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Icons of Power: The Late Antique Imperial Portrait as Image and Amulet

Gold jewelry incorporating coins and medals was produced throughout a wide geographical and chronological span in the Roman and late antique periods. Items of late antique coin-set jewelry should be understood not only as staging points for the luxurious display of personal wealth, but also as conceptually complex objects that bring the body of a wearer into proximity with one of the most official images of the Roman canon—numismatic imperial portraits. The ubiquity of the imperial portrait in the Roman world, and its centrality in Roman visual culture is well established. This paper charts the evidence that the imperial portrait enjoyed a special philosophical, ritual, and legal status that equated representations of the emperor with the person of the emperor. Building from an analysis of the coin ornaments, the author proposes an iconic model of efficacy for the amulet in late antiquity. Reading the prescriptions of the *Greek Magical Papyri* through the lens of late antique Neoplatonic thought, I argue for the icon, understood as a word or an image, as an essential component in the construction of a talisman. This essential icon is most often manifested, in surviving magical objects and writings, as a name that when correctly spelled, written, and/or spoken, gives direct access to a figure of power. The use of efficacious names in magical prescriptions and amulets can be understood as a practical application of the philosophy of true names as natural representations of their prototypes that operate through the mechanism of resemblance. In coin set jewelry, this iconic role is fulfilled visually through the imperial portrait, rather than verbally, but the characteristics of coin-set jewelry used as amulets illuminate not only our understanding of the talismanic use of numismatic jewelry, but also the mechanisms by which amulets could function more generally in late antiquity.