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Born under a Lucky Star: Interpretations of Woodcuts of Pseudo-astrological Birth Amulets from German-Jewish Printing Houses in the 18th Century

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Born under a Lucky Star

Interpretations of Woodcuts of Pseudo-astrological Birth Amulets from German-Jewish Printing Houses in the 18th Century

Abstract

This article examines illustrations of the zodiac signs on birth amulets from German-Jewish printing houses from the 18th century. These woodcuts are part of a long tradition of astrological references in Jewish art and literature. However, the amulet texts themselves do not contain any astrological topics. What, then, is the relationship of the woodcuts to the text and to the function of the amulets? By contextualizing the images with other contemporary traditions of illustration, this article provides three interpretation models which can explain the choice of the zodiac signs on the amulets.

Keywords

Woodcuts, Amulets, Zodiac Signs, Astrology, Judaism, Magic

Biography

Alisha Meininghaus is a doctoral candidate in the Department of the Study of Religions at the Philipps University of Marburg. Her dissertation focuses on German-Jewish birth amulets in the 18th and 19th centuries. She is a fellow of the Leo Baeck Programme of the Studienstiftung des Deutschen Volkes and the Leo Baeck Institute London and is an associate member of the collaborative project “Dynamiken religiöser Dinge im Museum” (REDIM).

Astrology and Amulets

Astrological ideas are certainly not the first association that comes to mind when thinking about traditional Judaism.¹ However, when one looks at objects that originate from the early modern tradition of the German Jews, nu-

- 1 My sincere thanks go to all the individuals and institutions mentioned in the captions for kindly providing the photographs.

merous illustrations of zodiac signs catch the eye. These illustrations belong to an old tradition that is not limited to groups marginalized as heretics. The long list of astrological references in Jewish art and literature includes, for example, illustrations of the zodiac signs on mosaic floors of synagogues in ancient Israel, astrological texts in the literature of Qumran as well as in the *Babylonian Talmud*, and philosophical discussions about astrology among Spanish scholars from the 12th century onwards.²

This article interprets the depictions of zodiac signs on birth amulets from Jewish printing houses of the 18th century in German-speaking countries.³ So far, studies of Jewish amulets have been mostly philological, and a comprehensive analysis of woodcut prints – embracing the visual dimension and the material history of the prints – remains a desideratum of research.⁴ Therefore, this article is located within a framework of “material religion” and “visual religion”⁵, and will supplement previous approaches.

The term “amulet” is a translation of the Hebrew word *kame’a* (קמיע) and denotes objects which are supposed to have a protective function. The term can be misleading, because in everyday language it implies objects which are worn directly on the body, which was not the case with amulet prints. Furthermore, the term “amulet” can evoke the assignment of these objects to the category “magic”. However, the concept of magic in the study of religions is highly problematic, and it is deliberately not applied in this article.⁶ Nevertheless, the term “amulet” allows a connection to previous academic discourses and is therefore used in this text.

Early modern Jewish amulets from German-speaking regions can be divided into prints, manuscripts, textiles, and metal amulets. The prints this article focuses on have been attributed an apotropaic function, primarily the protection of women in childbed and their new-born children against the demoness Lilith. There are five types of prints: (1) prints with illustrations of the 12 zo-

2 See Leicht 2006 and Fishof 2001.

3 The considerations presented here are the first results of research for my dissertation on German-Jewish amulets in the 18th and 19th centuries. They represent a work in progress that can be confirmed, supplemented, or corrected by future research.

4 See, for example, the excellent philological analysis by Folmer 2007. For studies on the visual elements, the work of Shalom Sabar is groundbreaking, see for example Sabar 2015.

5 See, for example, Beinbauer-Köhler/Pezzoli-Olgati/Valentin 2010. Kiyarad/Theis/Willer 2018 can be cited as an example of interdisciplinary examination of images of “magical” objects, while Feuchtwanger-Sarig/Irving/Schrijver 2014 shows Jewish Studies’ growing interest in visuality and materiality.

6 See Otto 2011 and Meininghaus 2021.

diac signs, (2) lithographs in which a menorah is formed from micrography, (3) prints with a wide, striking ornamental frame, (4) prints with a single illustration in the upper part, and (5) prints without illustrations at all. Most of the objects known to me belong to the latter three types and show the same Hebrew-Yiddish text,⁷ which consists of seven to nine elements:

1. The heading, which identifies the print as either “for a girl” or “for a boy”.
2. A Yiddish text, which is only found on some prints and which explains the protective function of the amulet against demons, ghosts, and sorcerers.
3. An invocation of Adam, Eve, and five angels, which is connected to the exclamation “Lilith out!”.
4. A summary of the following story in Yiddish.
5. A story in which the prophet Elijah meets the child-killing demoness Lilith and, by threatening her, makes her reveal her secret names. By the power of these names, which can also be read on the amulet, the mother and the child are to be protected.⁸
6. A name of God, which can also be translated as “Tear Satan!”, as well as several variations of Exodus 22:17 (“You shall not permit a sorceress to live!”),⁹ created by word rearrangement and a repetition of the formula “*amen, sela*”.
7. A second invocation of Adam, Eve, and five angels with the exclamation “Lilith out!”.
8. Psalm 121, in which God is praised as the never-sleeping guardian of Israel.
9. At the end some prints mention the three women-specific commandments (hebr. *nidda, ḥalla, hadlaqa*), in the version for a girl, or make reference to the covenant of circumcision, in the version for a boy.

In all prints of this text, a distinction is made between a version for a girl and a version for a boy, versions that are often found on the front and back of the same sheet. Except for the heading and grammatical details,¹⁰ the text of the two versions does not differ, but the illustrations do.

7 See Folmer 2007, 47–56.

8 The basic structure of this narrative has roots in antiquity. It was published in this form by David Lida (Amsterdam, c.1700) and by Haim Yosef David Azulai (Hebron, 1724–1806), see Folmer 2007, 48–50.

9 For the function of this verse, which is usually understood as a ban on “magic”, see Meininghaus 2020.

10 However, the text is often set incorrectly, with the grammatical forms not consistently adapted to the child’s gender.

Only very few amulets contain an explicit indication of when and where they were printed. However, assumptions can be made about origin based on woodcut prints used in other works. Accordingly, we can establish that most of the amulets come from the Jewish printing houses of Fürth and Sulzbach, while some can also be traced to Frankfurt am Main, Frankfurt an der Oder, and Karlsruhe. Most of them can be dated to the 18th century and some to the 19th century. The amulets were used in the context of different customs around the birth and the puerperium and were, for example, hung on the walls of the delivery room. This context makes our focus on the images particularly relevant. Given the small size of the amulets, the text cannot be easily read, even close-up. Only the often optically dominant pictures are visible then. If the amulet was not hung very close to the woman in childbed, looking at the picture might have played a greater role than reading or reciting the text, should she even have been capable of reading Hebrew.¹¹

The Woodcuts

With one exception all types of amulets have at least one illustration. In most cases, these are woodcuts, very rarely also copperplate engravings. While in studies with a philological focus the authors of the text are in the foreground, in this approach the artists who produced the printing blocks and the designers of the other visual elements of the amulets appear as creative religious actors. There is hardly any indication of who made the woodcuts, whether these persons were Jewish, what their relationship to the printing houses was, or to what extent the details of the depiction were determined by the printers or by the artists. In many cases, the woodcuts seem rather coarse and artistically not very demanding. The concrete visual design of the amulets was most likely decided by the respective typesetter.¹² Although he had no influence on the *content* of the text, which was predetermined by tradition, he was able to influence the *interpretation* of the text to an extent that should not be underestimated. This involvement could be achieved, for example, by setting some text elements in a larger font, by separating them from other text parts using decorative elements, or even by providing the Hebrew consonant text

11 See Wagner 2018, 66.

12 In many cases, the prints show indications of careless work, such as setting errors in the text or wrongly placed woodcuts.

with vowel signs, as it was usually set without vocals. It can be assumed that he also decided on the selection and placement of the woodcuts.

After these general explanations, the focus will now be on the type of amulets with a single image. So far, I am aware of a total of 12 different subtypes, each with a different illustration for the versions for a girl and for a boy. The motives vary, but in most cases a female figure is shown in the version for a girl, while a male figure is shown in the version for a boy. Accordingly, the illustrations probably served to facilitate the purchase of a suitable amulet for a male or a female infant by visualizing the gender of the child. This role was especially important for women, who sometimes had only limited knowledge of Hebrew. It is likely that they also served as “eye-catchers”, to increase the attractiveness of the products.

This corresponds to the function of the text elements in the upper third of the prints, which primarily served as information for the user and were probably particularly important in the purchasing situation. As far as I am aware, this “part of information” is typical of amulet prints, whereas neither pictures nor Yiddish explanations can be found on handwritten amulets. One can assume that these additions on the prints served as a substitute for the direct or indirect relationship between the writer of the handwritten amulets (who was often a rabbi and/or a kabbalist) and the amulet users. This relationship possibly had a positive influence on the user’s subjective feeling of protection. In the case of the amulet prints, which were produced by an anonymous typesetter and a printer, this form of relationship did not exist.

In addition to the picture and the headline indicating whether the print is intended for a boy or a girl, there is also at least one Yiddish text summarizing the content of the Hebrew story about Elijah and Lilith that follows.¹³ Yiddish was the everyday language, while Hebrew was used for ritual purposes, and the Yiddish summary therefore enabled the user to get a rough overview of the content of the Hebrew text, which might otherwise be incomprehensible. In some prints, this summary is preceded by another Yiddish text, which praises the protective effect of the amulet against demons, ghosts, and sorcerers. It is noteworthy that the Yiddish texts are printed in a different font than the Hebrew ones. This semi-italic font is called *vaybertaytsh* (yidd.: “women’s German”), because it was used especially in Yiddish literature for women and less

13 A closer examination of this Yiddish text shows, however, that not only is the following text paraphrased, but other text elements, especially the versions of Exod. 22:17, are also interpreted and thereby connected with the other texts of the amulet.

educated people.¹⁴ Therefore, the visually different font was used as marking for the addressees of the text. In contrast to the informative function of the upper third of the prints, the Hebrew texts below were understood as protection against dangers and were addressed not to the user, but to Lilith and other threatening beings.

But what do the illustrations on the amulets of this type represent in detail? To date I have found no interpretations of the woodcuts by the printers or individual users, and therefore I construct possible attributions of meaning on the basis of similar traditions of illustration.

Three of the 12 woodcuts I have worked with, mentioned here only in passing, depict an angel (for a boy) or two angels under a palm tree (for a boy) and a mermaid (for a girl) as well as a man with a long walking staff (for a boy). Five other woodcut pairs all show the same motive, namely a woman in a richly decorated dress with a wreath in her hand (for a girl) and a man dressed in the current fashion¹⁵ holding a book (for a boy) (fig. 1a and b).

The five pairs of woodcuts are remarkably similar even in their fine detail and as a result they form a coherent group. It seems likely that the figures depict a bride with a wreath and a man reading a religious book.¹⁶ These depictions correspond to the typical ideals of marriage for women and of lifelong religious study for men.¹⁷ Besides the transmission of these normative conceptions, the woodcuts also visualize the hoped-for effect of the amulets – the growth of the child into a socially conforming adult. This message may have had a positive psychological effect by contributing to the subjective perception of the protective effect of the amulet. It is also conceivable that the illustration, like the lower texts on the print, was attributed with agency and not only *represented* the growing-up of the children but also was understood to *cause* it.

Another positive psychological effect may have been evoked by the man's modern clothing. That depiction implicitly refers to the successive dissolution of dress restrictions for European Jews at the end of the 17th century and during the 18th century in the context of increasing political equality. This step

14 See Tamari 2001.

15 The man wears a hat (perhaps a tricorne), a frock coat, under it a waistcoat, a kind of bands and breeches. This corresponds to Central European dress fashion in the 18th century, which Jews were permitted to wear, see Rubens 1967, 178.

16 Wiesemann 2012, 60 also proposes this interpretation. In contrast, Carlebach 2011, 67 sees in the male figure a man reading a pocket calendar.

17 See Sabar 2002, 681.



לנברה

דיא (קאיע) איז איין גרויס (סגולה) זו
היטן דיא (וויזדוה) היטן היטן קינד
פֿרֿ איז ביי (רוחיה) אונז (מידין) אונז וויקיין
אונז (הכפין) דו וואו וואו גיט (כח) האבן
זו קוואן איין דאז וויזדוה קינד בעטריין היט
אירן קינד (הכפין) גיט זו קעגן שטרייגן
פֿון וועגן דיא הייזיג (שחיה)



אדם וחוה חוץ לילית חוה
ראשונה סיני וסנסני וסנסני
שנדיאל חסדיאל

דאז איז דיא (השבעה פֿון חזיה הכפיליין) וויא פֿרֿ האט (השבעה) גיווענין דיא
(הכפין) ביי וויא האבן איס וואו זי וואו ווערט (הכפין) זיין אירינגען
וועגן וויא פֿון דאז היט וועט ווען :

בשם יהוה אלהי ישראל יושב הכרובים ששמו גרול ונודא : אליהו הנביא
זכור לטוב היה חולך בדרך ופגע בלילית ובכל כת דילה ואמר
לה ללילית הרשעה אן אתה טמאה ורות טמאה וכל כת דילך כולם טמאים
הולכים ותען ותאמר לו אדוני אליהו אנכי הולכת לבית היולדות (פכ"פ) לחת
לה שינת המות ולקחת את בתה היולד לה ולשתות את דמה ולמצות את מוח
עצמותיה ולהכנס את בשרה והשיב לה אליהו הנביא וזכור לטוב ואמר לה בחרם
עצמות תחיה מאת השם יתברך וכאכן דומם תחיה וענתה ואמרה לו למען השם
תחייני ואנכי אברכה ואשבע לך בשם יי אלהי מערכות ישראל לעזוב את דרכים
הללו מהיולדות הוואת ומבתה הנולד לה וכל זמן שאני שופע את שמותי אני
אברכה ועתה אודיע לך שמותי וכל זמן שמכירין אותם לא יהיה לי ולכל ברה
דילי כח להדע וליכנס בבית היולדות ומכל שכן להוויק :

אלוהן שמותי לילית אביטי אביזי אמוקפו הקש אודם אקפורי אילוי
מטרוטה אבניקטה שטרנגת קליבטטה תילתי פֿרֿטשה :

קרע שטן מכשפה לא תחיה : מכשפה תחיה לא : לא תחיה מכשפה :
לא מכשפה תחיה : תחיה מכשפה לא : תחיה לא מכשפה :
א'ס א'ס א'ס א'ס א'ס א'ס :

אדם וחוה חוץ לילית חוה ראשונה סיני וסנסני וסנסני שנדיאל חסדיאל
שיר למעלות אשא עיני אל ההרים מאין יבא עזרי : עזרי מעם יי עושה שמות
וארץ : א ויהי למוטרגליה א'יגוס עומדיה והיה לא יגוס ולא יגון שומר
ישיר : יי שומדיה יי צלה עלי ימינה : יומם השמש לא יבהר וירח בלילה :
יי שומדיה מכל דע שומר את נפשה : יי שומר צאתה ובואה מעתה ועד עולם :

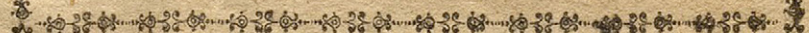


Fig. 1a: Printer: Moses ben Uri Schraga Bloch (?), H61 WAGENSEIL.VK 209 b recto, print with woodcut, size unknown, 1690 (?), Sulzbach (?) Universitätsbibliothek Erlangen-Nürnberg, Bibliothek Wagenseil. (© Universitätsbibliothek Erlangen-Nürnberg)

had been preceded by a long tradition of specifically Jewish clothing, partly imposed by political authorities, partly upheld for reasons of inner-Jewish religiously motivated distinction. For these reasons the negotiation processes around Jewish clothing can be understood as a reflection of the tension between particularism and acculturation in Central Europe in modern times.¹⁸ The woodcuts depicting a man dressed in modern clothes can thus be understood as an expression of social integration and of hopes for greater social participation and involvement.¹⁹

Four other woodcut pairs show a woman, who is usually naked but in one case is dressed, holding a plant in her hand (usually for a girl) and a naked or dressed man with a bow and arrow (for a boy) (fig. 2a and b).²⁰

These figures can be interpreted with some certainty as representations of the zodiac signs Virgo and Sagittarius, given their correspondence to typical iconographic traditions of these signs.²¹ For one subtype, this interpretation can even be proven, since the identical images can also be found in calendars, where they are printed together with the other zodiac signs and with the corresponding Hebrew designations. To my knowledge, one print of the version for a girl²² and three prints of the version for a boy²³ of this subtype have been preserved. The same woodcut prints are also found on calendars and a book from the Jewish printing houses in Fürth, so the amulets can also be located there. The calendars are assigned to three printers: Ḥajim ben Zbi Hirsch (practised 1737–1772), Izig ben Löb Buchbinder (practised 1761–1792) and Itzig ben David Zirndorfer (practised 1775–1826).²⁴ This repetition indicates that the

18 See Silverman 2013, xvii–xxii and 68–73.

19 We can note, therefore, that persons open to modernity were a target group for the amulet. At the same time, however, the illustration emphasizes adherence to religious identity with the representation of the book.

20 However, only one subtype shows the image of the naked woman on the front and that of the man with a bow on the back. Another subtype shows the man with a bow on the front and the man with the book on the back (probably a mistake by the typesetter). Another subtype shows in some prints a naked woman (for a girl) and a naked man without a bow (for a boy) and in other prints the same naked woman (for a girl) and a man pouring wine (for a boy). From another subtype, I know of only one print that shows a naked woman (for a boy – so perhaps a setting mistake).

21 See Hübner 2013, 253, and Fishof 2001, 116–119 and 128–131.

22 Gross Family Collection 027.011.891.

23 F_Kindbettzettel_1 and F_Kindbettzettel_2 (found in the Geniza Freudental, today: Pädagogisch-Kulturelles Centrum Ehemalige Synagoge Freudental) and M 1252 (found in the Geniza Memmelsdorf, today: Jüdisches Kulturmuseum Veitshöchheim).

24 See Löwenstein 1913.



Fig. 2a: Unknown Jewish printer, 027.011.891, print with woodcut, 18 x 22 cm, between 1764 and 1785 (?), Gross Family Collection. (© William Gross)

printing blocks were exchanged between cooperating printers, which makes exact assignment of the amulets to one of them impossible, but it is also not necessary. The calendars and the book were all printed between 1764 and 1785 and accordingly the undated amulets can be dated approximately to this period.

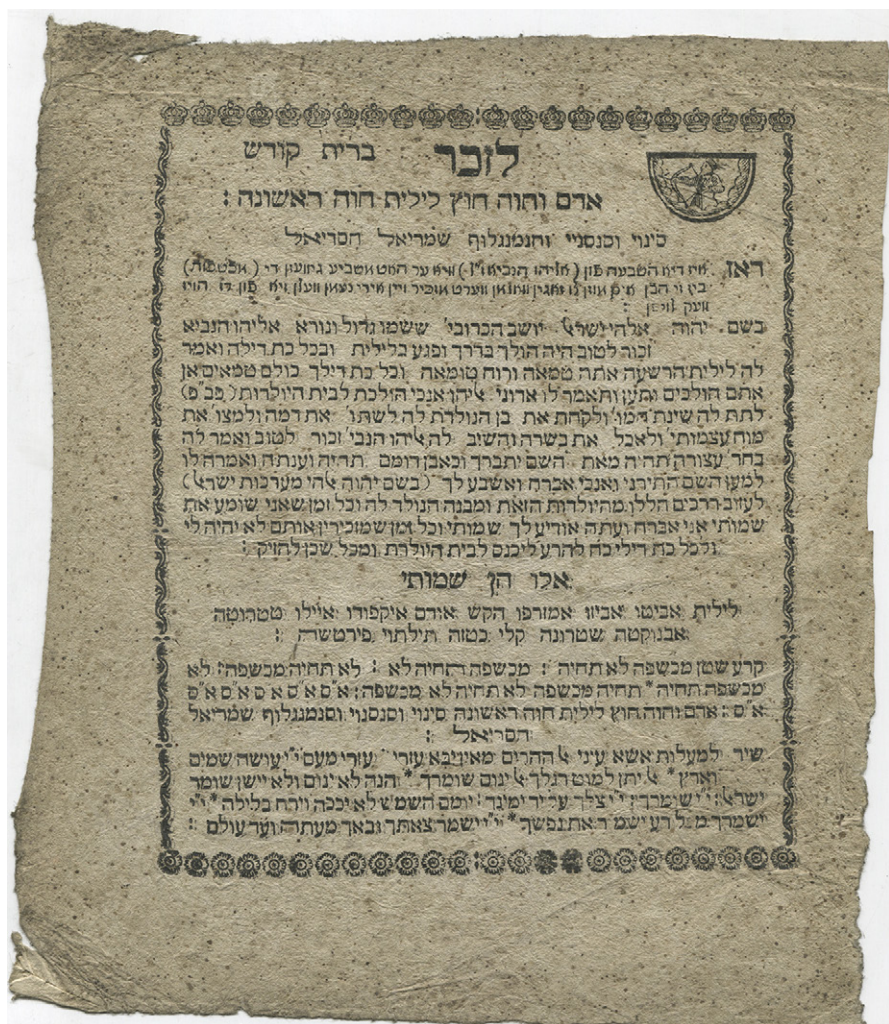


Fig. 2b: Unknown Jewish printer, F_Kindbettzettel_1, print with woodcut, 18.5 x 20 cm, Between 1764 and 1785 (?), Pädagogisch-Kulturelles Centrum Ehemalige Synagoge Freudental. (© Photo: Prof. Andreas Lehnardt)

Interpretations of the Astrological Illustrations

The zodiac signs on these last amulets are confusing in that their text bears no reference to astrology.²⁵ For all other woodcut prints discussed here, a more or less direct relationship between illustration and text can be reconstructed: the depictions of angels refer back to the angels invoked in the text, while the man with the staff, the bride, and the man with the book visualize the gender and future development of the child mentioned in the title. Still, engagement with astrology in the text of the amulet would have been possible, since a reasonably intensive literary occupation with astrology existed in Jewish sources from antiquity to modern times.²⁶ A comparison with other Jewish objects of the same period in German-speaking countries depicting the zodiac signs illustrates the conspicuousness of this incongruity between text and image: zodiac signs were used to illustrate numerous printings, manuscripts, and textiles, for example, calendars,²⁷ books with prayers for celebrations throughout the year (*Maḥsor* books),²⁸ embroidered or painted Torah binders made from the cloth in which boys were swaddled at their circumcision (*Mappot*),²⁹ wedding certificates (*Ketubbot*),³⁰ as well as the printing signs of individual Jewish printers.³¹ Although the zodiac signs were sometimes used for purely decorative purposes,³² in most cases there are explicit or implicit references to astrological topics in the text. In calendars, they were arranged to correspond to the respective Jewish months. *Maḥsor* books contain two prayers with astrological references, while in the case of the Torah binders, the month of birth of the boy can be represented by zodiac signs. In the case of wedding certificates, the zodiac signs illustrate the congratulation “*mazel ʔow*” (literally: “a lucky star!”), while on a printer’s sign they often symbolize the birth month of the printer. There are also amulets from Frankfurt an der Oder which contain all 12 zodiac signs and refer explicitly to them in the text.

25 For this reason, the amulets can be called pseudo-astrological. The illustration of the mermaid noted above, however, needs explanation along the same lines as the zodiac signs treated here.

26 See Leicht 2006.

27 See Rosenfeld 1989, 29 and Rosenfeld 1990, 28, and also Carlebach 2011, 80–81.

28 See Fagin Davis 1991 and Narkiss 2007, 364.

29 See Weber 1997.

30 See Sonne 1953b.

31 See Sonne 1953a, 4.

32 See Sonne 1953a, 3 and Wiesemann 2002, 12.

These examples cause us to wonder whether the illustrations of the zodiac signs on the amulets had purely decorative purpose, but if not, then how the illustrations of Virgo and Sagittarius relate to the other illustrations on the amulets and the text. We might at first assume that amulets were provided with zodiac signs chosen in light of the birth month of the child. In this case, the picture would provide the text with additional information, enabling amulets to be used more effectively from an emic point of view. However, I know only of prints with the images of Virgo and Sagittarius, and yet it seems an unlikely coincidence for only amulets with these images to have survived. Three alternative explanatory models for the use of the illustrations are possible, I propose, and can coexist.

Imitation of the Original Illustration Tradition: From Bride to Virgo

The most obvious thesis is that the use of the zodiac signs can be explained by the material conditions in the Jewish printing houses. Printing blocks with zodiac signs were standard equipment of Jewish printing houses because they were used in popular printings like calendars and *Maḥsor* books. In addition to woodcuts of the zodiac signs, a limited number of typical illustrations can be found in the Jewish literature of that time. These include portals on the front pages of books and illustrations of Yiddish books of fables. In addition, woodcuts illustrate people performing rituals, especially in books that depict regional customs (*Minhag* books), where the same woodcut is often used several times to depict different customs. Besides, woodcuts often depict biblical scenes in Yiddish bible paraphrases (*Tse'edah u-r'edah*), history books (e.g. *Sefer Josippon*), as well as in instructions for Pessah (*Pessah-Haggadot*) and Esther scrolls (*Megillat Esther*).³³ Thus, a suitable printing block was not acquired for each text, and instead existing woodcuts were reused in different contexts. This procedure was a common practice, not unique to Jewish printing houses, and, as Alexandra Franklin notes, should not be confused with arbitrariness or thoughtlessness:

When a woodblock appears with an entirely different text, we can assume that the printer found it expedient to use his or her existing stock, but this does not mean that the use was careless, or that the image was meaningless. What does an image illustrate – or how does it illustrate – if it is used

33 See Wiesemann 2002, 9–34.

in different contexts? Composition, as well as content, could suggest meaning.³⁴

The woodcuts of the zodiac signs which were available anyway were then also used for amulets, for the realm of birth already had an astrological connotation marked by illustrations of the zodiac signs on Torah binders.

It seems likely that only Virgo and Sagittarius were used because they show anthropomorphic figures that could pick up on the tradition of depicting the bride and the man with a book, perhaps the primary tradition of illustrating these amulets. Since the amulets with the bride and the man with a book contain neither a year of production nor a reference to the printing house, the order in which they were printed and by whom cannot be established. Nevertheless, at least one amulet of this type can be dated relatively reliably to 1690 and located to Sulzbach (see figs. 1a and b).³⁵ This version would then be very old compared to the presumed dating of the other amulets. The whole tradition of illustration of the bride and the man with the book may then be quite old and perhaps even the original form of illustration for amulets. Accordingly, the zodiac signs can be understood as imitations of this tradition. The fact that the Gemini and the Aquarius were not used although they too are anthropomorphic can be explained by the similarity of the Virgo with the plant to the bride with the wreath. Besides, the Sagittarius with his bow would possibly fit better to the apotropaic function of the amulet than would the Aquarius.

Astro-Medical References: From the Virgo to the “Zodiac Man”

Another possible and not necessarily competing explanation for the choice of Virgo and Sagittarius draws on an astrological-medical attribution for the illustrations. The context here is the tradition of images of a naked man whose

34 Franklin 2019, 216.

35 This is H61 WAGENSEIL.VK 209 b, Universitätsbibliothek Erlangen-Nürnberg, Wagenseil Library. The Wagenseil Library consists of prints collected by Johann Christoph Wagenseil (1633–1705). After his death, the collection was sold by his heirs to the University of Altorf in 1708 and then given to the University Library of Erlangen. Although it is no longer possible to reconstruct how Wagenseil got hold of the amulet, the localization to Sulzbach and the dating to 1690 seem realistic. In any case, the print was produced before 1708, when the collection was sold, as no works were added to the collection.



Fig. 3: Printer: Itzig ben Löb Buchbinder, A 133, print with woodcut, size unknown, 1784/5, Landesarchiv Speyer. (© Photo: Prof. Andreas Lehnardt)

body parts are assigned the 12 zodiac signs.³⁶ This tradition is known from Christian and Jewish sources from the 13th century onwards and is called “Zodiac Man” (fig. 3).

The image had a medical function, related to determining the correct time for bloodletting at the respective parts of the body. For this purpose, the zodiac signs were often assigned to designated parts of the body as follows: Aries to the head, Taurus to the neck, Gemini to the shoulders or arms, Cancer to the chest, Leo to the heart, Virgo to the stomach or generally the abdomen, Libra to the kidneys or the pelvis, Scorpio to the genitals, Sagittarius to the thighs, Capricorn to the knees, Aquarius to the calves, and Pisces to the feet.

³⁶ See Hübner 2013.

The illustration of the Virgo was possibly chosen for the amulets because of its location on the Zodiac Man, where it is traditionally assigned to the area in which the uterus is located. Similarly, the illustration of the Sagittarius is partly assigned to the pubic area. The Scorpio, which is more often assigned to the genitals on the Zodiac Man, may not have been used because of the need to use a male figure to visualize the sex of the child. In this case, one can speak of a transformation of the original medical function of the illustrations to an apotropaic function. This interpretation is supported by the fact that illustrations of the Zodiac Man can also be found in Jewish calendars from Fürth.³⁷ We can therefore assume that the association of Virgo with the abdomen and of Sagittarius with the pubic area was known to the typesetters and readers. However, there are very few depictions of female bodies in the pictorial tradition of the Zodiac Man and therefore the zodiac signs were rarely explicitly related to female breasts, the womb, and the vulva. So far, a Zodiac Woman in Jewish sources is unknown to me.³⁸

Ambivalent Forms of Representation: Adam and Eve

Finally, a third possible interpretation can be noted, which refers to those amulets that depict the Virgo and the Sagittarius naked (fig. 4a).

These instances can function as reference to Adam and Eve, who are called on twice in the amulet text, while in the same sentence Lilith is ordered out of the house. Their relevance in the context of the birth amulet stems from their fundamental opposition to Lilith. The earliest source with a detailed legend about Lilith is the *Alphabet of Ben Sira*. This Hebrew work is dated between the 7th and 10th centuries CE. In this narrative, God creates the first woman, Lilith, from the same dust as Adam, and only later the second woman, Eve, from Adam's rib. Since Adam and Lilith are simultaneously created from the same material, Lilith refuses to lie under Adam during intercourse. In the ensuing argument, Lilith pronounces the name of God and flees. Upon Adam's complaint, God sends three angels to bring her back. The angels find her at the Red Sea and threaten her, but Lilith refuses to return and swears to kill female children up until the 20th day after their birth and male children until the 8th day if she has the chance. However, if she sees an amulet with the names of the three angels, she will not do any harm.

37 See Rosenfeld 1989, 30–33 and fig. 3.

38 On the connection between the signs of the zodiac and the female body see Hübner 2013, 305–306.



Fig. 4b: Printer: Michael Ben-Zalman Hanau (?), 027.011.0043, print with woodcut, 17.5 x 17 cm, 1720s (?), Gross Family Collection. (© William Gross)

dent in their depiction on another amulet type from Sulzbach or Fürth, which shows them as one of the central pictorial elements (fig. 5).

On this type, the depicted figures can be clearly identified as Adam and Eve through the use of captions with their names. So, it is possible that in the case of the amulets with the naked Virgo and Sagittarius, the woodcuts provide a second association, with Adam and Eve. This thesis is supported by the observation that there is also an amulet that, matching the naked Virgo with a plant in her hand, shows a naked man with a flower (fig. 4b). While the woman with the plant can be unambiguously recognized as a common



Fig. 5: Unknown Jewish printer, OBJECT.JMP.COLL/178801, print with woodcut, 16,2 x 21,6 cm, 18th century, Jewish Museum Prague. (© Jewish Museum Prague)

representation of the Virgo, the male figure cannot be interpreted as a zodiac sign, which makes the association of this figure with Adam likely. Moreover, the plants in the hands of the figures may evoke associations with the fruit of the tree of knowledge. This ambivalence of the illustrations is encouraged by the absence of explanatory captions on the amulets, unlike for many woodcuts in books. The printers may have deliberately played with the ambiguity of the illustrations.

Conclusion and Outlook

The considerations presented here show that the material conditions in Jewish printing houses, especially the existence of certain printing blocks, influenced the design of the amulets. Thus astrological-medical interpretations not laid out in the text could also be accessed by users. In these cases, the images seem to be relatively independent of the text. Here, then, is an expres-

sion of the creativity which the typesetters deployed, unlike for the traditionally fixed text. At the same time, however, numerous associative references can be established between the illustrations and the text – for example, the depiction of angels matching the angel invocations, the bride and the man with the book matching the heading with the sex of the child, or the naked figures matching the invocation of Adam and Eve. With captions missing, the illustrations are open to various interpretations and associations. The illustrations could provide practical help in choosing the appropriate print, increase the attractiveness of the product, and possibly enhance the apotropaic effect of the text from an emic perspective.

The observations made provide impulses for further research. As valuable as studies on single amulets are, a broad comparison of all preserved prints will surely uncover connections and differences between amulet types. Furthermore, comparison of the amulets with other contemporary printed works with which they share visual and other elements is also indispensable. In a further step, the results should be contextualized within Jewish discourses of the 18th and 19th centuries, and an attempt should be made to reconstruct the practices associated with the amulets.

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