



Ṭābiṭ ibn Qurrā on Talismans

Arriving in **year** from the star-worshipping city of Harrān, Ṭābiṭ ibn Qurrā dazzled the cognoscenti of Baghdad. A translator, mathematician, astronomist, and astrologer, Thābit was not a Muslim but a Sabeian of Harran. These people believed that the stars and planets obeyed divine commands, and therefore focused their energies on these distant but perceptible beings. For indeed at this time the stars and planets were believed to be living creatures with knowledge and will. The Sabeians initiated youths into their mystery-shrouded cult with a complex ceremony, which culminated with the teaching of half of the secrets of the universe to the young women, half to the young men, who were bound never to divulge what they learned. Drawing together esoteric knowledge from India, Iran, Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Greece, the Sabeians held the key to cosmic commerce.

Thus when Ṭābiṭ came to Baghdad, where astronomers, astrologers, physicists, and philosophers were building an epistemology that did not separate worldly science from divine belief, his knowledge was much in demand. He published many mathematical treatises, but his most intriguing impact on Arabic science was the theory and practice of talisman making. Talismans are an ancient practice in many cultures, but the synthesizing cosmic view of the Sabeians, like the Islamic Neoplatonist philosophers, gave the talismanic practitioner newly expansive and scientific powers to call upon the stars and planets to intervene in sublunary matters—things like making someone fall in love with you, vanquishing an enemy, or driving away scorpions. Talisman making was both magic and science. The adept needed years of study of astronomy, astrology, mathematics, and the biological sciences, as well as skill, patience, and fortitude to carry out the lengthy and involved processes of constructing talismans according to the precise positions of the stars and planets, down to the decan (10 degrees of the astrological cycle). What most strikes me about Ṭābiṭ's talismanic magic is that he had personal, emotional relationships with the planets.

Here is an account of Ṭābiṭ's talismanic practice compiled by Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (1149-1209).

1. Ṭābit ibn Qurra, the Harrānian, told the following story: "The spirits [*arwāh*] of Saturn were united with me and were helping me against everyone who was opposing me. It happened that an invidious person incited al-Muwaffaq against me in the affair of his son, al-Mu'taḍid, and claimed that I had incited him to do something vile. Consequently he [al-Muwaffaq] was very angry with me, and I thought he was going to kill me. As I was sleeping on my bed my spirit [*rūhānīya*] came to me, aroused me from my slumber, and ordered me to flee. So I left my house and went into the house of a friend. Just before dawn a messenger from al-Muwaffaq came and looked for me, but did not find me either in my own house, or in those of my neighbours.

When I got up, I received the news from my house that the messenger of al-Muwaffaq had looked for me; then he looked for my son Sinān. He was in his bed, but they did not see him. Then I received the news that [the spirit] concealed him from the

search. Moreover, the torches that he [the messenger] had with him, went out, and they [the messenger's entourage] tried to re-light them but failed. My son was coming and going among them in the house and they did not recognise him, but they thought that he was one of their own number. Then I questioned my spirit, saying: "Why did you not do the same for me as you did for my son?" They [the spirits] replied: "Your *haylāğ* was in opposition to Mars and to a fixed star of Mars' complexion. So we did not feel secure in your case as we did in that of your son Sinan; for his *haylāğ* was safe from the malefics".¹

2. Then I made a talisman and it overcame the enemy after 40 days. I got help against him [my enemy] from one of my brothers, over whom Mars was dominant, and he met with a dreadful end. Then my spirit was angry with me and punished me so that I feared for my life. So I apologised to her and told her: "I thought you were too important to be concerned with affairs like those for which I was asking help from others". I did not stop trying to placate her with sacrifice and prayer until she stopped harming my condition.

3. Then I asked him [the spirit of Saturn] to mend the heart of al-Muwaffaq towards me. But Saturn is a cold planet by nature and slow in movement, and so was taking a long time to deal with my case. So I asked Venus for help and made a sacrifice to her. At the same time I made a sacrifice to my spirit so that she should not harm me for asking for Venus' help. The aim was achieved and I was saved".

4. From her [the spirit] <it resulted> that he [Ṭābiṭ] was able both to save the oppressed from the hands of the oppressors and to see far-off things and to act on them.

The account goes on to relate how Ṭābiṭ made an eye ointment that allowed him to see through walls and perceive distant events, which al-Rāzī and a colleague confirmed.²

We see that Ṭābiṭ is constantly negotiating with the planets, their spirits, and his own personal spirit, all of which seem resentful and moody. Since the planet Mars governs war, Ṭābiṭ naturally seeks the help of his Mars-influenced brother against his enemy. But this incurs the jealousy of his personal spirit, and Ṭābiṭ must grovel in repentance like an unfaithful boyfriend. For some reason he appeals to Saturn to soften al-Muwaffaq's heart, but Saturn is too slow, so he turns to the heart-softener Venus, this time making sure to reassure his personal spirit.

Ṭābiṭ molded talismans from metals that corresponded to the planet in question (or more precisely to one of its spirits) or, for talismans intended to do harm, from base materials like clay and pitch. Other talismans were carved onto stones corresponding to the planet benignly beseeched. Ṭābiṭ's Arabic manuscript on talismans has not been found, but it was twice translated into Latin,

¹ Burnett gives al-Bīrūnī's definition of a *haylāğ*: the point on the zodiac where a person's life begins.

² Charles Burnett, "Ṭābiṭ ibn Qurra the Ḥarrānian on Talismans and the Spirits of the Planets." *La corónica: A Journal of Medieval Hispanic Languages, Literatures, and Cultures*, 36: 1 (Fall 2007): 13-40.

by Adelard of Bath and John of Seville, and relied on in the medieval world's blockbuster book of magic, the Arabic *Ghayāt al-hakīm*, compiled by Maslama al-Qurtubī (d. 964) and translated into Latin in the thirteenth century as the *Picatrix*.

These magic manuals and the many similar works that circulated throughout the Muslim world and the West emphasize time and again that it is not enough to follow the steps, arduous in themselves, of talisman making; the practitioner must also have intention and focus. Influenced by Ṭābit, the philosopher Yaḳūb ibn Ishāq al-Kindī (801-873) includes intention in his ray-based theory of casuality, *De Radiis* (the Latin translation; the Arabic original is lost). All things are caused by the action of rays, al-Kindī argues. First the stars and planets, acting at God's command, send out rays, and then earthly entities in turn send out their own rays. Molding and modeling, as a talisman maker would do, produces active rays: "Every actual figure, certainly every form impressed in elemental matter, produces rays that cause some motion in all other things."³ Ceremonial speech also sends out rays: "If the words are spoken in the right (debita) places and at the right times, with careful attention (intentio exacta) and ceremony (sollemnitas) they produce movement and the hinderance of movement in the appropriate matter."⁴ Al-Kindī emphasizes that confidence and hope help to produce the desired effect.⁵ All these conceptions of ray causality support the work of a magician who make images of celestial bodies by carving a figure into metal or stone or by molding it, with good intention and ceremonial labor.

Intention and ceremony remain crucial elements in the making of talismans. The post-Ṭābit magic manuals that spread across the Arab world, into Persia and the Muslim East, across North Africa and into sub-Saharan Africa, and into medieval and Renaissance Europe all urge serious magicians to pray, mortify themselves, and pronounce the incantations with ceremony if they want their talisman to work.

About those spirits to whom Ṭābit appeals. Some astrologers held that spirits attended the stars and planets, and that it was to these, and not the celestial bodies directly, that talismanic forces were directed. This belief was condemned by monotheistic religion in the Muslim world and, later, Christian Europe, because appealing to spirits is demonic. Only natural magic was okay with medieval Islamic and Christian theologians; that is, magic that simply reiterated the natural causality already at work between the celestial realm and the world. Yet philosophers held that

³ Al-Kindī, *De radiis*, trans. Sophie Page, quoted in Sophie Page, *Magic in the Cloister: Pious Motives, Illicit Interests, and Occult Approaches to the Medieval Universe*. University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2013), 91.

⁴ Al-Kindī, *De radiis*, trans. Charles Burnett, quoted in Charles Burnett, "The Theory and Practice of Powerful Words in Medieval Magical Texts." In *The Word in Medieval Logic, Theology and Psychology: Acts of the XIIIth International Colloquium of the Société Internationale pour l'Étude de la Philosophie Médiévale, Kyoto, 27 September-1 October 2005*, ed. T. Shimizu and C. Burnett (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2009), 221.

⁵ Yaḳūb ibn Ishāq Al-Kindī, "On Rays," in Peter Adamson and Peter E. Portman, *The Philosophical Works of Al-Kindī* (Oxford University Press, 2012). 233.

the celestial bodies were immune to human appeals, unlike the spirits that drifted between the celestial and the worldly realm. In a catch-22, then, magic was ruled either demonic or impossible.

In Europe, illicit magic went deep underground after the 1277 Condemnations of Paris. In the Muslim world, especially its Sunni regions, magic was sternly forbidden (it remains punishable by law in some countries). But secret books continued to circulate that described how to cajole the spirits of the planets and stars with incense and incantations. Talisman makers strove to build personal affective relationships with the planets and their spirits, like Ṭābiṭ: for example the Moroccan magician Ibn al-Hajj, in a 1909 account, begins a magic spell by entreating God, “I beg you to submit to me one of the servers of your name who will do my will.”

In contrast, those magicians who try to stick to the monotheistic ban on contact with spirits must focus their intention in the act of making, as al-Kindī urges. Talisman makers are like antennas, drawing celestial rays to themselves and into the device they are fashioning. By working on themselves, refining their spirit as a metallurgist refines a metal, they increase their conductive powers and make themselves a ceremonial body.