

The Seven Sleepers of Ephesus in the Christian and Islamic magical tradition

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Abstract

The Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, a late antique Christian tale that flourished in both Christian and Islamic medieval traditions, incorporated various magical elements that enhanced its cultural resonance. This essay examines how magical components—including the miraculous preservation of the Sleepers' bodies and their connection to healing practices—shaped the narrative's evolution and adaptation across different societies. By analyzing the integration of the Seven Sleepers into Anglo-Saxon charms and Islamic magical traditions, this study demonstrates how religious narratives can absorb and reflect changing cultural values while addressing practical spiritual needs.

Keywords: *Religious Syncretism, Magic, Cultural Adaptation*

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Introduction

The legend of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus is a late antique Christian tale that gained widespread popularity in both Christian and Islamic traditions during the medieval period. While primarily a religious narrative affirming the doctrine of bodily resurrection, the story contains several elements that could be interpreted as magical or supernatural.

The belief in magic amulets has been a prominent aspect of human culture throughout history, serving as objects of protection and symbols of faith. These enchanted charms have played a significant role in shaping the narratives and legends that have captivated people's imaginations for centuries. One such captivating tale is that of the seven sleepers of Ephesus, a story steeped in mysticism and divine intervention. This essay explores the contribution of the belief in magic amulets to the narrative of the seven sleepers, delving into their significance as symbols of faith and resilience amidst religious persecution. By examining this connection, we gain insight into how magical elements can shape stories and provide solace in times of adversity.

Specifically, this study aims to analyze the magical elements present in the original Seven Sleepers legend and their interpretations across different cultural contexts, examining their incorporation into magical practices and charms, particularly in Islamic and Anglo-Saxon traditions, and exploring the significance of the number seven in the legend and its broader implications in religious and magical symbolism. Moreover, it investigates the use of the Seven Sleepers' names in protective charms and healing practices, focusing on their application in sleep-related issues and general healing, and assessing the syncretic nature of the legend's magical interpretations, particularly in the context of early medieval Christianity. Starting from a review of primary and secondary sources, it is intended to make a critical examination of key texts, including religious narratives, magical charms, and inscriptions, to identify recurring themes, symbols, and magical elements associated with the Sleepers legend, with a cross-cultural comparative approach, examining how this legend has been interpreted and utilized in different cultural and religious contexts, and tracing its development from a religious narrative to its incorporation in magical practices.

Magical Elements in the Original Legend

Several aspects of the Seven Sleepers narrative involve supernatural or magical occurrences. The central miracle of the story is the young men falling into a divinely-induced sleep that preserves them for centuries. God caused them to fall into a deep sleep and kept them asleep for an unnaturally long time, ranging from about 150-400 years depending on the version. It demonstrates divine power over nature and time, showing God's ability to suspend natural laws. The theme of magical sleep, as a form of suspension of vital functions, induced by divine or human intervention, is quite widespread. We can quote the Greek myth of Endymion, a shepherd granted eternal youth through endless sleep by Zeus, the Norse legend of Brunhild, a Valkyrie put into a magical sleep by Odin, the folktale of Rip Van Winkle, who sleeps for 20 years and awakens to find the world changed, the fairy tale of Sleeping Beauty, where a princess and her kingdom are put into a magical sleep for 100 years, folklore about preserved bodies of saints or holy figures, or the Buddhist legend of Aśvaghōṣa, who is said to have entered a deep meditative trance for centuries. These stories share themes of magical preservation through sleep, divine intervention, and awakening to a changed world. However, it's important to note that the Seven Sleepers legend is primarily a religious tale, with its magical elements serving to illustrate divine power and religious doctrines, rather than being purely fantastical. Related to the miraculous sleep is the preservation of the Sleepers' physical bodies over the span of centuries without aging or decay. Their bodies remained unchanged during their long slumber. God protected the Sleepers while they slumbered. In some versions, this includes sealing the cave entrance to hide them from persecutors.

The outdated coins the Sleepers attempt to use upon awakening serve as miraculous proof of their story and the length of their sleep. While not explicitly described as magical objects, the coins function in a way that is central to the miraculous nature of the legend. They serve as physical evidence of a supernatural occurrence, bridging the natural and supernatural elements of the story in a tangible way. The coins function as tangible, miraculous proof of the Sleepers' story. When they try to use these ancient coins, it immediately demonstrates the vast amount of time that has passed during their sleep. This serves as a magical means of verifying their incredible tale. Moreover, the coins act as a form of divine authentication of the miracle. They provide physical evidence of God's power to preserve the Sleepers through time, making the supernatural

event verifiable through mundane objects. Magically, the coins serve as a bridge between the past world the Sleepers left and the present world they awakened to. They are physical artifacts that have traversed time along with the Sleepers. The outdated nature of the coins symbolizes the magical transformation of the world during the Sleepers' slumber. It dramatically illustrates how much has changed, including the shift from a pagan to a Christian empire. The fact that the coins survived intact along with the Sleepers adds to the miraculous nature of their preservation. It extends the magical effect beyond just their bodies to include their possessions. In storytelling terms, the coins serve as a magical plot device that allows for the immediate recognition of the Sleepers' miraculous nature by those they encounter upon awakening. The presence of the coins suggests a divine plan in the Sleepers' awakening. It provides them with a means to immediately prove their story, facilitating their role in affirming the truth of resurrection. This use of everyday objects as proof of miraculous events is a common motif in religious legends, where the mundane and the miraculous intersect to provide tangible evidence of divine intervention.

Some versions mention God leaving a "watcher" or guardian to protect the Sleepers' bodies while they slept. The Islamic version adds a dog that God set to watch over the cave and the Sleepers (Ceci, 2011). In some Christian traditions, guardian angels are believed to watch over and protect individuals. The idea of divine protection during sleep or vulnerable states is a common theme in many religious traditions.¹ For instance, in Judaism, there are prayers recited before sleep asking for God's protection. In some mythologies, there are stories of gods or supernatural beings appointed to guard specific places or people. While not exactly the same as the Seven Sleepers scenario, these stories share the theme of divine appointment of guardians. The idea of divine protection is certainly central to the legend, but the specific manifestation of this protection may vary in different versions of the story².

¹ Barbara E. Borg, *Slumber under divine protection. From vague pagan hopes to Christian belief*, in Nicola Hömke / Gian Franco Chiai / Antonia Jenik (eds.), *Bilder von dem Einen Gott: Die Rhetorik des Bildes in monotheistischen Gottesdarstellungen der Spätantike* [Images of the One God: The Rhetoric of the Image in Late Antique Representations of a Monotheistic God], Berlin-Boston, De Gruyter, 2016, p. 263-288. Thomas H. McAlpine, *Sleep, divine and human, in the Old Testament*, JSOT Supplement Series 38, Sheffield, JSOT, 1987.

² Holberg, J. L. (2010). "The Courage to See It": Toward an Understanding of Glory. *Christianity and Literature*, 59, 283–300.

Magical Practices and Charms

The belief in magic amulets played a significant role in shaping the narrative of the seven sleepers of Ephesus. According to legend, these sleepers sought refuge inside a cave to escape religious persecution during the reign of Decius. As they slept, their bodies remained miraculously preserved for several centuries until they eventually woke up. The story gained widespread popularity due to its supernatural elements. The Seven Sleepers legend was not only reinterpreted in literature but also became incorporated into magical practices and charms. Their names were used in protective charms, particularly those related to sleep and healing³. Used in charms to treat sleep disorders, their names were used also in charms to treat fevers⁴. Moreover, the legend inspired the creation of talismanic objects. In some Islamic traditions, the Seven Sleepers were associated with divination and prophecy.

These magical charms were believed to safeguard against evil forces and ensure divine protection for those who possessed them. They served as a powerful symbol of faith and resilience in times of adversity, reinforcing the notion that God's intervention could surpass human limitations. The inclusion of magic amulets not only added an element of mysticism but also emphasized the strength and importance of one's beliefs. This narrative resonated with audiences because it tapped into their desire for transcendence and hope amidst challenging circumstances. It provided solace by reminding individuals that even in times of oppression or persecution, there existed supernatural means through which divine aid could be obtained.

The Seven

The number seven carries significant mystical and symbolic weight⁵ that

³ Éva Pócs, *Dream Healing: The Nocturnal World of Healing*, in Éva Pócs (ed.), *The Magical And Sacred Medical World*, Newcastle, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019, p. 343-376.

⁴ Alessia Bellusci, *Oneiric Aggressive Magic: Sleep Disorders in Late Antique Jewish Tradition*, in Siam Bhayro / Catherine Rider (eds.), *Demons and Illness from Antiquity to the Early-Modern Period*. Magical and Religious Literature of Late Antiquity, Volume: 5, Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2017, p. 134-174; Zsuzsa Závoti, "... And Swore that He May Never Harm the Sick or Anyone that can Sing this Charm": Response to Mental Disorder in Anglo-Saxon England in the Context of Medical Charms, in Éva Pócs (ed.), *Charms and Charming: Studies on Magic in Everyday Life*, Studia Mythologica Slavica Supplementa, Supplementum 15, Ljubljana, Založba, 2019, p. 119-128; Louise S. Milne, *One, Two, Many: Dream-Culture, Charms and Nightmares*, in Éva Pócs (ed.), *Charms ...*, p. 129-167.

⁵ Nelson Cowan / Candice Morey / Zhijian Chen, *The legend of the magical number seven*, in Sergio Della Sala (ed.), *Tall Tales About the Mind and Brain: Separating Fact From Fiction*, Oxford-New York, Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 45-59.

contributes to the magical associations of the Seven Sleepers legend and its use in apotropaic amulet iconography. It has deep spiritual and symbolic meanings in many cultures and religions and is considered a sacred or mystical number in various traditions, associated with completeness or perfection. The Seven Sleepers legend itself revolves around seven holy figures, giving the number mystical weight in that context. Seven was seen as having magical protective properties when used in charms and amulets, and had significance in cosmological/universal understanding. In astrological lore, it related to the seven classical planets (Sun, Moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn) which governed all aspects of life according to Hellenistic and medieval cosmology. So, the seven youths could be associated with the seven planetary forces, bringing the entire cosmos under their mystical purview; though this connection is not explicitly made in the sources. Representing this planetary influence on amulets allowed them to control or avert any negative astrological conditions.

The mystical associations with the number seven contributed to the magical potency attributed to the Seven Sleepers legend when used in protective amulets and charms. The sacred status of seven across multiple traditions enhanced its perceived apotropaic power.

The pervasive use of seven⁶ has led to various theological interpretations: Seven is often seen as representing the completeness of God's work and will, viewed as a number of perfection, combining the divine number three with the earthly number four. The number is associated with God's covenant relationships, as in the seven-day week established at Creation. In some interpretations, seven represents spiritual fullness or maturity. So the symbolism of seven has influenced various religious practices (Sabbath observance, seven-branched menorah, seven sacraments, seven virtues and seven deadly sins). The enumerative repetition of seven throughout the Bible and Judeo-Christian traditions serves as a powerful symbol of divine completeness, perfection, and covenant. Its pervasive use in biblical narratives, theological concepts, and religious practices has cemented its place as a number of profound spiritual significance. Understanding the symbolism of seven provides valuable insight into the structure and

⁶ The number seven appears with remarkable frequency throughout the Bible and Judeo-Christian traditions, serving as a powerful symbol of divine completeness, perfection, and covenant Genesis 1-2; Genesis 7:2; Genesis 41; Joshua 6; 2 Kings 5:10; Proverbs 9:1; Daniel 4:16, 23, 25; Revelation 1-3; Matthew 18:22; Mark 8:5-8.

meaning of many Judeo-Christian texts and traditions. Using the number seven to identify the Sleepers further underscored their perceived holiness and tie to biblical paradigms. Displaying this number brought its scriptural symbolic power to any protective talisman.

The number seven held a place of unparalleled symbolic power in European folkloric magic from the medieval period through early modern times⁷. Its associations with cosmic completion, divine creation, and natural cycles made it an ideal number for structuring magical rituals, charms, and esoteric systems like alchemy. Whether in the complex symbolism of learned magical texts or in simple folk charms, seven represented a point of confluence between spiritual and material realms. Understanding the role of seven provides key insights into how European magicians and folk practitioners conceptualized the universe and humanity's place within it. Further comparative research could illuminate whether similar uses of seven appear in magical traditions worldwide.

The combination between the value given to the number seven by the biblical tradition with the magical power inherent in it in folklore legends meant that the legend of the Seven Sleepers increasingly took on a magical power and was reused in the creation of objects that drew their inspiration from that legend. their strength. So while seemingly arbitrary, the conscious use of the number seven created a talismanic and iconographic archetype overflowing with established symbolic resonances deeply meaningful within the worldview that birthed the Seven Sleepers myth itself. This lent amulet depictions great esoteric power and prestige.

The Seven Sleepers in Arabic Inscriptions on Healing Objects

The legend of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus has held an important place in Islamic traditions for centuries. In Islamic contexts, the story of the *Ashab al-Kahf* [Companions of the Cave], as they are known, has been incorporated into various magical and medicinal practices. The miraculous

⁷ The importance of the number seven in European magical and alchemical traditions, demonstrates its pervasive use in symbolism, rituals, and magical practices (Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions: A Historical Introduction*, Oxford-New York, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 45). Cords with seven knots were used for healing, protection, and other magical purposes (Owen Davies, *Grimoires: A History of Magic Books*, Oxford-New York, Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 78). Combinations of seven herbs were common in folk remedies and magical preparations, and many folk magic rituals required seven days of repetition to take full effect. Protective charms often incorporated seven objects (stones, seeds, etc) (Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, Cambridge UK, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 133).

sleep is seen as a sign of Allah's power and ability to resurrect the dead on Judgment Day. The Qur'an presents the Sleepers as evidence for doubters of resurrection⁸.

Archaeological and textual evidence indicates that the names of the Seven Sleepers were frequently used in protective charms and healing practices.⁹ The legend inspired the creation of talismanic objects, such as a 13th-century bronze mirror inscribed with the names of the Seven Sleepers¹⁰. The names were used in charms for sleep-related issues and general healing. Some charms invoking the Seven Sleepers were used to treat fevers.

A study examining magical practices in Muslim Ingush healing traditions found two objects with Arabic inscriptions used for treatment that contained the names of the Seven Sleepers¹¹.

While the core narrative remains similar across versions, the Islamic retellings include a notable addition - the dog Qitmir who accompanies and guards the sleeping youths, as a companion and guardian of the Sleepers. According to these versions, Allah set Qitmir at the entrance of the cave to watch over the Companions of the Cave (*Ashab al-Kahf*) during their long slumber. The inclusion of Qitmir imbues the dog with several layers of magical and symbolic significance: As a divinely appointed guardian, Qitmir represents Allah's protection over the faithful Sleepers. This reinforces the theme of divine providence central to the narrative. Positioned at the threshold of the cave, Qitmir occupies a liminal space between the mundane world outside and the miraculous realm within where time stands still. This liminal status enhances Qitmir's magical aura. Dogs are often symbols of loyalty in folklore. Qitmir's steadfast vigil over centuries emphasizes the virtues of faith and constancy. Like the Sleepers themselves, Qitmir's preservation over centuries demonstrates Allah's power over life, death, and time. In some folk beliefs, Qitmir came to be

⁸ Patricia Crone, "Nothing but Time Destroys Us": *The Deniers of Resurrection in the Qur'an*, in "Journal of the International Qur'anic Studies Association", 1, 1, 2016, p. 144.

⁹ Venetia Porter (ed.), *Arabic and Persian seals and amulets in the British Museum*, London, The British Museum, 2011, pp. 147-149, nn. A48-A54; Venetia Porter, *Amulets Inscribed with the Names of the 'Seven Sleepers' of Ephesus in the British Museum*, in Fahmida Suleman (ed.), *Word of God, Art of Man: The Qur'an and Its Creative Expressions*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 123-134.

¹⁰ Tewfik Canaan, *The Decipherment of Arabic Talismans*, in Emilie Savage-Smith (ed.), *Magic and Divination in Early Islam*, London, Routledge, 2004, p. 125-178.

¹¹ Makka Albogachieva / Maryam Rezvan, *Some Magical Practices in Muslim Ingush Healing Traditions*, in "Manuscripta Orientalia. International Journal for Oriental Manuscript Research", 29, 2, 2023, p. 70-76.

seen as a potential intercessor between humans and the divine, capable of carrying prayers and bestowing blessings.

The magical associations of Qitmir in the Companions of the Cave legend led to the dog's name being incorporated into various folk magical and healing practices in Islamic cultures. The name of Qitmir was inscribed on talismanic objects for protection. For example, a 13th-century bronze mirror was found inscribed with the names of the Seven Sleepers and their dog Qitmir¹². Objects with Arabic inscriptions containing the names of the Seven Sleepers and Qitmir were used in healing practices¹³. A study of Muslim Ingush healing traditions found two such objects used for treatment. Reciting the names of the Seven Sleepers and Qitmir was believed to offer protection, particularly against sleep-related issues or during travel. Some folk practices involved symbolic interactions with Qitmir, such as offering wishes or prayers to the divine dog¹⁴. Beyond its magical associations, the inclusion of Qitmir in the Islamic Seven Sleepers narrative holds deeper symbolic and theological significance. The elevation of a dog to a divinely appointed guardian challenges notions of ritual purity and emphasizes Allah's universal compassion. Qitmir represents how elements of the natural world can serve as instruments of divine will and protection. The dog's inclusion emphasizes themes of loyalty and companionship in faith, even across species boundaries. As the only conscious entity present during the Sleepers' long slumber, Qitmir serves as a witness to the miracle, enhancing the story's credibility.

The addition of the dog Qitmir to the Islamic versions of the Companions of the Cave legend demonstrates how religious narratives can evolve to incorporate new elements that resonate with cultural values and spiritual needs. Qitmir's role as a magical protector and symbol of divine providence enriched the tale's significance for Muslim audiences¹⁵. Furthermore,

¹² Gwendolyn Collaco, *With Sleep Comes a Fusion of Worlds: The Seven Sleepers of Ephesus Through Formation and Transformation*, A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts in Medieval and Renaissance Studies and Classics, Latin Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, New York, May 2011, Senior Capstone Projects. Paper 3, p. 113.

¹³ Collaco, *With Sleep ...*, p. 125-126.

¹⁴ Albogachieva / Rezvan, *Some Magical Practices ...*, p. 70-76.

¹⁵ The attitude of the Islamic world towards dogs is quite negative. In fact, they are considered impure animals. This makes the presence of the dog Qitmir in the Islamic version of the Seven Sleepers legend all the more significant. Cf. Richard M. Foltz, *Animals in Islamic Tradition and Muslim Cultures*, Oxford, One World, 2006, p. 129-143; Jalal ai-din Rumi, *Mathnawi al-ma'anawi*, trans. R. A. Nicholson, *The Mathnawi of Jalalu'ddin Rumi*, Vol. 5; London, Luzac, 1925-1940), vv. 2008-11, p. 131:

the dog's incorporation into subsequent magical and healing practices shows how elements of sacred narratives can take on lives of their own in folk belief and ritual. The enduring popularity of Qitmīr in Islamic folk tradition highlights the power of animal figures in religious symbolism and the complex interplay between formal theology and popular spirituality¹⁶.

The divinatory and prophetic aspects of the Seven Sleepers legend appear to have varied across different Islamic cultures and regions. In Turkey, there are multiple cave sites associated with the Seven Sleepers legend, each with its own set of devotional practices. These sites, such as those in Tarsus, Afşin, and Lice, encompass a variety of rituals that may include divinatory elements¹⁷. The study of Muslim Ingush healing traditions reveals specific uses of the Seven Sleepers' names in protective and healing objects, suggesting localized adaptations of the legend for divinatory purposes¹⁸.

The use of the Seven Sleepers' names in healing objects can be understood in several ways: By invoking figures associated with divine preservation, the objects seek to channel similar protective power. Since the Sleepers' story involves a miraculous sleep, their names were seen as particularly efficacious for sleep-related issues. The Sleepers' awakening after centuries serves as a metaphor for healing and revival from illness. In Islamic magical traditions, the names themselves were believed to carry inherent power that could be activated through inscription.

The incorporation of the Seven Sleepers' names into Arabic inscriptions on healing objects demonstrates the complex interplay between religious narrative, folk belief, and medical practice in Islamic cultures. This

Wolf and bear and lion know what love is:
He that is blind to love is inferior to a dog!
If the dog had not a vein of love,
How should the dog of the
Cave have sought to win the heart of the Seven Sleepers?
You have not smelt the heart in your own kind:
How should you smell the heart in wolf and sheep?
Rumi's reference is to Qur'an, 18 :17-21.

¹⁶ Anna Tozzi di Marco, *Preliminary analysis of the symbolism and the agentivity of the dog Qitmīr during the devotion to the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus (Ashāb al-Kahf)*, in "EURAS Journal of Social Sciences", 3, 2021, p. 191-209.

¹⁷ Anna Tozzi di Marco, *The Seven Sleepers Tradition (Ashab-ı Kehf) in Afşin, Tarsus and Lice: Comparative Analysis of their Intangible Heritage*, in "Edeb Erkan", 5, 2024, p. 55-66.

¹⁸ Bartłomiej Grysa, *The Legend of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus in Syriac and Arab sources – a comparative study*, in "Orientalia Christiana Cracoviensia" 2, 2010, p. 45-59.

usage shows how a story emphasizing God's power over sleep, time, and resurrection was creatively adapted to address everyday health concerns. Further research into the specific formulae used in these inscriptions and their distribution across different Islamic cultures could yield additional insights into how sacred narratives were operationalized in magical healing practices.

Anglo-Saxon Metrical Charm 3

In Anglo-Saxon England, the names of the Seven Sleepers were frequently used in protective charms, particularly those related to sleep and healing¹⁹. Their inclusion in Metrical Charm 3 is part of this broader tradition of using the Sleepers as spiritual protectors.

Anglo-Saxon Metrical Charm 3, commonly known as "Against a Dwarf," is a fascinating example of the syncretic nature of early medieval English Christianity. This charm, which invokes the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus to protect against a supernatural threat, demonstrates how pre-Christian magical practices were adapted and incorporated into Anglo-Saxon Christian culture.²⁰

Metrical Charm 3 is found in the 11th century manuscript London, British Library, Cotton Caligula A. xv. The charm reads:

Man sceal niman VII lytle oflætan swycle man mid ofrað and written þas naman on ælcra oflætan: Maximianus, Malchus, Johannes, Martimianus, Dionisius, Constantinus, Serafion.

One shall take seven little wafers such as one offers with, and write these names on each wafer. The charm then goes on to provide instructions for its use, including reciting it in the left ear, right ear, and over the head of the afflicted person²¹. The "dwarf" (*dweorh*) mentioned in the charm's title likely refers to some kind of malevolent supernatural entity rather than a person of small stature. Dwarfs appear in other Anglo-Saxon charms and medical texts as causes of illness or misfortune.

¹⁹ British Library, Harley MSS 273, fol. 213r, and 585, fol. 167r–v, Royal MS 12 E xx, fol. 162v, Sloane MS 431, fol. 45r; Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica, Reg. Lat. 338, fol. 91r; and York Minster Library, MS XVI.E.32, fols. 172r and 173r. (cf. Katherine Storm Hindley, *Textual Magic: Charms and Written Amulets in Medieval England*, Chicago-London, University of Chicago Press, 2023, p. 67; Hugh Magennis (ed.), *The Anonymous Old English Legend of the Seven Sleepers*, Durham, Durham Medieval Texts 7, 1994).

²⁰ David E. Gay, *Anglo-Saxon Metrical Charm 3 against a Dwarf: A Charm against Witch-Riding?*, in "Folklore", 99, no. 2, 1988, p. 174-177.

²¹ Wilfrid Bonser, *Anglo-Saxon Laws and Charms Relating to Theft*, in "Folklore", 57, 1946, p. 7-11.

The most striking feature of this charm is its invocation of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus. The use of the Seven Sleepers in a charm against a "dwarf" is a clear example of religious syncretism in Anglo-Saxon England. The charm combines Christian figures (the Sleepers) with a pre-Christian magical practice (the use of written charms against supernatural threats).²² This syncretic approach was common in Anglo-Saxon Christianity.²³

The continued use of charms and other magical practices alongside Christian devotion suggests that the Anglo-Saxons did not see these as incompatible. The use of communion wafers as the medium for the charm further demonstrates this blending of Christian and pre-Christian elements. By writing the names of the Sleepers on consecrated bread, the charm maker is literally inscribing Christian holy figures onto a physical representation of Christ's body.

Anglo-Saxon Metrical Charm 3 provides valuable insight into the religious and cultural landscape of early medieval England. Its combination of Christian figures and pre-Christian magical practices demonstrates the complex ways in which Anglo-Saxon Christians negotiated between old and new belief systems. The charm's use of the Seven Sleepers legend also highlights the importance of these figures in Anglo-Saxon spirituality. Their invocation in a protective charm suggests that they were seen as powerful intercessors, capable of defending against supernatural threats.

Other anglo-saxon charms

While Anglo-Saxon Metrical Charm 3 is perhaps the best-known charm invoking the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, it is not the only example of these figures being used in Anglo-Saxon magical practices. There are multiple examples of charms against fever that invoke the Seven Sleepers. W. Bonser's seminal 1945 study *The Seven Sleepers of Ephesus in Anglo-Saxon and Later Recipes* provides valuable insight into the use of the Seven Sleepers in Anglo-Saxon magical traditions.²⁴ Bonser identifies several charms beyond Metrical Charm 3 that invoke these figures.

²² John E. Richardson, *Hlude Woeran Hy: Syncretic Christianity in the Old English Charm Wio Foerstice*, in "Mankind Quarterly", 42, 2001, p. 21-45.

²³ Clare A. Lees, *Didacticism and the Christian Community: The Teachers and the Taught*, in R. M. Liuzza (ed.), *Old English Literature*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2002, p. 246 notes that "Charms, medicinal recipes, poetry, and other material artifacts (...) offer evidence for a more culturally diverse world of belief than the Christian homilies".

²⁴ Wilfrid Bonser, *The Seven Sleepers of Ephesus in Anglo-Saxon and Later Recipes*, in "Folklore", 56, 1945, p. 254-256.

The names of the Seven Sleepers occur in various charms of the Middle Ages, not only to secure sleep but also to treat fever. This suggests that the Sleepers' association with miraculous preservation extended to ideas of healing and protection from illness.

A charm from MS. Harley 464, f. 177 invokes the Seven Sleepers for protection against chills and fevers:

In nomine domini nostri Jesu Christi, et in nomine Sanctae et Individuae Trinitatis et in nomine sanctorum Septem dormientium, quorum nomina haec sunt: Maximianus, Malchus, Martinianus, Johannes, Seraphion, Constantinus, Dionysius.²⁵

MS. Regius 2 A XX, f. 52 contains a protective charm invoking the Seven Sleepers:

In Epheso civitate in monte Celion requiescunt sancti Septem dormentes, quorum ista sunt nomina: Maximianus, Malchus, Martinianus, Dionisius, Iohannes, Serapion, Constantinus. Per eorum merita et piam intercessionem dignetur dominus liberare famulum suum N. de omni malo. Amen.²⁶

One charm is described as "the best charm for nightmare,"²⁷ indicating that the Sleepers were seen as particularly efficacious against sleep-related supernatural threats.

Charms in Latin that invoke the Seven Sleepers, suggesting that their use crossed linguistic boundaries within Anglo-Saxon magical practices.²⁸

Additional Latin charms against fever invoking the Seven Sleepers are found in MS Royal 12. E. xx. fol. 162v, MS Colton Faustina A. x. fol. 136, and MS III. Q. I. fol. 95 v.²⁹

The use of the Seven Sleepers in Anglo-Saxon charms exemplifies the complex interplay between Christian and pagan elements in early medieval English magic. As Godfrid Storms notes, "In spite of its Christian wording the atmosphere of this charm is pagan. The magic numbers three and nine

²⁵ Godfrid Storms, *Anglo-Saxon Magic*, s-Gravenhage, Martinus Nijhoff, 1948, p. 277.

²⁶ Storms, *Anglo-Saxon ...*, p. 278.

²⁷ Wilfrid Bonser, *Magical Practices against Elves*, in "Folklore", 37, no. 4, 1926, p. 351.

²⁸ Cf. Lisa M.C. Weston, *The Language of Magic in two Old English Metrical Charms*, in "Neuphilologische Mitteilungen", 86, no. 2, 1985, pp. 176-186; Anne Lawrence-Mathers, *The problem of magic in early Anglo-Saxon England*, in "Reading Medieval Studies", XXXIII, 2007, p. 87-104.

²⁹ Bonser, *The Seven Sleepers ...*, p. 255.

play a conspicuous part and retain their full significance".³⁰ The Seven Sleepers, as Christian figures, provided a way to Christianize older magical practices. Their story of divine preservation made them ideal figures for protective magic, while their association with sleep allowed them to be incorporated into charms dealing with sleep-related issues. However, the use of these Christian figures in magical practices that likely had pre-Christian roots demonstrates the persistence of older beliefs and practices within the framework of Anglo-Saxon Christianity. This syncretic approach is characteristic of Anglo-Saxon religious culture more broadly.

The use of the Seven Sleepers in Anglo-Saxon charms beyond Metrical Charm 3 demonstrates the widespread adoption of these Christian figures into folk magical practices. Their invocation in charms for sleep, fever, and protection reveals how Christian narratives were adapted to address everyday concerns in Anglo-Saxon England. These charms provide valuable insight into the syncretic nature of Anglo-Saxon Christianity, showing how Christian figures could be incorporated into magical practices that likely had pre-Christian roots. This syncretism reflects the complex processes of religious and cultural change in early medieval England.

Conclusions

The legend of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, while originally a Christian religious tale, contains elements that have lent themselves to magical reinterpretation and reuse in later literature and folklore. By extracting the supernatural aspects from their religious context, storytellers, folklorists, and magical practitioners transformed the Seven Sleepers into a fertile source for fantastical narratives, magical beliefs, and protective practices. This demonstrates how even explicitly religious legends can evolve and be repurposed to serve new storytelling needs and cultural functions over time. The Seven Sleepers legend's journey from religious narrative to magical folklore exemplifies the dynamic nature of oral tradition and the enduring appeal of supernatural themes in human culture.

This study set out to explore the intricate relationship between the Seven Sleepers legend and magical practices across various cultural contexts, with a particular focus on how magical elements shaped this religious narrative and its subsequent use in protective and healing traditions. Our findings

³⁰ Storms, *Anglo-Saxon ...*, p. 276.

reveal a complex interplay between religious doctrine, folk beliefs, and magical practices that transcended cultural and religious boundaries.

The analysis of magical elements in the original Seven Sleepers legend reveals several aspects that lent themselves to supernatural interpretation. The central miracle of divinely-induced sleep that preserves the youths for centuries demonstrates divine power over nature and time. This theme of magical sleep resonates with similar motifs in various cultural traditions, from Greek mythology to Norse legends and fairy tales. The preservation of the Sleepers' bodies and the miraculous nature of their outdated coins upon awakening further contribute to the legend's supernatural aura. These elements, while primarily serving religious purposes in the original narrative, provided a foundation for later magical interpretations and practices.

Examining the incorporation of the Seven Sleepers narrative into magical practices and charms, reveals widespread adoption across different cultural contexts. In Islamic traditions, the names of the Companions of the Cave were frequently used in protective charms and healing practices. Archaeological evidence, such as the 13th-century bronze mirror inscribed with their names, demonstrates the creation of talismanic objects inspired by the legend. Similarly, in Anglo-Saxon England, the Seven Sleepers' names were incorporated into various charms, particularly those related to sleep and healing. The use of their names in charms against fever and other ailments suggests that their association with miraculous preservation extended to ideas of healing and protection from illness.

The significance of the number seven in the legend proves to be a crucial factor in its magical interpretations. Seven's deep spiritual and symbolic meanings across various cultures and religions enhanced the perceived magical potency of the Seven Sleepers legend when used in protective amulets and charms. Its associations with completeness, perfection, and divine creation in biblical and Judeo-Christian traditions, as well as its importance in European folkloric magic, contributed to the legend's power in magical contexts.

Investigating the use of the Seven Sleepers' names in protective charms and healing practices, our fourth objective, reveals a wide range of applications. From Arabic inscriptions on healing objects to Anglo-Saxon charms against supernatural threats and illnesses, the Sleepers' names were

believed to offer powerful protection. This widespread use demonstrates how elements of sacred narratives can take on lives of their own in folk belief and ritual.

Finally, assessing the syncretic nature of the Seven Sleepers legend's magical interpretations reveals a fascinating blend of religious and magical elements. The incorporation of the dog Qitmir in Islamic versions and the use of communion wafers in Anglo-Saxon charms demonstrate how the legend was adapted to resonate with different cultural values and spiritual needs. This syncretism reflects the complex processes of religious and cultural change in medieval societies.

This study primarily relied on textual evidence and archaeological findings, which may not fully represent the oral traditions and practices that were not recorded. Future research could benefit from a more comprehensive archaeological investigation of talismanic objects related to the Seven Sleepers across different cultures. Additionally, a comparative study of similar legends in other cultural contexts could provide further insights into the universal themes that lend themselves to magical interpretation.

While the sources used in this study provide valuable information on the magical uses of the Seven Sleepers legend, it's important to note that many of these interpretations are based on later folk practices rather than contemporaneous accounts. The evolution of the legend's magical associations over time deserves further scrutiny, as does the potential influence of scholarly interpretations on popular understanding of these practices.

The magical interpretations of the Seven Sleepers legend significantly reinforced themes of faith and resilience present in the original narrative. By invoking the Sleepers in protective charms and healing practices, believers sought to channel the divine protection and preservation demonstrated in the legend. This use of the legend in everyday magical practices shows how the themes of faith triumphing over adversity and divine protection in times of need resonated deeply with people across various cultures and time periods.

While the core elements of the Seven Sleepers legend remain consistent across cultures, its magical interpretations show interesting variations. Islamic traditions, for instance, place greater emphasis on the dog Qitmir,

incorporating it into protective practices. Anglo-Saxon charms, on the other hand, focus more on the Sleepers themselves, often invoking their names for protection against specific ailments or supernatural threats. These differences reflect the unique cultural and religious contexts in which the legend was received and adapted.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates how the Seven Sleepers legend transcended its origins as a religious narrative to become a significant element in magical practices across various cultures. The legend's journey from religious tale to magical folklore exemplifies the dynamic nature of oral tradition and the enduring appeal of supernatural themes in human culture. It provides valuable insight into how religious narratives can evolve and be repurposed to address everyday concerns and spiritual needs in diverse cultural contexts.