

## Amulets and jewelry from Jordan – A study on the function and meaning of recent bead necklaces

### I. Introduction

#### I. A. Amulets and jewelry

The interpretation of jewelry in archaeological context often presents serious problems for archaeologists. Yet few attempts have been made to take into consideration comparative ethnographic data when discussing the origin and historical significance of a piece of jewelry, or even its socio-economic implications, and few attempts have been made to provide the archaeologist with this kind of data. In the following, functional aspects and individual histories of nineteenth- to twentieth-century bead necklaces from Jordan are discussed. Arguments will be made against the unrestricted use of exclusively formal criteria as the sole basis of jewelry classification. Besides a number of metal beads, beads made of different organic and non-organic materials are discussed, since these are the beads which, since the Epipalaeolithic, form part of the archaeological material culture assemblage of the Near East. Besides their material and aesthetic value they have acquired a wide set of attributed magico-medical properties. It is a well-known fact that many beads found at burial sites dating back as far as prehistoric periods have to be interpreted as amulets.

Often, these amulets may be defined as functional personal adornment (Kennedy 1986: 50; Sleen n. d.: 55). In this context the question arises as to whether a clear distinction between amulets and jewelry might be reasonably drawn. Any material item worn by a person for mere adornment might be considered jewelry. Such a definition does, however, meet with certain problems: jewelry may serve particular practical purposes, as do, for example, hair-needles and fibulae. The word adornment itself is a rather vague term, not providing an answer on how and why adornment is sought and how the mechanism works. Considering the question of what »amulets« are, one is left puzzled with the huge amount of re-discussions and re-definitions of the term since Antiquity (Budge 1978: 12f). No attempt will be made to take up this discussion at this point. Instead it is suggested that an amulet be defined as any object believed to prevent misfortune and danger, to counteract or divert the effects of supernatural powers, and to bring luck and strength to its wearer (Knuf 1984: 10–18). Amulets may protect humans and animals, but also inanimate objects. They may work either apotropically or in an aggressive way, enforcing something upon somebody. In Jordan a well-known amulet of this type is meant to make its wearer, against his wish, fall madly in love with another person (Mershen 1982: 117–127). Another amulet may be thought to make its wearer irresistibly attractive to others. Amulets exist in virtually all materials and shapes. In our region two main groups of amulets are found. The first group is represented by written amulets (Mershen 1982). In general written for a particular purpose, most of them are strictly personal and often name the person the amulet was written for. Written by magico-religious specialists, they are supposed to work with the magical powers of incantation, spell, symbols, and particular supernatural beings which the scribe seeks to control by addressing them with their secret names or symbols (Winkler 1931).