

# **Uterine Amulets: Looking at Women's Lives From the Womb Up**

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Imagine not being able to get pregnant. This is your primary purpose as a wife in 100 CE living in Northern Egypt. You don't want anyone to know because they might think you are cursed or a bad match for your husband. You feel alone and helpless. You turn to uterine amulets for comfort and a sense of hope. Throughout late antiquity women used amulets to help promote fertility and ease in childbirth. Women used these amulets as a form of protection against all the potential dangers associated with childbirth and infertility. Amulets were used for various ailments, but there is extensive archeological evidence that the use of uterine amulets was a common practice in the ancient Mediterranean. The specific amulet I will be examining is from Egypt, but the influences from Greco-Roman culture on this amulet are substantial. Through these amulets we are able to see both the conflicting ideas of a woman's body at the time and the slight steps towards autonomy women took. By using these amulets women were taking agency over their health in a very tangible and direct way. In this essay I will examine how uterine amulets help us understand women in antiquity and how women's lives were influenced and shaped by objects like uterine amulets.

To understand uterine amulets, we first need to discuss the beliefs about women's health at the time. During late antiquity there were many different theories about menstruation, fertility, and the woman's body. Dissection of the body was highly taboo and frowned upon so studies around the body were generally external and anecdotal in nature. One important theory about women's bodies was the wandering womb: an idea that the womb moved around the body if one was not sexually active, and sexual activity "grounded" the womb. This theory was supported by various medical texts, specifically from the Hippocratic corpus. The Hippocratic author states in *Diseases of Women* that "Whenever in a woman who has never given birth the menses are suppressed and cannot find a way out, illness results." (Lefkowitz and Fant 2016). Consequently,

this theory led to terms like hysterik pnix or uterine suffocation to describe a common ailment women experienced where they felt as if they were being suffocated, and this was attributed to the uterus. Amulets were used for many reasons, from irregular periods and fertility issues to diseases like hysterik pnix. Because of this it is important to understand the context in which first century common era women used the amulets. Many different theories and opinions gave very conflicting views and instructions regarding self-care and this led to lots of confusion about what was considered best practice for various ailments. Uterine amulets adhered to the theory that wombs involved movement, and many of the inscriptions talk about concerns with this and offer protective spells against this movement (Hanson 1998).

A uterine amulet is a small object, most often made out of stone, that women would wear to protect against negative outcomes in pregnancy, for fertility, or for regulation of menstruation. In earlier years in Greece and Rome it is likely that amulets were made out of materials that wouldn't have survived into the modern age but there is textual evidence showing that they were used (Hanson 1998). Women would have placed these amulets around their necks, bound on their arms, or inserted/placed near their vaginas (Aubert 1989). These amulets had different inscriptions that offered protection for these women. The amulets often included images of vases, symbolizing a uterus, and grain, symbolizing fertility. Various Egyptian and Greco-Roman gods and goddess are also depicted on these amulets, and these icons were generally related to fertility, pregnancy, or protection. For example, on the amulet I am examining from the Kelsey museum, there is an inscription of Isis, the Egyptian Mother goddess of midwifery, sexual relationships, pregnancy and birth (Aubert 1989). Through these uterine amulets women found protection in various forms, likely providing comfort.

The amulet from the Kelsey museum that I am examining is from Verbatim Provence in Egypt and is dated from 100-500 CE. This is a general dating to the Roman Empire but the specific date of this amulet is unknown. It is made out of hematite with one side inscribed with images and writing in ancient greek on the other. The amulet is a 15x12x12 cm oval and contains intricate symbols. The images on the amulet are a jar, lock, ligaments, depiction of the god Isis, Anubis and the serpent Ouroboros. The upside-down jar symbolizes a womb, which has lines coming out from it, symbolizing ligaments surrounding the uterus. The jar looks like a cupping jar, something that could be used to summon blood, presumably if one was not menstruating properly. On the top half there is a depiction of Isis-Tyche, the fertility god holding a cornucopia, a symbol of abundance and nourishment (Farone 2018). Isis-Tyche is the Roman equivalent of Isis-Fortuna. There were multiple versions of Isis and Isis-Tyche was the upright version who had associations with luck as well as fertility. Next to Isis is a depiction of Anubis mummified. Anubis is a jackal, and the god of the dead, and the depiction seems as if Isis is preventing him from interfering with the fertility (CBd-1350, 2010). Next to the jar there is a key, indicating that the womb can be open or closed.

The text on the back likely relates to the term Ororiouth (Aubert 1989). There is a debate about the meaning of Oroiouth. Some sources say it is a demon womb protector (Aubert 1989) while others say it is part of a magic spell for opening (Hanson 1998). Either way the inscription carries importance and has been replicated on many other amulets found from late antiquity. The border of the amulet also contains an image of a snake devouring its own tail, or Ouroboros the Egyptian symbol for regeneration. The elaborate and deliberate design of this amulet points to how important this object must have been in women's lives. Amulets were used as protective objects, but symbols on this specific amulet point to binding ideas as well. This amulet gives us a

very interesting view into Egyptian women's lives in the first few centuries of the common era as we can see the cross cultural influence of the Greeks in language and symbolism while still using their own idols on the amulet.

The amulet I am examining is made out of hematite. Hematite is a mineral form of iron that was often known as blood-stone because of the black and deep red color. The stone itself was known for its healing properties, specifically as an astringent and warming agent, that could purge the body of ailment (Hanson 1998). Hematite was used in later antiquity in many medicinal recipes for things like conjunctivitis and bloodshot eyes. It would be grinded down and added to medicines to help stop bleeding (Farone 2018). This association between things that bleed and this stone that gives off a blood like residue also may have been a reason why this stone was often used for uterine amulets. The association with blood stone and menstruation is not insignificant and may have played a role in the usage of this stone in ancient times.

Women used these amulets largely to deflect against magical aggression, a very real and relevant fear in these women's lives (Aubert 1989). They also may have been recommended by doctors, but we don't have significant sources showing this occurring. Amulets offered women a sense of protection and comfort through a very tumultuous process that often was pregnancy and childbirth. Infant and child mortality was very high in this time period so it is logical that women would look for various forms of protection against such tragedies. Medical scholars at the time, like Soranus, did not advocate for uterine amulets as an effective medical treatment, but Soranus conceded that "their use should not be forbidden, since the hope they provide possibly makes the woman more cheerful." (Kelsey Museum, 2017) Magic and curses played a large part of cultural interpretations of maladies that occurred in the ancient Mediterranean in this time period, so having protection against these fearful occurrences likely provided women with comfort.

Amulets were also prominent in Greece and Rome and were used for many things, not just fertility. While there is extensive textual evidence that greek and roman uterine amulets or similar protective objects existed, there is very little physical evidence for the existence of these objects. It is likely that Greco-Roman amulets were made of less permanent materials than hematite and therefore are not able to be recovered. Protective phrases or images were likely inscribed on cloth or softer stone that has disintegrated since the time period. Amulets were used for other things besides uterine protection as well. Some common amulets were often used for stomach pain, back pain, and eye ailments (Kelsey Museum, 2017). Various gods and icons are used depending on the issue, and this seemed to be a common practice when people were faced with maladies. Another interesting thing to note is that the image of the object causing pain was often portrayed on the amulet. Like the uterine jar, there were images of feet, eyes, and stomachs for ailments of these body parts (Farone 2018).

Social class did play a role in who had access to certain uterine amulets. For the Kelsey museum amulet specifically it was likely owned by a woman of the upper middle class in Egypt (Hanson, 1998). This is because only the higher classes in Egypt spoke greek, and our amulet contains greek inscriptions. This is not to say that lower class women did not use similar types of amulets, but that the ones we are able to work with now were likely from upper class women because of the type of material they were made of as well as the inscriptions. It is hard to make lots of assumptions about social class based on these amulets because while we have lots of explanations for what the symbols on the amulets mean, we have very few first-hand accounts of using the amulets. Especially lacking are accounts from women, so while we know these amulets were very abundant based on the archeological evidence available, it is hard to extrapolate on the exact effect they had on women's lives.

Uterine amulets provide a very unique view into the history of women in antiquity. These amulets are unique because there was not an equivalent to this type of protection for men, and it has been shown that amulets are specifically feminine in practice (Hanson, 1998). These amulets are interesting because they provided women a sense of control and power over their bodies. During antiquity many things could go wrong with pregnancy, and these amulets helped women feel protected from harm throughout pregnancy and birth. Amulets also imply a level of education for women in a time period where education of women varied significantly. Amulets had both writing and detailed symbols implying that women could both read and had at least a basic knowledge of icons and iconography. There is some speculation about who used these amulets. Some sources say it was likely an upper class women that had enough education to read and interpret such amulets, but others see them as more inclusive. It is probable that all different types of women used amulets, even if they couldn't read the inscriptions.

Through uterine amulets we are able to examine how women practiced self-care in the ancient Mediterranean. Uterine amulets show us an example of women's autonomy in an extremely patriarchal society. It seems possible that amulets would have been passed through generations, and the significance they had in adornment and protection made amulets an essential part of self-care throughout antiquity. Women used these amulets to protect against very real fears, and through these stones and clothes they were able to take steps as individuals to feel protection. While we don't know who "prescribed" or made such amulets, their abundance in historical evidence suggests they played a significant and common role in women's lives.

Overall, uterine amulets and amulets in general played a large role in cultural and medical practices in late antiquity. These elaborate amulets, which were very intentionally crafted, hold immense historical significance. Through amulets we can see what kind of gods and

icons people were worshiping, and through symbols like the cup/jar as a womb we see the literal connotations they hold as well. Writing on the back of the amulet indicates literacy and importance placed on spells and phrases. In addition to offering protection to the user, the writing and symbols on amulets also provides a rare view into the lives of women in late antiquity. We can and should use uterine amulets to understand history, as they provide us an exclusively female object that is often elusive when looking at archeological remains. Combining these amulets with written texts allows us to see a more comprehensive view of women in the ancient Mediterranean. The knowledge we can gain from studying these amulets is incredible, offering us a unique view into women's lives.

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