“Talismans to pacify the tomb: archeological evidence from Central China and Dunhuang”

Omnipresent in Chinese religious practice for more than two thousand years, talismans (fu 符) are composed of cryptographs and other designs inscribed or engraved on diverse media to serve as apotropaic, prophylactic, or therapeutic ritual implements. My presentation will focus on the earliest exemplars, the funerary talismans drawn on the potteries and wooden tablets « to pacify the tomb » (zhènmù 鎮墓) that have been brought to light by archeologists during the past decades. The most ancient, Eastern Han fu unearthed in central China will be examined and compared to those dating from the 3rd to 5th centuries found in the Gansu-Dunhuang region. We shall see that these talismans contain primary information on the mortuary and postmortem conceptions of the early first millennium. Their decipherment, moreover, allows us to situate them in an enduring astro-funerary tradition that was perpetuated in Dunhuang until as late as the 10th century. This transmission over the longue durée and its geographical diffusion call us to question the religious background of this talismanic tradition.