Ensuring immutability: Islamic amulets from Kulubnarti, Sudan

Julie R. Anderson
Ensuring immutability: Islamic amulets from Kulubnarti, Sudan

Julie R. Anderson

In 1969, as part of the UNESCO campaign to save the monuments of Nubia threatened by the construction of the Aswan High Dam and reservoir, an archaeological mission from the University of Kentucky directed by William Y. Adams began excavations on the seasonal island of Kulubnarti located approximately 130 km upstream from Wadi Halfa, in northern Sudan. Their work focused on two Christian cemeteries (6th-8th century AD) and upon several medieval and post-medieval habitation sites largely dated between the 13th and 17th centuries. ‘The primary objective of the Kulubnarti excavations was to shed light on the cultural transition from Christianity to Islam, a phase of Nubian cultural history that is almost wholly undocumented historically and that was also mostly neglected in previous archaeological campaigns’ (Adams 2011, 3). Following the excavations, the Sudanese Antiquities Service gave some of the finds, in accordance with Sudanese Antiquities Law, to the W. S. Webb Museum, University of Kentucky. The W. S. Webb Museum, together with the excavator, generously donated these artefacts to the British Museum in 2005 and they now form part of the collection in the Department of Ancient Egypt and Sudan.

Preservation of organic remains at Kulubnarti was exceptional, with environmental conditions and finds similar to those discovered at Qasr Ibrim, Egypt. Materials preserved included wood, leather, textile, bone, and paper. Amongst the artefacts excavated were 20 leather cases, made to house an apotropaic text (phylactery) normally written on paper (sing. hijab حجاب; pl. hijbat حجابات), of which three were complete. Hijab cases may be roughly square, cylindrical, round or rectangular in shape, are often covered with stamped or inked decoration, and may bear remains of leather thongs or string cords for attachment.

The Kulubnarti amulets ranged in size from 27 x 29mm to 44 x 37mm (Adams and Adams 1998, 85). They largely consisted of stamped leather containers, square or rectangular in shape, which in theory originally held a magical religious text designed to protect the wearer. Amulet fragments were found in both medieval and post-medieval contexts at four different occupation sites designated 21-S-2, 21-S-9, 21-S-40 and 21-S-42 (Adams and Adams 1998, 128).

At Kulubnarti, it was not possible to determine whether a complete hijab was of Christian or Islamic origin, as the exterior casings of both are similar in appearance. It is only through studying a case’s contents that such a differentiation might be made and this is not necessarily practical or desirable in every situation particularly when dealing with archaeological artefacts;

---

1 Since the impounding of the Aswan High Dam reservoir, Kulubnarti has become a permanent island. Front image by Derek Welsby.

2 For example see Adams 1996; 2010; 2013 and Alexander, forthcoming.

3 See Adams and Adams (1998, 128, Appendix A) for a list of amulets found during excavations. Tin and silver also have been used to create amulet cases (Al Safi 2006, 131).

4 For a discussion of the difficulties in the English definition of the word hijab as used in Sudan as ‘amulet’ or ‘phylactery’ see Osman El Tom 1987, 224-225.
however, with two of the Kulubnarti amulets (EA77655, EA77653) it was possible (Figs. 1 and 2). Even with a securely dated archaeological context, the nature of a *hijab* cannot necessarily be identified with absolute certainty. For example, individual sk-1110, excavated from a Christian grave at et-Tereif in the Fourth Cataract by the Sudan Archaeological Research Society, wore a *hijab* around the ankle and was buried in a Christian grave in a medieval cemetery, and though extremely likely, it can only be assumed that the amulet was of vernacular Christian origin without opening it (Fig. 3). Similarly, the natures of Kulubnarti *hijbat* EA78570, a small brown leather amulet (34 x 32 x 8mm) discovered at site 21-S-9 in Unit A-1, room 1-4 and EA78636, also a small, square, leather amulet, found at site 21-S-2 on the High Street, remain unknown though both were found in post-Christian contexts (Adams and Adams 1998, 132).

EA77655 is a complete *hijab* excavated from above the floor surface of room 3, house 5, in site 21-S-40. House 5 was built of stone and consisted of 5 irregular-shaped rooms. Its occupation was dated to the 18th or 19th centuries AD (Adams 2011, 114-115). The amulet was opened in the laboratory of the University of Kentucky's W. S. Webb Museum. The rectangular leather case (42 x 34 x 8mm) consists of a folded strip of leather, which was stitched along the sides with leather thongs, folded over at the top, and sewn closed to form a loop to enable the insertion of a suspension cord or string for attachment to the neck, arm, leg, waist or chest (Fig. 1).

Inside the leather housing, wrapped in several layers of cotton fabric, was an Arabic text written in black ink on white paper (Figs. 4 and 5). The paper had been methodically folded several times to form a square. Traditionally, the paper had to be of a specific quality referred to, at least in the early 20th century, as ‘Abu Shubbak’ (Father of Windows). This name is taken from the shape of the watermark found on imitation medieval paper manufactured in Europe and used for legal documents and for Islamic religious texts (Abdulla El Tayib 1955, 147 and ftn 2). The text was primarily written on the verso side of the paper (Fig. 5). There are two horizontal lines of cross-hatching accompanied in one place by a short line of magical geometric signs and in an other by a mixture of illegible Arabic letters and magical geometric symbols on the recto side that correspond to the external faces of the folded paper square. Some of these geometric figures may be part of a cryptographic alphabet as discussed by T. Canaan (Canaan 2004, 167-170) though their meaning is obscure. The 35 lines of text written on the verso side included several passages from various Qur‘anic Suras. A pseudo-magic square was drawn in the upper quarter of the document. Although the type of ink used in the text is unknown, an inkwell, which also dates to the 18th-19th centuries AD from Kulubnarti site 21-S-40, was analysed. The ink was contained within a thin, tan-coloured, wooden oval-shaped container tray (EA 77683) and analysed using Raman spectroscopy and gas chromatography-mass spectrometry (GC/MS) to identify the pigments and organic

---

6 The field excavation numbers for this object are 85.6.84 and 21-S-9/81. For a further discussion of apotropaic magic in Christian Nubia, particularly on the usage of pottery and graffiti see for example Zurawski 1992; 1994.
7 EA77655, along with EA77434, were conserved by B. Leach in the British Museum in 2005 in preparation for the temporary exhibition Kulubnarti: A Thousand Years of One Community held in the British Museum, Room 61, in 2006-2007.
8 The field excavation numbers for EA77655 are 85.8.53 and 21-S-40/128A/B.
material present. It was found to contain carbon bound with plant gum mixed with a sugary syrup, possibly date or honey-based, and it may be similar to the ink used in the hijab text.

The text of EA77655 reads as follows (Fig. 4):

‘In the Name of Allah, the Most Beneficent, the Most Merciful. Peace and blessing be upon our master Muhammad, upon his family, and upon his companions.

And We shall turn to whatever deeds they [disbelievers] did [in this life], and We shall make such deeds as scattered floating particles of dust (Sura 25.23).

Then when they had been cast down, Moses said: “What you have brought is sorcery: Allah will surely render it of no effect: for, Allah does not set right the work of evil-doers” (Sura 10.81).

So they [great ones] were defeated there and then, and were returned disgraced (Sura 7.119).

[magic square (waqf)]

<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

No falsehood can come to it from before or behind it: It is sent down by the All-Wise [One Full of Wisdom], Worthy of all praise (Sura 41.42).

Thus truth was confirmed, and all that they did was made of no effect (Sura 7.118).

Oh Allah, render all sorcery and bad work to no effect for the bearer of this written script of mine. For you are the one who is able to do all things. And peace and blessing be upon our master Muhammad, and his family, and his companions.


Oh Allah, by the right of B WD H and by the right of the praised Prophet, and the pen and the preserved tablet, and by what is inscribed in it of open secret, and by the right of what the pen has inscribed on the preserved tablet and by the right of Adam and Noah and the wise praised Prophet, the owner of honour and victories who is supported by the angels and the soul, I ask you to reconcile the hearts of creatures

9 Members of the British Museum’s Department of Conservation and Scientific Research conducted the analyses.

10 Translated by Fathi Khidir Abdel Hamid, commentary by the author. For an initial discussion and translation see Adams and Adams 1998, 89. See also Quertinmont 2007.
and mankind, all female and male, to love the bearer of this written script of mine by the right of Allah, the Glorified, the One who is free of all blemishes, the God of the angels and the soul. You who created the soul from the soul, I ask you to bring together between the soul and the soul, by the right of [in] the Name of Allah the Innovator, the Generous, the Everlasting, the Guide. I ask you to guide all creatures and mankind, all male and female, to love the bearer of this written script of mine and make them obedient to him and grant him power over their hearts and foreheads, and grant the bearer of this written script of mine, the love of all sons of Adam and daughters of Eve so long as there is night and day. Oh Allah, Oh Allah, Oh Allah, for you are able to do all things. I ask you by the right of your name the Giver, the Protector, the King.

“Oh my son!” [said Luqman] “If there be [anything] equal to the weight of a grain of a mustard seed, and though it be in a rock, or in the heavens or in the earth, Allah will bring it forth: For, Allah is subtle [in extracting it and] well aware [of its whereabouts/with them]” (Sura 31.16).

Thus all creatures and mankind, all female and male will come to the bearer of this written script of mine. Oh Allah, I ask you to grant him all his wishes so that he may not be in need of any one.

Oh Allah, the One, the Matchless, the Self-Sufficient Master, whom all creatures need, you who begets not, nor who was begotten, and there is none co-equal or comparable unto Him (Sura 112.1-4).

Peace and blessing be upon our master Muhammad, and upon his family, and upon his companions.'

The purpose of a hijab is to mitigate the effects of change and as such they may be used to protect the wearer from harm in the spiritual realm (i.e. from the evil eye) or in the physical world (i.e. injury, medical conditions or enemies, weapons and non-medical conditions) or to succeed in an endeavour be it good or evil (i.e. to attract customers or gain wealth) (Al Safi 2006, 131). They also form part of traditional Sudanese medicine where for example, hijbat were one of the methods used to treat patients experiencing fits (Abdel Halim and Effendi Abdel Halim 1939, 37) or to prevent the mentally disturbed and/or those possessed by evil spirits from experiencing a relapse (Hussey 1923). 11

The purpose of this text seems to be to protect the bearer from evil through the invocation of Qur'anic verses reinforced by various magical means, its efficacy being related to the belief of the wearer. Presumably the content of the text would vary depending upon its purpose. Though the belief in the power of the Qu'ran is not in doubt, there is the question of the interpretation of the text’s classical Arabic both by the indigenous Kulubnarti population and by the text’s creator, because the Arabic dialect used by those at Kulubnarti would have

11 For several examples of types of hijbat used among the Berti tribe with discussion see Osman El Tom 1987. It should be noted that while such hijbat are broadly comparable, direct correlations need be made with care, as the Berti and the Nubians of Kulubnarti are different cultural groups situated in different geographic locations.
been somewhat removed from its classical roots and thus their understanding of some words and associated meanings may have differed. Such a situation was also noted among the Berti (Osman El Tom 1987, 242-243). The method of transmission of Qu’ranic text (i.e. written text/memory/recitation) would also affect this.

The individual for whom the text was intended is not named. This might be because as Adams and Adams suggest it was a ‘generic’ charm, bought from a dealer, rather than something executed at the behest of a specific individual’ (Adams and Adams 1998, 89).

Of note, modern Sudanese hijbat often contain Sura 112 (Unity) for protection, Sura 113 (Dawn/Daybreak) for protection from the evil and mischief (evil eyes) found in creation and Sura 114 (Mankind) for protection from the evil eyes of people, and in fact, Sura 112 is invoked within the text discussed here. The Prophet advised people to read these Suras before sleeping for protection. Further, Sura 2.285-286 (The Cow) may also be recited for protection before sleep and Sura 2.255, the Allah al-Kursi (chair/footstool) may be recited for general protection.

The 3 x 3 magic square (wafq) found in text EA77655 is actually a pseudo-magic square as the numbers enclosed within the square’s cells do not add up to the same sum, as required when the columns, rows and diagonals are totalled individually. This may suggest that the author of the text was not versed in the mathematical intricacies of a magic square or that the mathematics had ceased to be important and it was simply the presence of a square that was required. However, the writer of the text clearly was aware of the mystical talismanic power of the buduh square and invokes it, repeating the letters ba’, dal, waw and ha’, twenty-one times through lines 10 to 13, though the order of letters is somewhat irregular as the sequence begins with an apparently superfluous ha’. In some instances of Islamic mysticism the buduh was personified and viewed as a ‘Djinni whose services can be secured by writing his name either in letters or numbers’ although it’s ‘most common use is to ensure the arrival of letters and packages’ (Macdonald 1981, 153, with examples). Its usage here may relate to the latter, safeguarding the delivery of the message, the plea or request for protection.

Amulet EA77653 was constructed of leather in a fashion similar to that of EA77655 and bore all the outward appearance of a normal square hijab case (43 x 32 x 10mm) (Fig. 2) with stamped decoration on one face. It was found at Kulubnarti site 21-S-42 in the East

12 Indeed, when the author of this paper commissioned hijbat, her name was incorporated into them (along in one instance with her mother’s name) and the purpose of the invocation was clearly defined in the text. In each case, the paper upon which the invocation was written was folded into a square by the fakir in a meticulous, specific fashion and the containers made separately on another occasion by a saddler (See Fig. 6). These modern ethnographic examples may or may not be applicable to past occurrences.

13 I thank Rihab Khidir elRasheed for our fruitful conversations and her insight concerning this matter.

14 The use of magic squares, both numerical and alphabetic, has been observed in the treatment of migraines in Northern Sudan in the early 20th century (Abdel Halim and Effendi Abdel Halim 1939, 36).

15 These letters are derived from the corners of a simple magic square wherein the numbers 1 to 9 are replaced by letters. The letters in the corners of this square form the name buduh (ba’, dal, waw and ha’). The repetition of buduh twenty-one times is likely significant. It may be related to twenty-one being a multiple of the number seven and to the use and significance of seven, for example in relation to Sura 1 (composed of 7 phrases) and/or to the letters of light and darkness, and/or to those used in the names of God, but it is unclear what was intended here. See further Canaan 2004, 152-155; Macdonald 1981. For a general discussion of Islamic talismans and amulets with examples in museum collections see Al-Saleh 2010.
Tower and likely dates to the 18th-19th centuries AD (Adams and Adams 1998, 84-85, 128, pl. 10.2E, c). Part of one side was missing and the leather stitching of two of the edges had become undone, enabling observation of the case’s contents. A thick, uninscribed square of leather had been placed inside the case simulating a folded paper apotropaic text. The excavator suggested that this might have been a ‘pious fake’ purchased in the belief that it contained a magical text (Adams and Adams 1998, 85). Further, a small, square, parchment or paper document (46 x 55mm) (EA77434) from site 21-S-2, bearing an unreadable inscription written on the verso side in simulated Arabic in black ink, may have been written in imitation of a hijab text and thus been another such ‘pious fake’ (Fig. 7) the appearance of which does not appear to have been unusual.

‘During the rebellion of the Mahdi in the Sudân thousands of his soldiers bought amulets purported to contain magical texts from the Kur’ân, and magical prayer which, they believed, would protect them and give them victory. The writer has seen many of their leather cases cut open, and they contained nothing but carefully folded blank sheets of paper, wrapped in an outer sheet inscribed ‘Bismillâh’, i.e. ‘in the name of God’ (Budge 1930, 31).

From at least the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the case-maker and the individual for whom the amulet was intended, were admonished not to look at the contents of the hijab so as not to cause them to fail or be ineffective (Al Safi 2006, 131-132). However, it is also noted that the strength and effectiveness of a hijab was related to the reputation of the fakir who created it (Al Safi 2006, 131), so perhaps the actual nature of the contents was of secondary importance when compared to the strength of belief in it and its maker. This was likely the case during the Mahdiya as mentioned above. Amulets created by ‘unofficial’ or unrecognized fakirs were not viewed as particularly effective.

‘An official “Fekki” had the right of writing formulae handed down to him by his father who had it from his father. It was he alone whose writing was of real value and who deserved to be given the “bayâd”. The “bayâd” was a necessary condition of the effectiveness of the amulet. The “bayâd” literally means “whiteness”, and it was thus named to emphasise the fact that it was given willingly and with a strong belief in the power of the “Fekki”, the heart of the giver being clean (white) and free of all doubts’ (Abdulla El Tayib 1955, 147).

The quality of workmanship of the leather amulet cases at Kulubnarti suggests that they ‘were made by professionals; they may have been purchased from itinerant fekis’ (Adams and Adams 1998, 85). During the 19th century in some places it was thought that amulets made by Islamic holy men coming from West Africa and passing through Sudan (while on Hajj), were of greater power and efficacy than those created by local fakirs (Burekhardt 1819, 364-365). In the late 19th century, during his travels in Sudan E. A. W. Budge noted the presence of ‘stamped leather cases containing pieces of paper with verses from the Kur’ân written on them’ (Budge 1907, 217) for sale in local markets (see also Fig. 7). The large number of

---

16 The field excavation numbers are 85.8.75 and 21-S-42/8.
amulets found at Kulubnarti along with the presence of pious fakes hints at a thriving market in these items, either commissioned or purchased, and demonstrates a strong vernacular belief in their efficacy both in medieval and post-medieval times.

Acknowledgements

It is a pleasure to contribute to a volume in honour of Bridget Leach, conservator of papyri in the British Museum’s Department of Conservation and Scientific Research, presented on the occasion of her retirement. In tribute to her outstanding contribution to the conservation and scientific study of numerous Egyptian and Sudanese artefacts, most notably but not exclusively papyri, I have taken this opportunity to further discuss some of the items in the Museum that she conserved, and make these objects more widely known.

Bibliography

Fig. 1: Leather amulet case EA77655 following conservation and mounting (photograph © Trustees of the British Museum).

Fig. 2: Leather amulet case EA77653 following conservation (photograph J. Anderson courtesy Trustees of the British Museum).

Fig. 3: Leather amulet around the ankle of sk-1110 from et-Tereif (photograph courtesy Sudan Archaeological Research Society).
ENSURING IMMUTABILITY: ISLAMIC AMULETS FROM KULUBNARTI, SUDAN

Fig. 4: Amulet text EA77655, verso side, following conservation and mounting (photograph © Trustees of the British Museum).
Fig. 5: Amulet text EA77655, recto side (photograph © Trustees of the British Museum).

Fig. 6: Modern *bijhat* from Begrawiya, Sudan (photograph J. Anderson).
ENSURING IMMUTABILITY: ISLAMIC AMULETS FROM KULUBNARTI, SUDAN

Fig. 7: Amulet text EA77434, verso side, following conservation (photograph J. Anderson courtesy Trustees of the British Museum).