicitly describing gemstone rings of a magical nature, a 1220 domestic suit spearheaded by Philip de Albini over a sapphire ring loaned to treat illness that was never returned, and the inventory of Charles V as having plates with stones attached which would detect poison.

<sup>16</sup> Evans, 27.

<sup>17</sup> Don Skemer, *Binding Words: Textual Amulets in the Middle Ages* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006): 125.

<sup>18</sup> Lea T. Olsan, “Latin Charms of Medieval England: Verbal Healing in a Christian Oral Tradition,” *Oral Tradition* 7 (1992): 116-117.

meditated on. The formula is effective regardless. She specifically states that “when such verbal formulas are employed in combination with herbal remedies or become associated with amulets and talismans, they appear in no way different from those unassociated with objects.”<sup>19</sup> A charm does not require a support material for it to be efficacious and powerful; rather, the deliberate arrangement of words activates their power. Furthermore, while a charm could be performed, they did not necessarily need to be verbally expressed for their function to be fulfilled, nor do they even need to be read. Don Skemer notes that charms function without vocalization through physical proximity:

Essential to this sort of use was physical agency, which focused the protective or therapeutic power of the word on an individual. Binding was believed to increase the magical efficacy of powerful words. A textual amulet could protect continuously, unlike the fleeting words of a pastoral blessing, and could be contemplated, like an icon, or read devotionally; and it could transmit apotropaic words of a distance, like St. Hildegard of Bingen’s letter to Sibylla, living about four hundred kilometers away in Laussane.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, textual charms did not require literacy, making them accessible to a diverse range of peoples in the Middle Ages. What was most important for their function was proximity to the body, meditative contemplation, and psychological intention. Without an individual present to benefit from or direct their protective function once created, Latinate charms exist but they do not act. The human body and mind is the site that activates the meaning of the phrase and directs it, but when a physical textual charm is severed from that human connection its efficacy falls into stasis.

European amuletic practice is largely derived from ancient and pagan cultures, however, their use throughout the Christian world is made acceptable through the inclusion of an explicitly devotional practice. The ABPAΞΑΣ (Abraxas), for example, was a common Gnostic magic

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<sup>19</sup> Olsan, 116-117.

<sup>20</sup> Skemer, 134.

phrase found on carved stones that was derived from the Greek papyri.<sup>21</sup> In fourteenth-century Italy, a more common inscription was *IEXUS AUTEM TRANIENS*: a clear reference to an event from the life of Christ in Luke 4:30. The full Latin text – *Iesus autem transiens per medium illorum ibat* – translates to “But Jesus passed through the midst of them and went His way.” By associating materials and inscriptions with heavenly bodies and biblical passages, especially ones that refer to safe passage through harm, amuletic objects worked in tandem with contemporary belief systems to protect the wearer without challenging the ecclesiastical hierarchies of power in the Middle Ages. The use of Christian charms in place of antique or Gnostic phrases allowed individuals to benefit from protective magic while bringing themselves in close proximity with the healing powers of the divine and guarding their bodies and souls from harm. Christian textual charms invited the wearer to contemplate sacred words and thus activated their imagination to perceive the heavenly powers they hope would intercede on their behalf. The adaptation and appropriation of pagan practices thus ensured that individuals who turned to amuletic objects for protection did so in dialogue with their broader religious beliefs.

Amulets in varying forms were present all throughout Europe – be they of a modest material bound to the body or a more sumptuous engraved object worn for both protection and display – and were integrated into practices of healing, prognostication, and devotion. It is important to note that, while there was a diverse range of amuletic objects produced in the medieval period, the ones that survived were considered materially and visually pleasing outside of their supernatural value. Some of the most robust evidence for magical gems in Europe were

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<sup>21</sup> The meaning of ABPAΞΑΣ is a subject of debate. What is known is that the Greek letters add up to equal 365 and that the inscription appears commonly on amulets and inscribed stones, but a literal translation is unavailable. What is known is that it functioned as a textual charm in the Gnostic practice. The Gnostic tradition emerged in the first century CE as an esoteric Christian practice that emphasized enlightenment over ideas of repentance. Gnosticism came to be viewed as a heretical practice following the establishment of Christian Orthodoxy in the fourth century.

through their mention and expressed value in courtly records and medieval inventories.<sup>22</sup> In the *Peterborough Lapidary* the emphasis on foreign points of origin is evident throughout the text: the agate stone is described as being “found in the Orient in a river which is called Achates,” garnet is a “stone of the kingdom of Asia,” sapphire is a “stone that men called *limecons* bring into India,” jasper is “found in the mountains of Scythia and griffins keep this stone,” and onyx is a “stone that comes out of India and Arabia.”<sup>23</sup> Gemstones that would be set in a ring would likely be imported into Europe, thus increasing their value through visual splendor, the curiosity surrounding exotic wonders, and the appeal of luxury goods, and would bar a significant amount of individuals from ever possessing such a fine object. The exclusivity and prestige of jeweled amulets ensured that they would be treasured and preserved. The objects around which this project is centered are an expression of simultaneous supernatural and financial abundance: they are compound objects constructed of virtuous materials and adjoined with powerful devotional inscriptions that optimize their protective function. Their potent material and charm formulae would be of key importance to those seeking to avoid the plague, and more importantly, avoid death altogether.

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<sup>22</sup> Kieckhefer, 103.

<sup>23</sup> Young: 2, 9, 53, 89.

## Chapter 2

### A SELECTION OF ITALIAN AMULETIC RINGS

Rings housed in museums – some fully cataloged and some less so – reflect a diverse range of tastes in adornment. Amuletic rings were mentioned in treasuries, they were noted in poems, they were the cause of legal battles, and they were notable enough to be preserved in courtly accounts. The sheer volume of rings gathered over time, such as in the collections at the British Museum and V&A, demonstrate the popularity of adorned hands in the act of self-fashioning. But in examining the scope of these rings in their collected mass, certain patterns become evident. The abundance of fourteenth-century Italian rings demonstrates a consistent production of charms, materials, and embellishments that allude to popular aesthetic choices as well as a common set of needs. There are largely three types of amulets that present as jewelry: mineralogical, textual, and symbolic. These categories are not mutually exclusive; they have the ability to influence and enhance each other when combined. The production of amulets was such that, in order to obtain maximum effectiveness, there would be a mindful combination of materials with common virtues such as setting stones with a compatible metal.<sup>24</sup> The inclusion of a devotional inscription or symbolic image could further enhance the potentiality of the amulet when worn as a gilded ligature. These rings are broadly linked to apotropaic and prophylactic practices in the fourteenth century, however, the notable increase in recognizable styles of amuletic protection has not yet been explicitly linked to the arrival of the Black Death. It is

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<sup>24</sup> Lecouteux, 135.

arguable that there was an increased need for these objects defined by a targeted use of stones and charm formulae in direct response to the arrival of the plague. The patterns evident in the production of these rings speaks to a collective demand for objects that could offer a constant protective aura as their bearers moved through a world transformed by the plague.

It is evident that the rings produced in Italy favored a flush bezel-setting for cabochons and intaglios. The signet of Noarius of Petrucius (fig. 1), the signet of Thomas Ruggieri of Suessa (fig. 2), and the scorpion intaglio rings (fig. 3) feature the support metal fully framing the precious and oft engraved cabochon. These three particular rings feature a Classical gem placed into a medieval setting. These were particularly precious not only for the innate properties of the stones, but because they created a temporal link between the current owner of the stone and the ancient cultures that had initially described their powers. Albertus Magnus' *De Rebus Metallicis* ("Of Metallic Matters") makes particular note of engraved stones with images appearing in the forms of cameos, intaglios, or dyes. The value and power of these gems was largely derived from the fact that they were produced concurrently with the formative texts that shaped the understandings of astronomy and magic in the medieval world, inferring that the individual from the ancient world who created the object understood the most opportune time to modify the stones to optimize their power.<sup>25</sup> Other mineralogical rings, such as the toadstone ring (fig. 4) and sapphire ring (fig. 5) do not bear inscribed gemstones, but the raw materials within the bezel are potent enough in their natural state to still be an intensely valuable jewel. The toadstone, in particular, was a unique material in that its name belied its origins; it is a fossilized fish tooth, but is described in the medico-magical *Kyranides* compilation from the fourth century as being a

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<sup>25</sup> Evans, 95. Magnus' work is largely printed and propagated in the 15<sup>th</sup> centuries onward through print media – the exact dates of the original *De Rebus Metallicis* treatise is unclear. It is attributed to the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century.



potent stone found in the marrow of an “earth toad.”<sup>26</sup> Beyond that, it was seen as a form of sympathetic magic – like capable of curing like – and was regarded as a rare remedy for cleansing the body internally and as a panacea for humoral imbalance and even plague.<sup>27</sup> The sapphire was another particularly precious type of jewel. Albertus Magnus referred to it as the color of the firmament created by God on the second day of creation.<sup>28</sup> The understanding of these materials as magical and potent substances in the European world can be traced back to Pliny (d. 79 CE), through lapidaries produced in Alexandria, and then through individuals such as Isidore of Seville (d. 636 CE) who placed less emphasis on their magic and more emphasis on their medicinal properties.<sup>29</sup> The properties of minerals was taken quite seriously as a form of particularly rich pharmacopeia in the study of medicine and Aristotelian sciences. These materials would safeguard the body, although matters of the soul required additional features to guarantee protection.

An additional pattern seen in Italianate rings is the use of an inscription decorating bezels and the band that encircles the finger. All of the aforementioned rings, with the exception of the scorpion intaglio and sapphire, feature the inscription “*IEXUS AUTEM TRANSIENS PER MEDIUM ILLORUM IBANT ELOP*” (“But Jesus passed through their midst.” Luke 4:30). Additional rings such as the signet of Zeno Donati (fig. 6), an amulet with later cameo (fig. 7), and an amulet with a diamond (fig. 8) all bear the same textual inscription referring back to Luke 4:30. This Latin text is an apotropaic phrase that directly references a biblical passage: Jesus was rejected at Nazareth, and the incensed villagers sought to inflict grievous harm upon him. That

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<sup>26</sup> Christopher Duffin, “The Toadstone – A Rather Unlikely Jewel.” *The Magazine of the Society of Jewellery Historians* 8 (2010): 3.

<sup>27</sup> Duffin, 3.

<sup>28</sup> Evans, 85. Evans provides a translation from Magnus’ *de Mineralibus* as describing the sapphire as a particular stone associated with the heavens.

<sup>29</sup> Evans, 31.

Jesus was able to pass through the angered masses unharmed grants this phrase particular significance, and those who bore this charm hoped for the same ability to walk through danger safely, becoming a proxy for an event from the life of Christ. This charm was most frequently employed as a means of protecting travelers from the harm that comes with traveling by sea or over land.<sup>30</sup> Additional inscriptions, such as the *ANANIZAPTA* (an elusive inscription that frequently appeared as an annotation for *Ananizapta Tetragammaton* or *Ananizapta Emmanuel* – both names of God),<sup>31</sup> is presented on a wholly-inscribed amulet band (fig. 9). The *ANANIZAPTA* is an inscription that is magical in its nature, however, the true meaning and translation has largely evaded scholars. Guarinus' *Vocabularium* (1492) offered a possible explanation for *ANANIZAPTA* as an abbreviation for “*Antidotum Nazareni Aufera Necem Intoxicationis Sanctifice(n)t Alimenta Pocula Trinitatis Alma*” – a Latinate remedy for intoxication. Some scholars, such as Ellen Etlinger, suggest that it is an acrostic and the true meaning is not fully known but does not dispute the role of this ‘mysterious word’ in addressing intoxication as well as falling sickness, or epilepsy.<sup>32</sup> *IESUS AUTEM TRANSIENS* and the *ANANIZAPTA* appear across several objects and are clearly regarded as amuletic, but there are instances of textual inscriptions which deviate from the popular types. The lion signet-amulet features the text “*IN MANUS TUAS DOMINE COMMENDO SPIRITUM MEUM*” (“Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit.” Luke 23:46) which was the utterance of Jesus before his death on the cross (fig. 10). Similarly, the signet of Thomas Roggeri of Suessa is inscribed with

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<sup>30</sup> Hugh Tait, *Jewellery through 7000 Years* (London: British Museum Publications, 1976): 225.

<sup>31</sup> Ormonde Dalton, M. *Franks Bequest Catalogue of the Finger Rings Early Christian, Byzantine, Teutonic, Mediaeval and Later* (London: British Museum, 1912): 136-137. He notes that it seems to have its earliest appearance in Guarinus' *Vocabularium* (1491) as a Latinate charm text: “*Ananisapta mat amors interpretatur et quaelibet littera repraesentat unam dictionem, scilicet: Antidotum Nazareni Auferat Necem Intoxicationis Sanctifice(n)t Alimenta Pocula Trinitatis Alma*.”.

<sup>32</sup> Ellen Etlinger, “British Amulets in London Museums.” *Folklore* 50, no. 2 (1939): 169.

the words “*ET VERBUN CARO FACTUM EST ET HABITABVIT IN NOBIS*” (“And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.” John 1:14) which is a section of the gospel that emphasized the humanity of Jesus. These passages are clearly Christian – linked with specific biblical passages and holy figures – and appear in frequency across amuletic objects. Although the specific nature of the protective properties is unclear, however, they fit the pattern of Christian charm formulae utilized across oral and amuletic healing traditions. Furthermore, their binding to the body is a hallmark of the amulet ring, and their usage suggests that they would operate to protect the bearer from harm, be it physical or spiritual. These textually inscribed rings form the corpus of a ritual object language: the Lombardic text, generally emphasized through black niello inlays in the engraved golden surface, encircles the finger of the wearer and binds the phrase to their body.<sup>33</sup> The content of the inscription may differ in terms of specific biblical references, but the stylistic presentation remains largely consistent.

The combination of potent materials and devotional charms form the largest body of amuletic objects; however, some rings feature images and symbols that also serve to protect. The signet ring of Zeno Donati features the *Iexus Autem Transiens* charm inscription along the band, but it also features decorations brought out in niello along the surfaces of the ring (fig. 11). The inclusion of a personal seal matrix on the raised bezel of the ring operates as an identifying motif as well as a symbol of authority, thus inextricably linking this object to the wearer, and the deeply engraved matrix adorns the apex of the ring in lieu of a gemstone. Additional engravings, such as the draconian wyverns and leaves, could offer function as protective elements. Mythical

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<sup>33</sup> Vicky Foskolou, “The Magic of the Written Word: The Evidence of Inscription on Byzantine Magical Amulets,” *Deftion of the Christian Archaeological Society* 35 (2014): 348. Foskolou, in her discussion of charm inscriptions found on Byzantine amulets, asserts that these types of devotional inscriptions as a form of ritual language. She observes that this ritual language of charm formulae is a result of a “faithfully repeated framework and format with constant form and content.”

creatures such as the wyvern are a motif that would appear in liminal spaces and gateways as apotropaic figures.<sup>34</sup> It could be further suggested that the botanical embellishments along the golden surface, as tiny as they may be, could additionally symbolize or summon forth abundance. Botanical adornment was frequently seen as a herald of abundance in Byzantine decorative arts, and the strong relationship that Venice had with the Byzantine empire suggests that such cultural and aesthetic practices could have influenced amulet production in the region.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, this particular ring has repeated images of columns: a column detail appears in the central signet matrix, an additional column is framed by confronting wyverns, and a third column appears on the interior surface of the band. The incorporation of the column into the identifying seal of Zeno Donati strongly suggests that this was a particularly important symbol to him, and his role as a *proveditor* – a noble Venetian tasked with overseeing and coordinating military directives with mercenary commanders – further informs the use of personal symbols on a protective object. The column that would sit against the skin is that of a scythe cutting and breaking a column, accompanied with a banner that reads “*AIDA MEDIO*.”<sup>36</sup> The extant scholarship on this ring suggests that *AIDA MEDIO* is a personal motto of the Donati family and that the translation is unknown, however, when read aloud it sounds extremely close to “aiuta me dio” which would then translate to “Help me God”: a personal plea for divine intercession. The chaotic breaking of a column emphasizes the stability of the other two on the ring – it is possible

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<sup>34</sup> James C. Nohnberg, “The Descent of Geryon: The Moral System of Inferno XVI-XXXI,” *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, no. 114 (1996): 150. Nohnberg states that “fantastic beasts are a decorative motif very frequently found on borders and boundaries” and that they operated as guardians. Their protective nature in dialogue with the amuletic text suggests that these are apotropaic in nature.

<sup>35</sup> Debra Pincus, “Venice and the Two Romes: Byzantium and Rome as a Double Heritage in Venetian Cultural Politics,” *Artibus et Historiae* 13, no. 26 (1992): 102.

<sup>36</sup> Dalton, *Franks Bequest Catalogue*, 252. Cherry, “Medieval Rings,” 70. Tait, *Jewelry Through 7000 Years*, 252. Each of these sources list *AIDA MEDIO* as a motto of the Donati family with unclear meaning. I am of the belief that, when reading this passage aloud slowly the phrase “AIDA MEDIO” sounds like the Italian “AIUTA ME DIO” – which would then translate to “Help me God.”

that these images are a form of sympathetic magic to confer stability upon the wearer and their tasks.

Additional engraved images – such as the images adorning the classical mineralogical intaglios discussed earlier – draw strong parallels to the ancient world. One signet with a classical-era intaglio (fig. 3) features a banded onyx cabochon with a scorpion carved into the smooth surface of the stone. The image of the scorpion dually embodies the sympathetic magic properties of the arachnid while also being symbolic of the Scorpio constellation. The scorpion, in particular, is a creature frequently found incorporated into protective practices: it was believed to heal poisoning through sympathetic magic and its astrological association offered the humoral properties of cooling fevers.<sup>37</sup> The frequent combination of the scorpion with particular gemstones, especially with attention paid to the color and properties of the cabochon, amplified the astrological benefits of the stone with natural virtues.<sup>38</sup> This particular intaglio, featuring the engraved arachnid atop banded onyx, would have been considered particularly valuable as it featured an image carved into the ideal form of the stone. Natural striations, banding, translucency, and color were significant factors in the potency of cabochons and indicated their overall efficacy in amuletic and prophylactic applications.<sup>39</sup> It is in this ring that the Hellenistic lapidary tradition, as described by Damigeron and expanded upon by Marbode of Rennes, is acutely expressed. The act of carving the image of the scorpion into the onyx cabochon makes

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<sup>37</sup> “Ring,” Victoria and Albert Museum, accessed February 1, 2021. <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O121202/ring-unknown>

<sup>38</sup> Simone Michel-von Dungern, “Studies on Magical Amulets in the British Museum,” *Gems of Heaven* (London: British Museum, 2011): 93. Michel-Von Dungern describes scorpion-engraved stones as being frequently combined with specific materials and inscriptions. This practice, as she describes, strongly suggests that such imagery was part of a prescription formula in line with the lapidaries of Socrates and Dionysios which, as discussed in this essay, were disseminated throughout the medieval Christian West.

<sup>39</sup> Magnus, 27. In the entry on “Onyx” the stone is described as being “black of color,” but the best stones would be “full of white veins.” He further describes this material as being imported from “India, unto Araby” which would contribute to its exotic and rare appeal.

accessible the magical protection afforded by the astrological body to which it relates.<sup>40</sup>

Furthermore, given the ancient origins of the intaglio, it is likely that this gem would have been regarded as especially effective as it was created during the period from which these understandings of the universe had unfolded.

Protection from sudden death and the guarantee of safe travel are reasonable concerns for an individual at any given point in time, but the encyclopedic catalogs of rings – such as the works of Evans, Dalton, and Cherry – emphasized a massive influx of these types of amulets following the fourteenth century.<sup>41</sup> The substantial number of extant Italian amuletic rings and the timing of their production, along with the consistent visual and functional patterns that animated them, strongly points to these items being a material response to the needs and concerns that emerged follow the arrival of the plague. Furthermore, the Lombardic script and richness of materials also suggests that these rings were produced in areas that had a level of fluid urban wealth that could afford such fineries despite the economic impact of the plague. The consistent presence of niello – a form of inlay on the surface of these rings that brings out the Lombardic through black detailing – is consistent throughout Italianate rings. Furthermore, the stylistic production of niello and Lombardic script reflect a known site of Italian workmanship found at Chalcis in Euboea – an area that would have very likely had a strong Venetian

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<sup>40</sup> Lecouteux, 175. Lecouteux, discussing the influence of astrological bodies over amuletic production, states that “the planets rule over metals and stones, which shall be chosen in accordance with the objective one wishes to achieve ... it is upon these support materials that the magical figures, which allow the force to come down into them, will be carved.”

<sup>41</sup> Joan Evans’ *Magical Jewels of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, Particularly in England* (1922) is the foundational scholarship for this reading of amuletic rings. Ormonde Dalton’s *Frank’s Bequest Catalog of Finger Rings: Early Christian, Byzantine, Teutonic, Mediaeval, and Later* (1912) is an encyclopedic catalog of the rings possessed by the British Museum – offering enough descriptive evidence to establish a typological reading of these objects. John Cherry’s more recent work – “Medieval Rings” (1981) and “Medieval Jewelry: From Collections to Consumerism” (2012) further engages with these sources in exploring the nature of rings in collections.

presence.<sup>42</sup> Amuletic practices wax and wane depending on cultural beliefs and needs. Prior to the fourteenth century there is a lull in the need for amulets, and inscriptions on rings that were produced before the arrival of the plague were largely self-descriptive. The British Museum ring catalog compiled by Dalton in 1912 lists numerous rings from the late thirteenth to early fourteenth centuries that are described as bearing inscriptions that primarily express the name of the owner and its function as a sigil.<sup>43</sup> It is important to note that the earliest entry in the amulet subsection of the catalog is from the fourteenth century.<sup>44</sup> Given the lack of evidence for charm formulae adornment prior to the fourteenth century, and the explosion of protective jewelry produced following that period, it raises an important question: why did individuals turn to amulets for protection? What needs did they truly address? The plague disrupted every aspect of the lived experience in medieval Europe. The consistency with which amuletic objects were produced from the mid-fourteenth century onward is highly suggestive of a broader social movement that turned towards objects of apotropaic and prophylactic natures to be carried on the person in both private and public spaces.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, consistent formulae and material components reflect a syncretism between the ancient world and medieval Christendom that occurred in response to the urgent needs that arose amid the outbreaks of the plague.<sup>46</sup> These

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<sup>42</sup> Ormonde Dalton, M. *Franks Bequest Catalogue of the Finger Rings Early Christian, Byzantine, Teutonic, Mediaeval and Later* (London: British Museum, 1912).

<sup>43</sup> Dalton, see section E. on Amulet Rings, p. 135.

<sup>44</sup> Dalton, 135.

<sup>45</sup> Stephanie Langin-Hooper, "Fascination with the tiny: Social negotiation through miniatures in Hellenistic Babylonia," *World Archaeology* 47, no. 1 (2015): 62. Langin-Hooper discusses miniature figures and patterns embedded within objects as a byproduct of social change. She states that "times when social identities were coalescing around rigid ideals, usually in order to form stable homogenous communities in opposition to external forces, are marked by a similar homogeneity in the miniature objects." The patterns of amulet rings identified in this essay form a homogeneous corpus of compact objects that appear to have been produced in response to the external influence of the plague's destruction and social upheaval in medieval Europe. Additionally, these objects engaged with the act of self-fashioning when displayed on the hand, which could suggest that the popularity of these rings was also in part to their performative quality as an upper-class object of wonder and power.

<sup>46</sup> Lecouteux, 93.

objects were a means of possessing control and wielding protective powers during a period defined by upheaval and collective trauma.

Beyond the adaptation of longstanding amuletic practices to protect oneself during outbreaks of the plague, these objects were also deeply personal items that forged an intimate connection through their tactility and proximity. The efficacy of an amulet was dependent upon its closeness to the person in need: they could be worn against the skin, tucked into pockets and coin purses, and sewn into articles of clothing.<sup>47</sup> Rings would form a gilded ligature upon the hand of its bearer and offer a tactile reminder of its presence and protection. The diminutive size of these powerful objects is such that they encapsulate and contain a link to divine and celestial bodies in a manner that places those forces, quite literally, into the palm of the bearer's hand. Engagement with these rings would offer an intimate encounter with the invisible but deeply felt forces that shaped the lived experience for all, and thus offered the bearer the ability to not only utilize but wholly monopolize such potentiality for their own protection. The presence of rings with specific names engraved into them, such as Noarius of Petrucius and Zeno Donati, inextricably linked these objects of power to the identity of their bearers. Charm formulae, divine associations, and virtuous substances transformed rings into amuletic objects of wonder that expressed value in terms of supernatural potential as well as capacity to intercede on the owner's behalf.<sup>48</sup> These objects further communicate that a need for protection was all-encompassing regardless of financial status: amulets could and would be made of a variety of materials, but the abundance of gold rings and gemstones is a particularly luxurious form of protection that was

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<sup>47</sup> Lecouteux, 108.

<sup>48</sup> Katharine Park and Lorraine Daston. *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150-1750* (New York: Zone Books, 1998): 88. Park and Daston observe that "ownership of rare and unusual objects served to reinforce social, political, and religious hierarchies" and go on to note that objects such as the amuletic rings in this study would be a place where the bearer was able to restrict access and interaction with protective forces for their own benefit. These objects were valuable in part due to that exclusivity and intimate appeal.



exclusive to the wealthy. This emphasizes that the impact of the plague was not lessened for even the most privileged members of society. The plague was indiscriminate and all-encompassing, and the aftermath of its destruction created a demand for amuletic objects to alleviate an acutely felt sense of upheaval that impacted medieval Europe.

## Chapter 3

### THE BLACK DEATH, THE MORTAL BODY, AND HOLY WRATH

The arrival of *Yersinia pestis* in 1347 was an event that assaulted Europe on multiple fronts: the sudden and disastrous effects of the plague left a wake of death in its path, and more permanently, it deeply undermined ecclesiastical and scholarly authority. The Black Death shattered the collective understanding of the workings of the world and the nature of the human body in relation to it. Along with being a portent of chaos and death, the plague was a unique blight in that it created a void of knowledge that physicians and philosophers scrambled to fill. By the fourteenth-century major medical universities had developed in three cities, each branching from Salernitan scholarly traditions and curriculums typical of the High Middle Ages: Bologna, Montpellier, and Paris.<sup>49</sup> The physicians at these universities were trained through the study and accumulative commentary on Hippocratic, Aristotelian, and Galenic theories which inextricably tied the human body to natural philosophy, astronomical, and physical sciences.

Attempts to explain the plague with the knowledge available to medieval scholars offered a sense of its origins, but offered little by way of treatment and prevention. The Paris physicians believed that an ill-conjunction of Mars and Jupiter resulted in the corruption of warm, wet vapors from within the earth, and that this alignment also generated winds which propelled the

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<sup>49</sup> Siraisi, 55. The city of Salerno boasted one of the first major medical learning centers in medieval Christendom. The Hippocratic and Galenic corpus of treatises formed a curriculum through commentaries on these texts.

corruption up from the south and east.<sup>50</sup> What challenged this explanation was that although the Paris physicians identified a remote cause of the plague, no known remedy that correlated to or contrasted from these cosmic bodies was effective. A completely rational and scientific explanation for the plague existed without an equally rational response. Learned physicians – masters of logic and philosophy – thus found themselves at an impasse in the face of the great pestilence overtaking the region. Despite physicians lacking a formal concept of contagion in their medical vernacular, they collectively observed that close proximity to those infected with the plague significantly increased the chances of the illness spreading to others.<sup>51</sup> This illustrated an understanding that the corruption following the cosmic conjunction was transmissible through foul winds and odors. Geoffrey de Meaux, an astrologer working in the French court in the late fourteenth century, performed an astrological study of the cause of the plague and urged individuals to stay inside their homes, and to scent their dwellings with roses and vinegar so as to make the air less corruptible.<sup>52</sup> Medieval urban society was brought to a halt with the arrival of the plague, making sheltering in place difficult; thus, one of the recommended ways to avoid getting the plague was to immediately leave areas that had been impacted by it.

The movement of bodies – both mercantile and civilian – carried the plague deeper into Europe. The framing story for Boccaccio's *Decameron* is one of wealthy Florentines fleeing the

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<sup>50</sup> Lauren A. Smoller, "Of Earthquakes, Hail, Frogs, and Geography: Plague and the Investigation of the Apocalypse in the Later Middle Ages." In *Last Things: Death and the Apocalypse in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, Inc, 2012): 172. "'The conjunction of March 1345 was the remote and universal cause of the plague, and it had the effect, argued the Paris physicians, of drawing up warm, moist vapors from the earth, which were corrupted by Mars (which ignited them and particularly caused corruption because it was in retrograde) and Jupiter (whose quartile aspect with Mars caused a bad disposition in the air inimical to human nature). The configuration of the heavens also had the effect of generating many winds, particularly warm, moist southern winds. Thus the triple conjunction served as a universal remote cause of the plague.'"

<sup>51</sup> Siraisi, 129.

<sup>52</sup> Rosemary Horrox, *The Black Death*, translated and Edited by Rosemary Horrox (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994): 177.

plague and exchanging stories in a villa located in the Italian countryside (fig. 12).<sup>53</sup> Bocaccio recounts his encounter with the Black Death and describes the failing confidence in medicine:

Against these maladies, it seemed that all the advice of physicians and all the power of medicine were profitless and unavailing. Perhaps the nature of the illness was such that it allowed no remedy; or perhaps those people who were treating the illness ... being ignorant of its causes, were not prescribing the appropriate cure. At all events, few of those who caught it ever recovered, and in most cases death occurred within three days from the appearance of the symptoms we have described, some people dying more rapidly than others, the majority without any fever or other complications. But what made this pestilence even more severe was that whenever those suffering from it mixed with people who were still unaffected, it would rush upon these with the speed of a fire racing through dry or oily substances that happened to be placed within its reach.<sup>54</sup>

The plague moved improbably quickly and was an almost guaranteed death. Any interaction with an infected person placed the surrounding populace at risk. The only way to truly avoid the Black Death was to leave infected areas as soon as the illness appeared. Physicians, heeding their own advice, fled populated areas when the plague inevitably arrived. As a result, those unable to leave the plague-stricken areas were left without access to medical intervention and were left bereft of aid in a period of intense crisis. Tragically, it was the inclination to flee which most exacerbated the issues and expanded the reach of the plague, and the influx of travelers possibly carrying the pestilence with them resulted in an increased hostility towards people out on the roads.<sup>55</sup> The understanding that this devastating event as a byproduct of divine wrath further incited anxieties surrounding travelers: hostilities grew towards peoples of a non-Christian faith, and heresy was seen as a possible explanation for such a divine wrath. The chroniclers of the period largely gestured towards the east, where the enemies of Christianity resided, and marked

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<sup>53</sup> Bocaccio, Giovanni, J. M. Rigg, and Louis Chalon. *The Decameron*, Faithfully Tr. by J.M. Rigg, with Illustrations by Louis Chalon. London: H.F. Bumpus, 1906.

<sup>54</sup> Horrox, 27. "This translation by G.H. McWilliam is taken from the Penguin Classics edition of the Decameron, Harmondsworth, 1972, pp. 50-58."

<sup>55</sup> Herlihy, 59.

their land as the source of these troubles.<sup>56</sup> While the physicians at Paris had identified a remote cause for the plague – the triple planetary conjunction of 1345 – other learned individuals turned to eschatological theories in an attempt to understand the pandemic overtaking their communities as well as rationalize a sense of the impending apocalypse *through* the plague.

If the disastrous cosmic conjunction was one cause of the plague, however, another emerged that strongly alluded to the arrival of the end days. The planetary misalignment was a natural cause (*causa naturalis*) of the Black Death, but that does not mean it was mutually exclusive from divine judgement. The knowledge that God could act through natural causes helped shape the belief that a form of divine judgement was being carried out through the plague.<sup>57</sup> When factoring in such a form of divine judgement, a question is raised: what deplorable actions would have merited such an intensely destructive punishment? The moral cause (*causa moralis*) of disasters – largely attributed to sin and heresy – was another medieval model for understanding disastrous events. That every event was largely through the execution of God’s will (*causa remota*) was widely understood; however, the presence of natural secondary causes made concrete the belief that cosmic bodies had the ability to influence terrestrial bodies in an equally impactful way.<sup>58</sup> These beliefs worked in dialogue with each other: they recognized the movement of celestial bodies as well as the ever-imperfect state of mankind’s soul as rational explanations for the interruption of order on earth. And yet, despite this overwhelming rationalization, the word *disastro* appears to have been coined in fourteenth-century Italy largely

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<sup>56</sup> Smoller, 157. Smoller describes the chroniclers working in the fourteenth-century as actively pointing to the east as the source of the troubles: “In these chronicles, snakes, toads, hail, and fire all rained down in the east: the land of marvels and monsters, of Prester John and Gog and Magog, of enemies of the faith and of potential Christians ... plague moved from east to west, from pagans to Christians.”

<sup>57</sup> Smoller, 165.

<sup>58</sup> Garrit Jasper Schenk, “Disastro, Catastrophe, and Divine Judgement: Words, Concepts and Images for ‘Natural’ Threads to Social Order in the Middle Ages and Renaissance” in *Disaster, Death and the Emotions in the Shadow of the Apocalypse, 1400-1700* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK):49.

as a response to the three *causas* that left the region in a state of total upheaval and societal decay.<sup>59</sup> The magnitude of the plague's impact was such that it pushed these frameworks to their limits: the arrival of the pestilence was the arrival of death, and those living in the impacted areas bore witness to mass mortality and collective suffering.

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<sup>59</sup> Schenk, 52.

## Chapter 4

### TRAUMA, FEAR, AND A LOSS OF AGENCY

The emotional and psychological impact of the Black Death cannot be overlooked: the plague was an event that brought a sense of normalcy and stability to a grinding halt. It was a wholly transformative and catastrophic experience that rippled through society and closed the distance individuals kept from death. Indeed, the culture surrounding death was one of the more immediate shifts experienced within communities. Prior to the plague outbreak, the church operated as a site of reconciliation with the end of life: last rites conferred upon the dying guided them to salvation, and the rituals of mourning offered a sense of community for those who lost the ones they loved and bolstered the belief that the separation would only be temporary.<sup>60</sup> The morbidity rate for the plague, as well as its virulency, made such mourning practices impossible to carry out. The comforts offered through funerary practice ceased to be. A 1348 ordinance against the plague, distributed in Pistoia, emphasizes the drastic change to mourning practices within the community. Dead bodies were required to remain in place until they had been placed in a sealed casket – leaving families to share their living space with the deceased until they could seal the burial vessel with nails and cloth. Gravedigging had to be modified to increase the depth of the graves so as to minimize the smell of decay. A twenty-five pence fine was enforced to

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<sup>60</sup> Herlihy, 59. “The shock of the plague disrupted the customary ways by which society coped with the passing of its members. Over the centuries the medieval church has softened the sting of death through comforting rituals. Like last rites in other cultures, their primary purpose was to help the dead achieve eternal rest, but they also instructed the living that the separation was only temporary: on the last day all would be resurrected and reunited.”

those who attempted to offer gifts of condolences to surviving family members. Bells could not be rung during burial to avoid alarming residents of the rising number of deaths, and drummers were barred from announcing funerals. Public lamentations were forbidden so as to avoid a gathering mourning procession. In later revisions to the ordinances it becomes clear that there were not even enough wax reserves to light a candle to honor the dead: a torch would be held aloft during burial and any other flame lit would incur another twenty-five pence fine.<sup>61</sup> The shared experience of mourning was a needed comfort to those that suffered losses, but even a small gathering posed a tremendous risk for spreading the plague further. The ordinances established by Pistoia barred people from entering the homes of the grieving, at risk of yet another fine, and even restricted escorts for widowed women headed to the burial. These ordinances amplified the feelings of loss and loneliness for those who had to place their loved ones' body into a casket until the time it could be placed into a mass grave. A manuscript miniature from Tournai (c. 1353) illustrates such a scene of communities carrying their bodies of their family members and peers in wooden caskets en masse to burial sites with sorrow painted plainly across each of their faces (fig. 13). Death was inescapable and overwhelmed communities as their population dwindled to alarming numbers. Grief was interrupted due to protective ordinances and trauma could not be soothed by community. The Black Death was an intensely isolating force that disrupted every aspect of life. Petrarch's letters from Parma in 1350 describe the intense loss felt by those who had survived the initial arrival of the plague and lost numerous loved ones:

Where are our dear friends now? Where are the beloved faces? Where are the affectionate words, the relaxed and enjoyable conversations? What lightning bolt devoured them? What earthquake toppled them? What tempest drowned them? What abyss swallowed them? There was a crowd of us, now we are almost alone. We should make new friends –

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<sup>61</sup> Horrox, 197-202. This section is derived from the translation of Chiappelli's "Gli Ordinamenti Sanitari del Comune di Pistoia contro la Pestilenza del 1348", *Archivio Storico Italiano*, series 4, 1887, pp. 8-22.



but how, when the human race is almost wiped out; and why, when it looks to me as if the end of the world is at hand? Why pretend? We are alone indeed... how transient and arrogant an animal is man! How shallow the foundations on which he rears his towers! You see how our great band of friends has dwindled. Look, even as we speak we too are slipping away, vanishing like shadows. One minute someone hears that another has gone, the next he is following in his footsteps.<sup>62</sup>

The plague created a void, an agonizing absence, in the daily lives of those who survived.

Petrarch's account is one that expresses the futility of trying to return to a sense of normalcy.

Death was palpable and the experience was catastrophic. Petrarch likens the plague to earthquakes and tempests, consuming abysses and strikes from above. It is therefore no surprise that the word *disastro* emerged following such a collective trauma. Such suffering had heretofore been unknown, and no other words could accurately describe it.

The profound emotional impact of the plague left an indelible mark on every community it touched. The *Allegory of the Plague* from the Sienese School, c. 1437, illustrates the insidious nature and enduring threat of the Black Death nearly 100 years after its initial arrival (fig. 14). A winged figure atop a black horse fills the frame and breaks through the dividing wall to strike unseen; the plague is overwhelmingly present to the viewer, but it is completely undetectable to the figures it visited upon. Of the six people in the room playing a game, four are struck, and a fifth arrow notched on Plague's bow indicates that only more death is to follow. The *Allegory of the Plague* embodies futility; all the victims can do is hope that they are spared from such a visit. It is this intense trauma that Herlihy argues acted as a catalyst towards a medico-magical religious practice that prompted individuals to protect themselves through ritual practices. Repeat and direct confrontations with death created an intensely felt vulnerability that transformed the

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<sup>62</sup> Horrox, 248. Excerpts from Petrarch's 'Letters on Familiar Matters' – dedicated to his friend Louis Heyligen and written in 1349-1350.

lived experience and created a void of intimacy and safety that needed urgent addressing.<sup>63</sup>

Social collapse shattered any sense of order and stability and the cultural shift embodied within art and literature reflects that. Death, once placed on the periphery, was now at the center of a *memento mori* movement that juxtaposed scenes of visceral decay alongside the living to emphasize the precarity of the human body and the inevitability of death.<sup>64</sup> The instability of life is similarly reflected in adornment; the very existence of amuletic rings is a response to an emerging need to feel protected. These objects act upon the mind as much as they do the body to offer a sense of security and protection. The physical presence and tactility of amulets is a material response to a desperate need to feel safe.

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<sup>63</sup> Jean E. Jost, “The Effects of the Black Death: The Plague in Fourteenth-Century Religion, Literature, and Art.” *Death in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Time: The Material and Spiritual Conditions of the Culture of Death*. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016): 199.

<sup>64</sup> Jost, 194.

## Chapter 5

### AMULETS AS A RESPONSE TO EMOTIONAL NEEDS

The amulet rings produced in Italy, particularly during the mid to late fourteenth century, are a material response to a trauma-induced need for comfort and safety. Rational, scholarly minds had largely failed their respective communities, offering explanations for the plague but no treatment, and left the population to navigate shattered communities and the experience of mass death on their own. The production and use of amulets had been sacralized and adapted to suit the needs of the medieval mind. This cultural moment is one that, as described by Caroline Walker Bynum, emphasizes “materiality qua materiality;” amuletic objects became a piece of the universe, a piece of holy matter, that belonged to their possessors and placed them in close proximity to the divine.<sup>65</sup> The labile and malleable nature of the medieval object is such that the amulet would be a particularly effective response to pervasive feelings of helplessness and despair: the combination of potent materials, protective phrases, and comforting material beauty would have been employed to address feelings of helplessness and despair. Amulets could become precisely what an individual needed them to be. The literary nature of devotional objects from this period operates on the medieval mind through the process of visual comprehension and amuletic objects with textual inscriptions would function in a similar manner.<sup>66</sup> The activation of

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<sup>65</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe* (New York: Zone Books, 2011): 259.

<sup>66</sup> Seera Chaganti, *The Medieval Poetics of the Reliquary: Enshrinement, Inscription, Performance* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008): 144. Chaganti, examining the literary nature of reliquary objects, states that “the

vision through an object incites an internal call to contemplate, and it is in the act of individual contemplation that the proximity to the divine as well as its protections is most acutely felt. Furthermore, textual inscriptions that call upon specific events in the life of Christ – such as the *Iexus Autem Transiens* charm formula – might even aid in helping the bearer of the ring to imagine that they, too, could pass through danger unharmed, thus becoming a form of Christian sympathetic magic.

The toadstone is perhaps the most unusual and effective material to view these rings as material responses to the Black Death. The toadstone is a supernaturally charged panacea, believed to effectively pull venomous substances and corruption from the body. Of all the mineralogical substances to embed in an amulet ring, this was one of the most desirable materials due to its ability to adapt and actively respond to the environment of the wearer. The applications for this stone were incredibly diverse: it was believed to sweat when exposed to poisons, pull venom from bites when pressed against the wound, balance internal poisons, and reduce the severity of tumors, fevers, diarrhea, falling sickness, and even found an application in treating the plague.<sup>67</sup> The toadstone, unlike a deep blue sapphire, isn't particularly beautiful nor is it radiant like other cabochon-cut jewels, but it was miraculous in its efficacy. Paired with the *Iexus Autem Transiens* charm, as it is in the Italian charm ring with a bezel-set toadstone (fig. 4), it becomes a compound amuletic object that addresses all manner of bodily illness and corruption. This stone, despite its humble appearance, was a blanket solution for an intense fear surrounding

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medieval mind, as both object and process, was in general highly attuned to the mechanics of visibility and the formation of visual images.”

<sup>67</sup> Duffin, 3. Duffin describes the abilities of the toadstone as being believed to “actively sweat in the presence of poison” and that “bites of snakes, insects, spiders and rats could all be healed by touching the stone against the place of injury... internal poisons due to humoral imbalance could also be treated with toadstones; it is recorded as being useful in cases of tumours, biliousness, fevers, sores, tuberculosis, diarrhea, epilepsy, and even plague.”

death and mortality and was thus seen as intensely valuable and as an object of natural wonder.<sup>68</sup>

The toadstone was the ideal material to counter the fear of illness and decay, especially when made sacred through the inclusion of Christian charm formulae.

The intense fear of death, or of any bodily aberration, permeated all aspects of life after the horrors of the first outbreak. Amulets had the ability to not only be applied in a medical context, but found a very valuable use as a psychological comfort as well. The brush with the apocalypse created a turn towards an introspective awareness of one's own mortality and the versatility of amulets enabled them to respond to newly emerging existential crises. John Gower's *Vox Clamantis*, a poem written largely in 1370, criticizes sinners with a jarring description of the bodily rot that awaited them:

What will you have to say for yourself when the breeze no longer stirs your hair, when your throat is dry and can utter no words and your bloodless face is colourless, when your eyes are set in their gloomy sockets, when your mouth cannot be moistened and inside it your tongue stiffens against the roof of your mouth, when blood no longer throbs in your veins, when your neck cannot bend or yours embrace, when your foot cannot take a step?<sup>69</sup>

Such descriptions of decay are visceral in their specificity and it is a descriptive account that summons forth images of death that had been endured during the first outbreak. Two major attitudes formed in the aftermath of the plague: the first, expressed by Gower's grim warnings against sin, turned toward the trauma of the plague as a reminder of the physical cost of immoral behavior. In contrast, there were later beliefs that strongly believed that a happy mind had a

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<sup>68</sup> Herlihy, 63. Herlihy notes that "the fear of the sick and dying easily expanded into a horror of death, into the sense that life itself was a desperate battle against death's dominion," and that it was "the master of a dance in which all must join." The toadstone's broad range of applications seems to respond directly to a fear of any sort of illness or death.

<sup>69</sup> Horrox, 348. Text translated from John Gower's *Vox Clamantis*, Book VII, chapters 9-15.

greater chance of keeping plague at bay.<sup>70</sup> Bucci, a university physician working during the 1585 plague in Piedmont, offered advice to protect oneself from death:

Arm yourself with hope and confirmation in the faith of God; seek out jolly company; treat yourself to music, honest and pleasing games, ban all lugubrious and troublesome thinking. Make every effort to stay happy; dress in silk or in cloth with light and happy colours; wear a ring with precious stones; hang out sometimes with jesters; give an ear to comedies, games, and pleasing stories; read books, tell jokes and delightful stories.<sup>71</sup>

The initial arrival of the plague was so destructive that it was believed that the world was coming to an end and the passage of time did not ease these concerns. Gower's poem reflects the unrelenting presence of death and a mindset fixed on morbidity while Bucci's later affirmations mark a shift away from repentance and a movement towards a more light-hearted iteration of faith. Significantly, the mention of a ring with precious stones as a form of psychological and joy-bringing protection in Bucci's account suggests that the efficacy of amuletic jewelry was not limited to medical applications but was recognized as a psychological comfort and material delight as well.

The physicality of these amulets – given the innate tactility of rings – cultivates an intimate relationship with the wearer. Their presence on the hand emphasizes their materiality and the richness of gold as primary support material would catch the light and glint pleasingly with the movement of the hand. Furthermore, the Italianate use of niello emphasizes the textured surface with reassuring inscriptions adorning it. Personalization in the form names – as seen on the rings of Noarius of Petrucius, Thomas Roggieri of Suessa, and Zeno Donati of Venice – binds these objects to the wearers for their exclusive use (figs. 1, 2, & 6). These amuletic objects moved with their bearers: in the case of the Donati ring the find spot – having been provenanced in Aegium – indicated that this object moved from Venice to Western Greece by the hand of its

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<sup>70</sup> Samuel K. Cohn Jr, *Cultures of Plague: Medical Thinking at the End of the Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010): 266.

<sup>71</sup> Cohn, 267.

owner. These amulets accompany the wearers throughout their daily lives, and it is this lived context that emphasizes their importance as shields for the mind, body, and soul. They form a gilded extension of the body and their presence on the hand would become a comforting tactile reminder of the protection they granted. The popular *Iesus Autem Transiens* inscription responds to the need to feel safe while traveling and the specific and most valued properties of the toadstone infer that encountering humoral poisons was a chief concern. An underlying anxiety about the hyperawareness of death and turmoil is expressed through these objects and it is their presence that offers comfort.

Italian amulet rings fit neatly into both post-plague mindsets: these objects offered an individualized religious experience that addressed the specific psychological needs of the wearer at the time, and could also address grief and uncertainty while eliciting material delight.<sup>72</sup> The promise of protection through material and divine intervention is something that could usher in a sense of stability and, hopefully, a pathway to peace. Objects that invoke the divine create a link between the tangible world and a sense of the heavens, and through contemplation these amuletic rings offer the wearer a means through which they could encounter the divine through the object. Devotional objects shift between the boundaries of heaven and earth, offering a conduit to the heavens while maintaining a distance, and operate both as presence and absence.<sup>73</sup> The phenomenological quality of these rings is rooted in their intimacy and evasiveness. Their powers were understood as potent, their potential ever ready to spring into action, and yet it denied the wearer total access to the preternatural. The idea of the amuletic ring as a “dream

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<sup>72</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Dissimilar Similitudes: Devotional Objects in Late Medieval Europe* (New York: Zone Books, 2020): 29. Bynum, discussing devotional objects of the late medieval period in Europe, refers to these artefacts as a “religious experience literalized into encounters with objects.” These amuletic rings, while not explicitly a devotional object, are imbued with references that create associations to the divine.”

<sup>73</sup> Bynum, *Dissimilar Similitudes*: 52.

instrument,” in dialogue with Bachelard’s interpretation of miniature objects, is particularly apt in this context: the diminutive physical form of a charged and protective ring embodies a sense of an unseen world shaped through hidden virtues and offers the bearer to close the distance between themselves and the experience of encountering the divine.<sup>74</sup> Amulet rings, in their psychological role, collapse the potentiality of the natural world, cosmic bodies, and divine into an object that prompts the wearer to interact with these realms through contemplation. They invite the wearer to engage with the workings of the universe on their terms – offering a sense of control in a world that had been thrown into chaos.

The amulet as a catalyst for imagination – a way of seeing beyond that which is physical and real – is medicine for a troubled mind. The concept of the object “collapsing and maintaining the distinction between earth and heaven,” as described by Bynum, is the mechanism of fascination that makes an amulet such an effective device to combat the lingering psychological trauma of the Black Death.<sup>75</sup> The tactility of the object emphasizes its physical presence while also signaling a sense of something more. The diminutive size of these objects further factors into their role as an interlocutor between a troubled mind and the potentiality of the divine. Bachelard, with regards to miniaturization, offers the idea as representation as a “body of expressions” with imagination being a way to internalize, conceptualize, and possess an element of the world that is entirely theirs.<sup>76</sup> He further states that “the miniscule, a narrow gate, opens up an entire world ... the details of a thing can be the sign of a new world which, like all worlds, contains the attributes of greatness ... miniature is one of the refuges of greatness.”<sup>77</sup> The act of

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<sup>74</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*. Translated from the French by Maria Jolas. (New York: Orion Press, 1964): 157 & 162.

<sup>75</sup> Bynum, *Dissimilar Similitudes*, 52.

<sup>76</sup> Bachelard, 149.

<sup>77</sup> Bachelard, 155.



wearing an amuletic ring would grant the bearer with a physical commodity that compartmentalized the unseen forces that animated the world into something that was wholly theirs. To engrave a name onto such an item further expresses an exclusive possession of a wondrous object that oscillates between the material and immaterial world in a manner that elicits a sense of comfort as well as power. The miniature scale of an amulet ring in comparison to the hand upon which it is worn allows the owner to possess and utilize a microcosm of the macrocosm and compress aspects of the limitless powers of the universe into something small enough that it could be enclosed within a fist.<sup>78</sup> It is through this lens that the amulet ring becomes a phenomenological experience, opening the wearer up to a sense of higher powers and a better world through their own imagination, and offers a unique comfort of contemplation intermingling with proximity to the divine and the miraculous nature of the universe.

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<sup>78</sup> Susan Stewart, *On Longing: The Narratives of the Miniature, The Gigantic, The Souvenir, The Collection* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992): 41. Stewart discusses the miniature book in a similar manner, as being “the book as talisman to the body and emblem of the self; the book as microcosm and macrocosm; the book as commodity and knowledge, fact and fiction.”

## CONCLUSION

The arrival of the Black Death and the expansion of amuletic practices are sequential – the plague being the cause and deep-seated psychological trauma the effect – and provide a lens into the coping mechanisms that medieval Italians turned to in their darkest hours. Amulet rings are byproducts of mass-death, of visible bodily horror and decay, and express an underlying anxiety and helplessness in the face of absolute destruction. The Italianate amulets, appearing first in the fourteenth century and with most consistency in their design motifs and formulae, offered a model of protective adornment for late medieval Europe. Major trade centers, such as Venice, had lost over half of their population between 1347 and 1349 and continued to be battered by the plague in subsequent years.<sup>79</sup> The thinning of significant boundaries between life and death – and the sensory horrors of corporeal decay filling towns and cities – utterly shattered everything about the known world that had once been infallible and understood. Boccaccio's somber reflection of death and Petrarch's mournful recollection of his lost companions are small vignettes into tremendous community losses. And yet, despite their grim origins, they also speak to a sense of underlying hope and comfort afforded through the use of an object as a locus for contemplation.

That the use and production of these objects extends beyond the fourteenth century, and even well into the eighteenth, is demonstrative of the powers of natural wonder and virtuous materiality. The production of amuletic objects that derived their efficacy from charm practices

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<sup>79</sup> Deborah Howard, *The Architectural History of Venice* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1981): 55.

and natural medicine reflected a mindful adaptation of medico-magical practices that was fervently believed to improve the lives of their bearers through a persistent sense of safety and security.<sup>80</sup> The turn towards the ritual and magical practices of the ancient world embody that sentiment: the absolute upheaval of daily life necessitated additional comforts, and tapping into the richness of the natural and sacred materials on earth provided a comfort in the form of hope. Amuletic rings, despite being a byproduct of tremendous suffering and immeasurable loss, are an expression of resilience. They are defiant in the face of the plague and its aftermath. Bynum states that “medieval devotional objects have power...: they are themselves as *themselves* powerful exactly because they are a presence that holds absence within itself, a dissimilitude that is, *as what it is*, similar to what it represents.”<sup>81</sup> These objects – inherently tactile, bound to the flesh when worn like a ligature – cultivate a sense of intimacy and closeness with the sacred forces at work in the world. They are a catalyst for imagination – both of the potential of the world as well as the divine – and reaffirm doubtful minds that there are things beyond what is present and experienced. The amulet ring augments and makes malleable the human body to invoke divine intervention as well as operate in alignment with celestial bodies above. Embedded within these pieces of jewelry is a sense of anxiety, a recognition of mortality, an awareness of where a mortal man stood in the universe, and yet they still reflect a sense of enduring hope in the face of a blight believed to be the arrival of the apocalypse.

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<sup>80</sup> Valerie I. J. Flint, *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991): 4. She describes magic as having served “for the furtherance of a relationship between people and the supernatural that, it was fervently believed, would improve human life.”

<sup>81</sup> Bynum, *Dissimilar Similitudes*, 55.

## ILLUSTRATIONS



Figure 1 – *Signet ring of Noarius of Petrucius*. Italian, ca. 14<sup>th</sup> century, gold and sard, British Museum 1853,0218.13 [https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H\\_1853-0218-13](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_1853-0218-13)



Figure 2 – *Signet ring of Thomas Roggieri of Suessa*. Italian, ca. 14<sup>th</sup> century, gold, red jasper intaglio ca. 200-300 BCE. Victoria and Albert Museum M.275-1962  
<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O121097/signet-ring-unknown>



Figure 3 – *Scorpion Ring*. Italian, ca. 1400, engraved silver, banded onyx intaglio ca. 200-100 BC. Victoria and Albert Museum 724-1871  
<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O121202/ring-unknown>



Figure 4 – *Toadstone ring*. Italian, ca. 1400, gold and fossilized fish tooth (toadstone). British Museum AF.1023 [https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H\\_AF-1023](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_AF-1023)



Figure 5 – *Ornamental ring*. Venetian, ca. 1400, gold and sapphire. Ashmolean Museum  
WA1897.CDEF.F386

[https://collections.ashmolean.org/collection/search/per\\_page/25/offset/0/sort\\_by/date/category/other/start/1350/end/1350/object/44628](https://collections.ashmolean.org/collection/search/per_page/25/offset/0/sort_by/date/category/other/start/1350/end/1350/object/44628)





Figure 6 – *Signet ring of Zeno Donati*. Venetian, ca. 14<sup>th</sup> century, gold. British Museum AF.568  
[https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H\\_AF-568](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_AF-568)



Figure 7 – *Amulet ring*, Italian, ca. 14<sup>th</sup> century, gold, sard cameo ca. 16<sup>th</sup> century. British Museum AF.1010 [https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H\\_AF-1010](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_AF-1010)



Figure 8 – *Amulet ring with diamond*, Italian, ca. 14<sup>th</sup> century, gold and diamond. British Museum AF.1011 [https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H\\_AF-1011](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_AF-1011)



Figure 9 – *Amulet ring*, Italian, ca. 14<sup>th</sup> century, gold and possible niello. British Museum AF.1004 [https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H\\_AF-1004](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_AF-1004)



Figure 10 – *Lion signet ring*. Ca. 14<sup>th</sup> century, gold, onyx intaglio ca. 3<sup>rd</sup> century. Victoria and Albert Museum M.190-1975 <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O121100/signet-ring-unknown>

Note: The V&A does not state that this ring is Italian, however, the Lombardic script and niello technique is a hallmark of Italianate jewelry production. I firmly believe this ring is Italian in origin.



Figure 11 – *Illustrated detail of Zeno Donati Signet Ring*, British Museum AF.568  
[https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H\\_AF-568](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_AF-568)





Figure 12 – Scene from Boccaccio's *Decameron*, 15th c. Latin translation executed by Laurent de Premierfait. Bibliothèque nationale de France. Département des Manuscrits. Français 239 fol. 1r <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8458435h/f5.item#>



Figure 13 - *The people of Tournai bury victims of the Black Death*. Pierart dou Tielt illustrating the *Tractatus quartus* by Gilles li Muisis, Tournai, c. 1353. ms. 13076 - 13077 fol. 24v.





Figure 14 - *Allegory of the Plague*. Sienese School. Siena, ca. 1437, painting. A Biccherna book cover, Allegorie der Pest auf dem sogenannten Biccherna-Buchdeckel.

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