

A PERSIAN TALISMAN.

Exhibited by Chancellor FERGUSON, April 5th, 1899.

I have the honour to exhibit a circular plate or disc of thin brass, which was brought from Persia to Windermere by a lady, who did not know what the object was. She, therefore, sent it to a bazaar to be sold for a charity. It was purchased by a curate, who sent it to me, by way of a Christmas card, with a note that it seemed to have upon it the signs of the Zodiac in some irregular order.

The disc is $3\frac{3}{4}$ inches in diameter. Its centre is occupied by a circle of $\frac{5}{8}$ inch in diameter containing a rude human face, representing the sun. Ranged round the central sun, in a circle or ring, are twelve cartouches, each containing a short inscription in either Persian or Arabic, the letters of the alphabet in those two languages being the same. To this ring of cartouches I shall return: outside of it comes a ring of twelve circles or roundels each touching its two next neighbours, and each containing a figure, human or bestial. In the spandrils, or triangular gores, between the roundels are markings resembling the characters of the inscriptions in the ring of cartouches.

Not being myself either a Persian or an Arabic scholar, I sent the disc to our member Mr. H. S. Cowper, F.S.A. He found the inscriptions were in Persian, and not in Arabic; this was what one might expect from the known history of the disc, and he conjectured that it was a talisman of one sort or another. He also made out the figures in the roundels to be the signs of the Zodiac, thus:

“Beginning under the face of the sun and reading from right to left:

1. Cancer.
2. Taurus.
3. Virgo.
4. Libra.
5. Gemini.

6. Leo.
7. Aquarius or Sagittarius??
8. Scorpio.
9. Aries.
10. Pisces.
11. Capricornus, with a fish tail?¹
12. Capricornus?

If No. 12 had been an archer it would have filled in well; but there seems one mountain goat too many."

It will be observed that the signs are not arranged in the usual order, as recorded in the well-known memorial hexameters:—

Sunt Aries, Taurus, Gemini, Cancer, Leo, Virgo,
Libraque, Scorpius, Arcitenens, Caper, Amphora, Pisces.²

Now every one of these twelve signs was supposed to have an influence or power over certain parts of the human body. Thus Chaucer tells us "euerich of thise 12 Signes hath respecte to a certein parcelle of the body of a man and hath it in gouernance; as aries hath thin heued, & taurus thy nekke & thy throte gemyni thyn armholes & thin armes, & so forth: as shal be shewed more pleyn in the 5 partie of this tretis."³

Unluckily, Chaucer, for some reason or other, never wrote the fifth part of his treatise on the Astrolabe, from which the above is taken.⁴ But a MS. copy of the treatise in the library of Trinity College, Cambridge, contains a diagram which shows the influence of the Zodiactal signs upon parts of the human body.⁵ This diagram

¹ Capricornus is frequently represented with a fish tail, symbolising the sun rising out of the ocean.

² The same twelve signs in the same order as in the hexameters, are in use in Persia under the following names:—

Verak (the Lamb).
Tora (the Bull).
Do-pat kar (the Two Figures).
Kalakang (the Crab).
Ser (the Lion).
Khusak (the Virgin).
Tarazuk (the Balance).
Gazdum (the Scorpion).
Nimas (the Sagittary).
Vahic (the Sea-goat).
Dut (the Water-pot).
Mali'k (the Fish).

The Arabs banished human figures from the signs, replacing—

Gemini, } (the two Peacocks,
Virgo, and } by < the Wheat-sheaf, and
Aquarius } (the Mule.

We are indebted for this information to a paper by Robert Brown, jun., F.S.A., "On a German Astrological Manuscript, and on the Origin of the Signs of the Zodiac," *Archæologia*, Vol. XLVII, pp. 336-360.

³ From "A Treatise on the Astrolabe," by Geoffrey Chaucer, edited by W. W. Skeat for the Early English Text Society.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. xxiii.

⁵ *Ibid.*, Plate VII, Fig. 19, and p. lxi.

shows that Aries takes the head, and that the order of the Zodiacal Signs is gone regularly through, descending the human body, and ending with Aquarius for the legs below the knee, and Pisces for the feet.

Thus much at present for the ring of roundels with Zodiacal Signs.

With regard to the inscriptions in the ring of cartouches, I have had much difficulty in obtaining a construe. Mr. Cowper submitted the disc in Edinburgh to a distinguished Persian scholar, long resident in the country. He conjectured each cartouche contained one of the names of God, but was unable to read them, as the letters were either of an archaic character, or else engraved by an illiterate person. I next sent the disc to a friend of mine in London, a retired Indian official, who took it to the library of the India Office, with no better results. The disc was then sent to Mr. E. G. Browne, of Pembroke College, University Reader in Persian at Cambridge, who sent the following account of it.

PEMBROKE COLLEGE,
CAMBRIDGE.

Dear Sir,

May 5, 1898.

I must apologise very much for not having sooner replied to your letter of 26th April, but I could not satisfy myself as to the use for which the disc was intended, and kept it back in the hopes of obtaining some light on this. Professor Rieu (formerly keeper of the Oriental MSS. in the British Museum, now Professor of Arabic here), who has a large experience in such things, is of opinion that it is of the nature of a charm or talisman, and he is probably right.

The twelve figures in circles which run round the circumference, are, I think, intended to represent the twelve signs of the Zodiac. Some of them, *e.g.*, the Fish (حوت), the Scorpion, the Scales (میزان), the Goat, etc., are pretty clear, while some of the animals are somewhat ambiguous. The small characters lying above and below the points of contact of the circles are too vague in their isolation for me to be able to identify them, but the twelve groups of characters in the inner circle, round the rudely-

drawn face in the middle are various attributes of God, with the با ("O") of the vocative prefixed, *e.g.* :—

یا سلطان, *Ya Sultan!* ("O King!")

یا مَنَّان, *Ya Mannan!* ("O Beneficent One!")

یا سُبْحَانَ, *Ya Subhan!* ("O Laudable One!")

I have not made a sufficiently careful study of talismans and charms to enable me to say more than this about the disc. If I had been in London, or had been able to keep the disc by me till some of my Persian friends came to see me, I might have consulted them as to its nature. If the owner is very desirous to know more of its uses and properties, he might, if in London, call at the Persian Legation (30, Ennismore Gardens, South Kensington), and ask for *Mirza Husseyn Kuli Khan*, one of the Secretaries, who is a very old friend of mine, and knows both Persian and English very well, and who would, I am sure, if this letter was sent in to explain the matter, look at the disc and throw any light he could on it.

Yours very sincerely,

EDWARD G. BROWNE.

Accordingly I called at the Persian Legation and saw *Mirza Husseyn Kuli Khan*, who was most courteous and obliging. He and another gentleman, also a Persian, confirmed Mr. Browne's statement that the inscriptions in the cartouches are the names of God.

A friend has supplied the following list and translation.

Ya Sultan	O! King!
„ Hannan	„ compassionate
„ Mannan	„ beneficent
„ Daiyan	„ judge
„ Rahman	„ merciful
„ Subhan	„ glorious
„ Hannan	
„ Mannan	
„ Daiyan	
„ Rahman	
„ Subhan	
„ Ghufrān	„ pardoner. ¹

¹ The letters composing each name are not engraved in the order they would be written in a manuscript, or

printed in a book, but are dotted about the cartouches in any order.

Ya Sultan is opposite the Bull, and the list just given proceeds from left to right. Ya Sultan occurs once, as does Ya Ghufran; the others are repeated twice, but the reading Ya Rahman under the Fish is disputed.

No one has yet been able to read the letters, if letters they are, in the spandrils above and below the points of contact of the circles; one Persian scholar declines to admit them to be anything else but ornament. I, however, do not see much that is ornamental about them, but I am not a Persian scholar. If they are letters, they probably would explain the connection between the ring of cartouches, and the ring of roundels.

Mirza Husseyn Kuli Khan and his friend recognised the disc as a talisman used by the poorer classes to avert disease, but how used, they did not seem to know. I would suggest that probably a person desirous of averting an attack of, say, gout in the foot, would consult the talisman and then address his prayers to God by the name opposite the Sign, Pisces, which has influence over the feet.