Two Aramaic incantation bowls and their relationship with the history of Late-Antique Mesopotamia

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Beyond the paramount importance of their texts for the study of Eastern Aramaic grammar in Late Antiquity, incantation bowls are relevant evidence for the study of Mesopotamian history. In this short note, incantation bowls from Hatra and Biǧān island (Middle Euphrates) will be addressed in relation to both historical sources and archaeological finds.

Keywords: Aramaic, Hatra, Biǧān, incantation bowls, Mesopotamia in Late Antiquity.

1. Introduction

In 2017 Christa Müller-Kessler provided the participants in the scholarly discussion with an up-to-date survey of the geographical locations where incantation bowls have been excavated since the middle of the 19th century.[1,2] Provenanced incantation bowls are not the majority of the known artefacts of this kind. Nevertheless, they are of utmost significance for research purposes, as they provide valuable data concerning the dating, use, and religious rituals of these objects in everyday life (Moriggi 2023). The map published by Müller-Kessler largely confirms the classical statement about the provenance of incantation bowls, i.e.:

> the provenance of this material is thus confined to a small region, extending from Nippur and Bismaya on the south to Ashur on the north, and laying on both sides of the Euphrates (Montgomery 1913: 22).

[1] The author would like to express his gratefulness to the following for kind suggestions, prompt assistance and useful reviews: Prof. Dr M. Gawlikowski (Warsaw), Prof. Dr Roberta Ricciardi Venco (Torino), Ms Ilaria Bucci (London). Any misreading remains solely his responsibility.

[2] Müller-Kessler (2017: 64-69). At the end of the article a map is enclosed which shows the find spots of incantation bowls and the sites where Aramaic magical metal sheets (*lamellae*) came to light or were reported to be found.

There are obviously exceptions to this, as Aramaic incantation bowls have been found in areas trespassing the borders of the region described by Montgomery. In fact, bowls with Aramaic incantation texts have been discovered also in south-western Iran (Khuzestan) and in the area of Nimrud and Nineveh in northern Iraq. In recent years further discoveries took place along the Diyālā river, east of the river Tigris, where a Syriac incantation bowl already came to light in 1976 (Moriggi 2014: 109). As a matter of fact, even though one may still be quite certain assuming that Aramaic incantation bowls "belong in Babylonia," the borders of the area where this cultural phenomenon occurred should be expanded or at least reconsidered. The same applies to regions included in the framework traced by Montgomery, where the "empty spaces" correspond probably to locations where incantation bowls have not emerged yet.

In the following paragraphs, a couple of case-studies will be examined to demonstrate how the geographical distribution of Aramaic incantation bowls may have a relevant significance for a more accurate definition of certain aspects of Mesopotamian history in Late Antiquity.

2. Aramaic incantation bowls in Hatra

In 2020, Marcato published an article linking to Hatra an incantation bowl inscribed with a text in Square script letters displaying two different varieties of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic. Marcato set forth the hypothesis that Hatrene religious tradition was at least partly transmitted to Mandaean culture by means of the deportation of Hatra's population — or a good share of it — to the region of Babylonia after the city's downfall at the hands of the Sasanian army in 240-241 AD. (Marcato 2020).

The thesis of Marcato also takes into consideration the dynamics of slow depopulation of the city of Hatra after the Sasanian siege and subsequent plundering:

> archaeological finds show that the settlement continued to be inhabited, although much less densely, and that its depopulation was a gradual process [...]. A widely accepted chronological benchmark is a remark by the Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus (25.8.5-6), who travelled past Hatra in 363 and described it as "an old city lying in the midst of a desert and long since abandoned" (Marcato 2020: 134).

Only sparse evidence of temporary re-occupation of some areas of the site have surfaced through archaeological investigations or chance-findings.

This picture may be now enriched by a further finding, which is reported in a study concerning the pottery of Hatra. As a matter of fact, an unpublished Ph.D. dissertation by the Iraqi scholar al-

Qabtān reports the discovery of incantation bowls also in Hatra. While addressing pottery bearing letters or inscriptions on its surface, al-Qabtān describes three "pots" or "bowls" that contain "exorcistic texts." These items match perfectly with the typology of Aramaic incantation bowls, as the description and drawings featured in al-Qabtān's work fully demonstrate (al-Qabtān 2002: 112-113, plts. 18-20).

Even though al-Qabtān provides a catalogue of the specimens studied in his work, which includes find spots and archaeological data, unfortunately he did not find information regarding the find spots of these three bowls, that ended up in the Mosul Museum (al-Qabtān 2002: 120).[3] The current state of preservation and whereabouts of the bowls remain thus unknown. The quality of the pictures and drawings presented in my copy of the dissertation hinders any possible evaluation of the texts, which seem to be written in Square script letters.

Be they as they may, these bowls represent significant material and epigraphic evidence and further encourage a more careful evaluation of the history of Hatra after the "benchmark" date of 363 AD, when the city appeared to travellers as completely deserted (Marcato 2020: 134; Bucci, Marchetti and Moriggi 2021: 77).

It has been acknowledged for more than a decade that Aramaic incantation bowls:

> constitute a peculiar phenomenon that is limited in place and time. We can be certain that they were produced during the sixth and seventh centuries CE. One may suppose that the practice began somewhat earlier, in the fifth or possibly even the fourth century CE, and may have continued until the early eight century CE (Shaked-Ford-Bhayro 2013: 1).

The time span just mentioned is confirmed by both incantation bowls bearing texts with dates and stratigraphy of duly excavated items. As a matter of fact the dates featured in bowl texts cover the period between 545 and 611 AD (Shaked-Ford-Bhayro 2013: 1, n. 2). If we thus consider the evidence of texts with dates, it may be well assumed that somebody buried the bowls found in Hatra in an house or likely building in the 6th-7th century AD, i.e. some two or three centuries later than Ammianus Marcellinus's remark.[4]

[3] Inventory numbers reported in the catalogue are respectively: MM (Mosul Museum) 832 (41383), MM 834 (28031), MM 833 (59792).

[4] For more details about the places where incantation bowls were usually buried (mostly upside down, in domestic contexts such as in houses, courtyards, animals' enclosures, as well as under thresholds, etc.), see Müller-Kessler (2017: 64).

Nevertheless, based on the wider timespan referred to above, one cannot exclude the possibility for the bowls from Hatra a date between the 4th and the 8th century AD. The lower limit of this period could point to the presence of a little community of people in Hatra, whose limited size could have gone unnoticed by a traveller passing by Hatra, possibly at some distance. This latter point is in any case not of crucial relevance to us. What is really meaningful is the datum that between the 4th-5th century and the 8th century AD, in Hatra, an individual or a family decided to protect their property, house, holdings, and health against demonic forces with a magical device that, as remarked above, is peculiar to Sasanian Babylonia. The lack of information regarding the find spot of the bowls from Hatra as well as the circumstances of their finding (whether fortuitous or in stratigraphic excavations) hinder the possibility of an in-depth analysis of these objects and their context.

At least one consideration, however, can be added. Incantation bowls usually come from permanent settlements, often from sites where cities with long-lasting histories were built (e.g. Nippur, Babylonia, etc.). This seems to confirm that the depopulation of Hatra was a gradual process and that the chronological benchmark 363 AD, associated with Ammianus Marcellinus' report on the city as "oppidum olimque desertum," should be nuanced rather that considered a fixed terminus post quem.

3. A Jewish Babylonian Aramaic incantation bowl from Biǧān island (Middle Euphrates)

If the incantation bowls found in Hatra are comprised in the area already singled out by Montgomery in 1913, this does not apply to a bowl excavated on the island of Biǧān in 1983. This island is located on the Middle Euphrates, some 12 km downstream of ʿĀna (Iraq) and it is nowadays submerged by the waters of the Ḥadīṯa lake. In order to salvage the antiquities that were to be submerged by the lake, a series of rescue excavations were carried out in the area between the end of the 1970s and the 1980s. One of the most active group of researchers was the Polish team led by Gawlikowski and Krogulska. On the island of Biǧān they were able to find evidence of human settlements and activities dating from the Neo-Assyrian (8th-7th century BC) until the early Abbasid period (8th-10th century AD).[5] In the first of the two Abbasid *strata* singled out in the stratigraphy of the site, an Aramaic incantation bowl bearing a text in Square script was unearthed (Gawlikowski 1990: 137, n. 1). The bowl was promptly published by Gawlikowski and his readings are proposed here with some minor variations:

External surface

[5] See https://pcma.uw.edu.pl/en/2019/04/16/bijan/

1) *bšmh* (2) *yhbyʾl* (3) *mšmᶜ* (4) *drḥmyʾ[l]* (5) *šmš(ʾl)* (6) [...] (7) *dšlyṭ{ṭ}* (8) *ᶜl kl ḥršʿ[y] wmbdywhn* (< mᶜbdyhwn) (9) *bšmk* (10) *sgyd(ʾ)yl* (11) *mlʾk[ʾ]* (12) *šlṭ ᶜl kl rwḥ[ʾ] byštʾ* (13) *ʾšbᶜyt ᶜlk[.]dnṭr kl* (14) *(rhʾsᶜ)* (15) *(br tbr)* (16) *bš<m> šʾl* (17) *nwryʾl (18) ḥ/hlwʾl* (19) *rpʾl* (20) *šṣ rṣ ʾ(t) sṣ mṣ* (around the base of the bowl) (21) *rḥm tw/y* (22) *rḥw(m)t*

1) In the name of (2) *yhbyʾl* (3) who obeys, (4) of *rḥmyʾl*, (5) *šmšʾl*, (6) [...] (7) who rules (8) over all sorcerers and their magical acts. (9) In your name (10) *sgydʾyl* (11) the angel (12) who rules on every evil spirit, (13) I adjured you, that protects (?) every (14) *(rhʾsᶜ)* (15) *(br tbr)*. (16) In the name of *šyʾl* (17) *nwryʾl* (18) *hlwʾl*, (19) *rpʾl*, (20) *šṣ rṣ ʾ(t) sṣ mṣ* (around the base of the bowl) (21) *rḥm tw/y (22) rḥw(m)t*.

Internal surface

1-3) [...] (4) *pṣ rbh gy(m)* [...] (5) *byd šlyḥ lʾ(y)mʾ(nb)* [...] *yh* (6) *yh (yh) [ʾh] ʾh yh yh ʾʾ* [...] *yhw yhw yhw* (7) *yhw yhw ʾʾ hh ʾʾ h[h] whh* [...] *p[ṣ] ss ss pṣ[ṣ] špṣ pnn* (8) *mr nbš gṣ hkt šgšš mm ssšsš* [.]

1-4) (...) (5) by means of the messenger, do not (?) (...) (6-8) divine names, magical letters, *nomina barbara*.[6]

The incantation contains invocations to angels similar to the ones featured in Syriac bowl nos. 47-48 (Moriggi 2014), even if one cannot consider them as parallel texts at all. What is unique about this bowl is the distribution of the lines of the text. As a matter of fact, they are written both on the outer and the inner surfaces of the vessel. One cannot say if the inner and outer surfaces contained a single, continuous text, or two distinct *formulae*. In any case it seems that a single hand put down the lines, with a pen that was first used for the outer surface and then, after it was re-shaped, for the inner one, as signs are thicker inside, but the letter-forms are the same. No peculiar linguistic feature is recognisable in the text if compared to the published incantation bowls in the same Aramaic variety (Jewish Babylonian Aramaic).

As just remarked, this specimen displays a distribution of the text which, to the best of my knowledge, has no parallel in both published and unpublished incantation bowls. It seems that the scribe operated according to a writing practice that is different from the usual one featured in

[6] Gawlikowski (1990: 140-141). Legenda: [...] three or more letters lack in the text; [.] one letter lacks in the text; [x] reconstructed reading; (x) uncertain reading; {x} inserted by the scribe by mistake; <x> scribal omission; (...) meaningless sequence; *xxx* written spelling. Gawlikowski provided the author with both the original drawings and pictures of the bowl.

incantation bowls, i.e. inscribing first the inner surface in various ways — mostly concentrically from the inner bottom up to the rim — and then the outer one, although only in a little number of cases. It appears in fact that the texts were "adapted" to fill the inner concavity of the vessel. In this case, the scribe seems to have painted the text on the outer surface of the bowl first and then on the inner one. This behaviour could be due to practical reasons, i.e. he had a text to be copied and the inner surface of the bowl did not provide enough space for all of it. On the other hand, based on the date of the bowl (8th century?), one can imagine that this specimen was prepared by a local practitioner, who was asked to write down the text but was not fully accustomed with the practice. The reason might be that the practice of writing magical texts on the surface of pottery vessels was typical of Babylonia and just some echoes of it had reached the area of Biğān in a period when the practice was itself seemingly slowly fading in Abbasid Babylonia.[7]

Similarly, to the case of the incantation bowls from Hatra, this bowl is an important historical evidence, demonstrating the lively continuity of religious practices of the pre-Islamic period into the Islamic era, not only at the core of Mesopotamia, but even at its outskirts.

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[7] One cannot rule completely out the possibility of importation.

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