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Relics of Syriac Magic: Another Syriac Bowl for *Prwkz'd br Kwmy* and a Syriac Incantation Fragment in the British Museum

Abstract The contribution features the first editions of two unpublished Syriac incantation texts: a bowl sold at a Christie's auction in 1974 (present whereabouts unknown), and a fragment of a Syriac bowl housed in the British Museum and not included in the catalogue of the Aramaic incantation bowls of the British Museum published in 2000.

Keywords Syriac, Aramaic incantation bowls, Syriac script in Sasanian Mesopotamia, Late Eastern Aramaic

1 Introductory note

A few years ago the present author conducted a survey of both published and unpublished Syriac incantation bowls.¹ In the course of this activity, two unpublished Syriac incantation bowls came to the fore, that deserve the attention of the participants in the scholarly discussion on ancient Aramaic magic. First of all, because 'the only way to do justice to this material is to edit as much of it as possible in a systematic manner and to make it properly available to the public'.² Secondly, because these two specimens well demonstrate the utility of editing parallel versions of the incantations found on the bowls. 'Parallel' texts are spells based on a common *Vorlage*, that are used for different clients—with minor variations—and may be transmitted through different scribal traditions, crossing in their turn the Aramaic varieties attested in incantation bowls (Jewish Babylonian Aramaic, Syriac, Mandaic).

¹ Moriggi 2022: 57–59.

² Shaked 2001: 61.



In our case, text no. 1 adds to our repertoire a new version of a spell which is well known to the corpus of Syriac bowls. Furthermore, it was prepared for a client—*Prwkzʿd* son of *Kwmy*—who seems to have ordered a number of bowls in his name in Syriac as well as in Jewish Babylonian Aramaic and Mandaic. As to text no. 2, what remains of it on the fragment of bowl it was written on is really scant. In fact, it was originally excluded from the catalogue of the incantation bowls housed in the British Museum edited by J.B. Segal in 2000 (see below § 3). Nowadays, after the publication of parallel texts, it is possible to at least identify the type of formula this text might have featured.

2 Another Syriac bowl for *Prwkzʿd* son of *Kwmy* (Figure 1 and 2)

In 1974 a Syriac incantation bowl was sold as lot no. 348 at Christie’s Antiquities ‘Hera’ Auction (London, 10th–11th July).³ In spite of the quality of the published image, a careful examination of the photograph allowed the present author to read almost all of the text. The following *editio princeps* is arranged in accordance with Moriggi (2014: 3–4).

Dimensions: diameter 18,8 cm.⁴

Remarks: the catalogue reads: ‘a Mesopotamian Aramaic pottery incantation bowl, of hemispherical form with flat base and straight rim, the interior inscribed with nine line incantation text spiralling outwards from the centre [...] circa 4th century A.D.’.⁵ The only picture at the present author’s disposal is the one published in the catalogue and it is of rather poor quality. It was neither possible to trace the present location of the bowl, nor to obtain a new image of it. The study of the text is thus based on what could be read of it from this picture with absolute certainty. As with bowl no. 47 in Moriggi (2014: 200–204), containing a text which parallels the one featured in this bowl, the basin is well preserved, with the ink having been erased and/or faded just towards the centre.

Script: *Estrangela*.⁶ *Seyame* dots are marked above some plural substantives (e.g. *ṣ̣̌dʿ wđjwʿ wlljytʿ*, l. 5) and third masculine singular pronoun suffixed to plural substantives (e.g. *bṇḥ*, l. 6). The letter *r* (*rēsh*) is regularly dotted above, while the letter *d* (*dālat*) is dotted below in most occurrences. The script of this bowl is very similar to the one used in the parallel bowl no. 47 in Moriggi (2014: 200–204).

Text arrangement: the text runs from the centre to the rim in a clockwise spiral.

³ Moriggi 2022: 59, n. 21; Christie’s 1973: 58, pl. 18.

⁴ Christie’s 1973: 58, no. 348. The height is not reported.

⁵ Christie’s 1973: 58.

⁶ The Syriac *Estrangela* script as featured on Syriac incantation bowls, with thorough discussion of its development and characteristics, is described in Moriggi (2014: 12–14).

Number of lines: nine. The first three lines have almost completely disappeared, and, due to the quality of the picture at author's disposal, it proved impossible to reconstruct them, even though at least two better preserved parallel texts are known (see below).

Drawings and other signs: traces of a circle surrounding the text are visible near the rim. No traces of drawings at the bottom of the basin are seen in the picture.

Clients: *prwkzʿd br kwmy* (quoted in lines 6 and 9).

Contents: protection for the house, threshold, sons and daughters of the client. As in the parallel text no. 48 in Moriggi (2014: 205):

the formula is intended to invoke the angels who stay in front of the Lord and to send them to kill evil demons. The angels are asked to protect the client, and demons are adjured not to approach his house and threshold. The fornicating demons are quoted, together with the seal 'by which heaven and earth are sealed' and 'the sun and the moon' fulfilling 'the command of the Lord'.

Contrary to its two parallels, the text does not quote the seal 'in which is everything'.

Parallels: bowls no. 47 (IM 142513, Iraq Museum, Baghdad) and no. 48 (IBC 2, Bibliothèque Centrale de l'Université Saint-Esprit de Kaslik).⁷ Bowls nos. MS 1928/10 (Schøyen Collection); JNF 216, JNF 218; Wolfe 44; Davidovitz 8 (private collections, to be published by Ford).⁸

Transliteration⁹

1–3) [...]

4) wʿzzyʿyl wyhbyʿyl mlkʿ dʿbdyn rʿwth dmryhwn w[šdr] ʿdwnyʿ ʿnwn lmqtl

5) šdʿ wdjwʿ wlljtʿ mwmyʿ lkwn {l} bmylt mryʿ wbtgʿ dbryšh dthwwn lh

6) ntwrʿ lbyth wlbñh wlbñth dprwkzʿd br kʿwʿmy dʿntwn šdʿ zriyʿ mwmyʿ lkwn

7) dlʿ tqrbwn lbyth mṭwl d ḥtmnʿ lh bḥtmʿ dbh ḥtmʿ šmyʿ wʿrʿ wʿyk dšmšʿ wshrʿ

8) ʿšrw pqwdnh d[m]ry[ʿ] [n]šr lh [hd]yn [ḥtm]t[ʿ] [lby]h wlsqwpth wlntrth dbñh wdbñth ʿ[ʿ]kʿ dšmšʿ wshr[ʿ]

9) ʿšrw pqwdnh [dmryʿ] [nšr] lh hdyn [ntrtʿ] lbyth w[lsqwpth] [dpr]wkzʿd br kwmy ʿmyʿ [ʿmyn] (slh)

⁷ Moriggi 2014: 200–207.

⁸ The unpublished parallels are quoted according to the references found in Ford (forthcoming). The author wholeheartedly thanks Ford for allowing him to quote this unpublished material, that is fundamental for the present research.

⁹ *Sigla*: [.] = one missing letter; [..] = two missing letters; [...] = three or more missing letters; [x] = restored letter; ʿxʿ = partially preserved letter; ^x^ = letter written above the line; x/y = alternative reading or translation; (x) = uncertain letter; {x} = superfluous letter / dittography / false start; ∅ = scribal omission; xxx = written spelling; /xxx/ = phonemic rendering.

Translation

1–3) [...]

4) and ʿzzyʿyl and yhbyʿyl, the angels who do the will of their Lord and Adonai sent them to kill

5) demons and devils and liliths. I adjure you by the word of the Lord and by the diadem that is on his head that you may be for it

6) protectors, for the house and for the sons and for the daughters of *Prwzkʿd* son of *Kwmy*, that you, the fornicating demons, I adjure you

7) that you may not approach his house, because I seal it with the seal by which are sealed heaven and earth, and as the sun and the moon

8) fulfilled the command of the Lord, may be strong for it this sealing, for the house and for the threshold and for the protection of his sons and of his daughters, as the sun and the moon

9) fulfilled the command of the Lord, may be strong for it this protection, for the house and for the threshold of *Prwzkʿd* son of *Kwmy*. Amen, amen, selah.

Notes to the text

1. 4) *rʿwth*: ‘his will’.

The spelling *rʿwth*—instead of Classical Syriac *rʿwth* —, with weakened ʿē changed to ʾālaf, is attested in both published parallels, i.e. nos. 47: 3, 6; 48: 3 (Moriggi 2014: 200–201, 206). For further instances of substitution between ʿē and ʾālaf in Syriac incantation bowls, one may refer to Moriggi (2004: 118).

1. 6) *wlbnh̄ wlbnth dprwzkʿd br kʿwʿmy*: ‘and for the sons and for the daughters of *Prwzkʿd* son of *Kwmy*’.

The text of this bowl adds the sons and daughters of the client, *Prwzkʿd* son of *Kwmy*, to the targets of protection of the spell. In the parallel texts nos. 47 and 48 (Moriggi 2014: 200–201, 206), only his house and its threshold are quoted.

The name *Prwzkʿd* recalls *Prwkdʿd/Prwkdʿd*, attested respectively in Syriac bowls nos. 28 and 22 (Moriggi 2014: 138, 109). In this bowl, the shape of the *zayn* is quite different from the one of the *dālat*. Moreover, as already stated above, the letter *rēsh* is regularly dotted above, while the letter *dālat* is dotted below in most occurrences in this text, allowing thus for a clear distinction between *zayn* and *dālat*. This bowl may be well included in the group of bowls prepared for

a certain Farrokhzād son of Kumay, who is otherwise known to have possessed a considerable number of well executed bowls in Jewish Babylonian Aramaic, Syriac and Mandaic. [...] The quantity and quality of the bowls that this individual owned are eloquent proof that the custom of writing incantation bowls still flourished during the first decades after the Islamic conquest of Iraq.¹⁰

¹⁰ Shaked, Ford and Bhayro 2013: 1, n. 2. A further Syriac bowl prepared for the same client is now published in Gorea (2022).

It is noteworthy that, while writing the name *Kwmy*, the scribe, having first forgotten to mark the *wāw*, added it over the sequence *kmy* afterwards (see Figure 2).

l. 7) *ḥtm*': 'sealed'. Defective form of the *pe'al* passive participle *ḥtym*'. Similar defective spellings are well documented in the corpus of Syriac, Jewish Babylonian Aramaic, and Mandaic incantation bowls. For a detailed analysis of the phenomenon, see e.g. Ford and Morgenstern (2020: 160).

l. 8) *[n]šr lh [hd]yn [ḥtm]t[ʔ] [lbyt]h wlsqwpth wlntrth dbnḥ wdbnth*: 'may be strong for it this sealing, for the house and for the threshold and for the protection of his sons and of his daughters'.

In spite of the difficulties of the reading, it seems that in this passage the text features a variation if compared with the published parallels. In fact, the spell first points to an unidentified protective or sheltering action for the house and the threshold of the client, while secondly it refers to the protection of his sons and daughters.

The sequence *[hd]yn [ḥtm]t[ʔ]* is reconstructed upon the parallel one in no. 48: 6 (Moriggi 2014: 206). Here the demonstrative pronoun masculine singular (*hdyn*) is used with reference to a substantive feminine singular in the emphatic state (*ḥtm*'). This phenomenon occurs also in the parallel text no. 48: 6 and in some other instances in Syriac incantation bowls, possibly anticipating the neutralisation of gender opposition in demonstrative pronouns as attested in North-eastern Neo-Aramaic.¹¹



Figure 1. Reworked image from Christie's (1973)

¹¹ Moriggi 2004: 207.



Figure 2. Reworked image from Christie's (1973)

3 A Syriac incantation fragment in the British Museum (Figure 3)

In the catalogue of the Aramaic incantation bowls housed in the British Museum, a reference is found to a pottery fragment described as follows: '1908-4-15,24 (BM 117877), not included in this catalogue, is not a bowl but a fragment of a bill of divorce, inscribed in cursive Estrangelo'.¹² This is somehow different if compared to the online entry regarding this object, where it is identified as: 'pottery incantation bowl. Body sherd only. Inscribed in cursive Estrangelo with a bill of divorce'. In the very same page, under 'Acquisition notes', one may read: '19th century big number implying this is from a Mesopotamian collection; big number sequence suggests that it is from either Rawlinson or Rassam'.¹³

Dimensions: the fragment's top length is 8 cm, while its height is 9 cm.

Script: *Estrangela*. Both letter forms and the general ductus show similarities with the letters and script of Syriac incantation bowls nos. 11 and 46 in Moriggi (2014: 68–70; 197–199).¹⁴ What is particularly striking is the use of the *wāw* ligatured to the left in this fragment and in bowls nos. 11 and 46 (Moriggi 2014: 70, 199). As reported in the *editio princeps*, bowl no. 11 (=IM 59098, Iraq Museum,

¹² Walker 2000: 39.

¹³ British Museum. Last accessed 16 August 2024. https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1980-0415-24.

¹⁴ For further comparison see Moriggi (2014: script charts nos. 11, 46).

Baghdad) was ‘acquired in Najaf’,¹⁵ thus not far from the Dukakin Caves, where an ostrakon with a similar Syriac script came to light in archaeological excavations. These data might point to a possible provenance of the fragment under scrutiny from the same area.¹⁶

Text arrangement: the text probably ran from the bottom to the rim in a clockwise spiral.

Number of lines: traces of eleven lines remain on the surface of the fragment.

Contents: it is obviously difficult to understand the contents of such fragmentary sherds correctly. In any case, a couple of words in what remains of the spell point to something analogous to the contents of Syriac incantation bowl no. 46 (Moriggi 2014: 197–199; no. VABab 4167-I-5 Vorderasiatisches Museum, Berlin), featuring the theme of a dispute between a magician and a demonic egg.¹⁷ The script of this bowl is also similar to that of bowl no. 46.

Transliteration

- 1) [...]ʿ ʿ[...]
- 2) [...]qwʿ wb[...]
- 3) [...]znq bšym[...]
- 4) [...]lʿ]lhʿ wʿ[n]šʿ ʿwʿ[...]
- 5) [...]nʿ wmʿtʿ nqt[nʿ] [...]
- 6) [...]dnʿmr šqrʿ [...]
- 7) [...]tʿ kbšnʿ wlʿ[...]
- 8) [...]qyʿ ʿbdw pwm(h)[wn] [...]
- 9) [...] ʿbdywn klhwn [...]
- 10) [...] ḥmšʿ wnqyt [...]
- 11) [...]

Translation

- 1) [...]
- 2) [...] (...) and in/by [...]
- 3) [...] (...) [...]
- 4) [...] gods and men and [...]
- 5) [...] and the town, I gather (?) [...]
- 6) [...] that he says lies [...]
- 7) [...] I press and (...) [...]
- 8) [...] (...) they perished, their mouth [...]
- 9) [...] (...) all them [...]
- 10) [...] five and gathered (?) [...]
- 11) [...]

¹⁵ Teixidor 1962: 52.

¹⁶ See Hunter (1989: 91).

¹⁷ The bowl is now newly published in Bhayro et al. (2018: 60–61).

Notes to the text

l. 4) [ʔ]lh̄ w̄[n]š̄: ‘gods and men’.

The sequence is reconstructed with reference to the analogous passage in the Mandaic incantation bowl no. MS 2054/124: 15 (Schøyen Collection).¹⁸

l. 5) mʔt: ‘the town’.

In Moriggi (2014: 197, bowl no. 46: 5), this word is translated ‘the country’. The present translation is based upon the edition of the same text featured in Bhayro et al. (2018: 61). This word is not attested in other published Syriac bowls.

l. 5) nqt[nʔ]: ‘I gather’. For the meaning of this Jewish Babylonian Aramaic root in Syriac bowls, see Moriggi (2014: 76, 241).

l. 8) ʔbdw pwm(h)[wn]: ‘they perished, their mouth’.

The text appears to read ‘the mouth’, for which compare the Mandaic bowl MS 2054/124: 5, 8, 10. The latter reports one of the most extensive versions of the dialogue between an egg and a sorcerer of the corpus of both published and unpublished Aramaic incantation bowls. Analogously, bowl no. 46 in Moriggi (2014: 197–199) seems to be part of the same group of testimonies of this formula.¹⁹

Although it is possible to read some words on the fragment, the text remains obscure. There appears to be some connections with the Syriac bowl no. 46 in Moriggi 2014 (= VABab. 4167-I-5, Vorderasiatisches Museum, Berlin) and the Mandaic bowl no. MS 2054/124 (Schøyen Collection). Divorce-texts on Syriac and other bowls do not feature words similar to the ones in the fragment under scrutiny in this contribution.²⁰ It seems thus unnecessary to label what remains of the formula on this specimen as ‘a fragment of a bill of divorce’.²¹

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¹⁸ This Mandaic specimen is still unpublished. A provisional translation is provided in Shaked (1999: 317–318).

¹⁹ Another Aramaic incantation bowl, with text in Jewish Babylonian Aramaic, features the theme of a demonic egg that harasses the client. It is published as no. 21 in Naveh and Shaked (1993: 127–130). For further references to bowl no. 46 in Moriggi (2014), see Bhayro et al. (2018: 60–61).

²⁰ Cf. Moriggi (2015).

²¹ Cf. Walker (2000: 39).

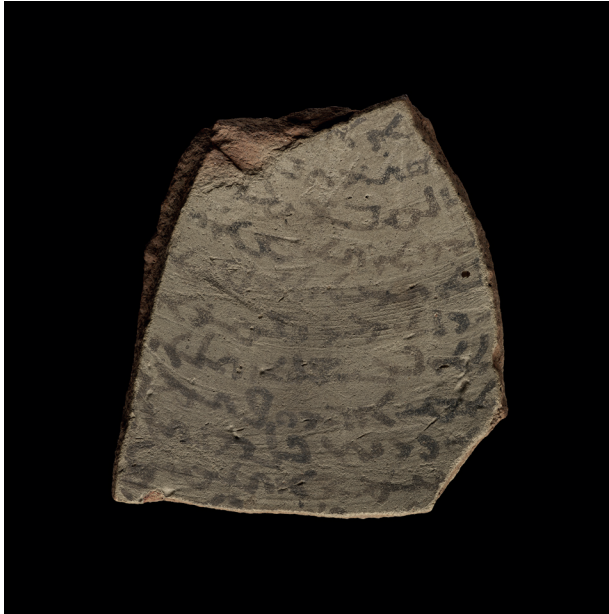


Figure 3. © The Trustees of the British Museum

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