

# Corpus of Aramaic Incantation Bowls from Late Antiquity

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Processing Ancient Text Corpora

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# Introduction

- Some 2000-2500 earthenware incantation bowls are known today (+ an unknown amount in private collections)
- Datable to the Late Sasanian Period (6-7th centuries CE)
- Magical texts (incantations); usually written on the inside of a bowl
- Mostly protective
- Originating from Babylonia (excavations in Nippur, Babylon) and Western Iran; in most of the cases their precise origin is unknown
- Excavations: found upside down
- Written in Jewish Babylonian Aramaic (majority), Mandaic, Syriac (smallest group); some 10% in pseudoscript
- Most important epigraphic source for JBA of the period
- Scientific interest for the bowls is relatively young (Jewish magical tradition; JBA of the bowls)
- Drawback of the material: unprovenanced material problematic
- Q: It is sizeable corpus, but to which extent can this be called a corpus?

# Jewish Aramaic magic bowl from Nippur (Montgomery)



# Magic bowl in pseudoscript

(Kelsey Museum in Michigan)



# Bowl in pseudoscript (Kelsey Museum in Michigan)







Bowls, bowls, and  
more bowls

Shlomo Moussaieff  
and his private  
collection

# Importancy of the corpus

- Linguistic importancy (Jewish Babylonian Aramaic; also Syriac and Mandaic); presumably in a less standardized form
- History of the Jewish magical tradition
- Lived religion of the Jewish community in Babylonia under Sasanian rule
- Interaction between the Jewish, Christian and Mandaean communities in the Sasanian period
- Biblical studies (quotations from the Hebrew Bible)
- Rabbinic studies (quotations)
- Jewish legal tradition

# Phases of the Aramaic Language (traditional)

1. Old Aramaic
2. Official Aramaic
3. Middle Aramaic
4. Late Aramaic (200-700 C.E.)
5. Neo-Aramaic



# Late Aramaic

## Western dialects of Late Aramaic (Palestine):

- Jewish Palestinian Aramaic
- Samaritan Aramaic
- Christian Palestinian Aramaic

## Eastern dialects of Late Aramaic (Babylonia):

- Jewish Babylonian Aramaic
- Syriac
- Mandaic

# Sasanian Empire (224 - 651 AD)



Source:  
[https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/history/images/7/77/Byzantine\\_and\\_Sassanid\\_Empires\\_in\\_600\\_CE.png](https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/history/images/7/77/Byzantine_and_Sassanid_Empires_in_600_CE.png)

# Challenges:

## availability of the material

### Text editions:

- Corpus is only partly published; Brill volumes: many corrected readings of bowls published earlier
- Text editions (Brill series since 2014; older published materials)
- Earlier publications: books (Montgomery 1913, Naveh and Shaked, Segal 2000, Levene 2003, Müller-Kessler 2005) and many publications of individual bowls in articles
- Question of reliable editions

### Online availability of the texts:

- Virtual Magic Bowl Archive (VMBA) (University of Exeter, led by Siam Bhayro) (aim: online access to 650 bowls from the Martin Schoyen collection; since 2014; thus far only photo's and basic information from vol. 1 of the Brill series are made available to the public)

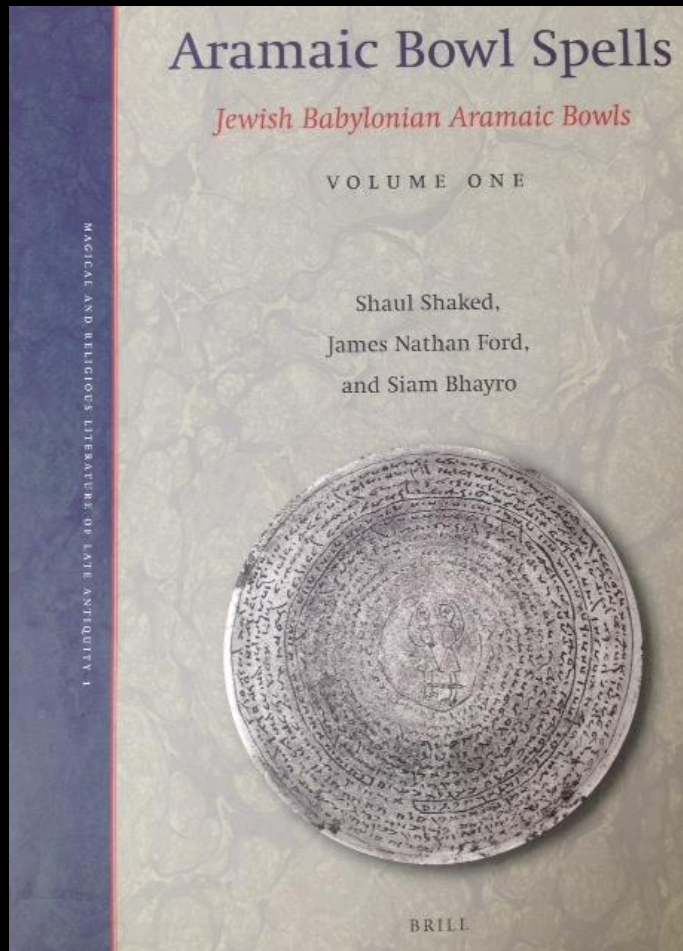
### Script and transliteration:

- Handwritten texts (written in a Jewish script) (also 'Hebrew' square script; transliteration)
- In published texts: standard is more or less to use Hebrew script for Jewish Babylonian Aramaic (Latin script is often used for Mandaic and Syriac)

Brill series  
(Magical and Religious Literature of  
Late Antiquity – MRLA)

# MRLLA 1 (Brill 2013)

## Shaul Shaked, Nathan Ford en Siam Bhayro



Five volumes in this series are text editions:  
Vol. 1 (JBA; Schoyen collection [private coll.]) (64 items)  
Vol. 2 curse texts; JBA  
Vol. 3 Syriac bowls (49 items) (169 items in the catalogue)  
Vol. 7 collection Staatliche museum zu Berlin (16 items)  
Vol. 8 Hilprecht collection Jena (45 bowls in Babylonian, Syriac and Mandaic) (jan. 2020) (new edition of the bowls published by Müller-Kessler)

Other volumes are studies of central topics in the

# Challenges:

## Creation of a database

- OCR (optical character recognition) exists for Hebrew (for instance: built in in Adobe)
- What are the possibilities of automatic tagging?

Problems that will be encountered:

- Many bowls (and texts) are incomplete
- Many errors in the bowl texts (how do we handle these)
- Many texts show a mix of languages (Aramaic and Biblical / Rabbinic Hebrew)
- There are many duplicates of bowls (often with variations)

Additional things to reckon with:

- Editorial signs : [ ... ], [---], supralinear dots, and others
- Errors made in the reading of the texts
- Need to comment

Images

- Many bowls contain images of chained figures (the figure is usually not explicitly referred to in the text)
- IIIF - international image interoperability framework



# Images of demons (drawings by Naama Vilozny)



# Specific questions that can be addressed

NB: Bowl texts are relatively short texts, usually 10-15 lines.

Questions of participant tracking / hierarchical structure are therefore less relevant in these texts.

- Description of the syntax of the Jewish Babylonian Aramaic of the bowls (*capita selecta*, such as DOM, internal structure of noun phrases, word order). This is new to this corpus.
- Differences between JBA of the bowls versus JBA of the manuscripts (and later printed editions) that came into existence in roughly the same period.
- How fixed were the formulas, that is, what is the amount of variation that is found?
- What are the variations in doublets of the same text?
- What conclusions can be drawn from the 'mistakes'?

Examples of other research questions that can be addressed:

- How did the magicians work? (from handbooks, from memory?)
- Were the texts recited ?
- What was the function of the bowl text in relation to the client: was the text read to the client or perhaps by the client?
- Can we conclude anything about the rituals behind the bowls?
- What is the relation between text and image?

# Text sample from (*zny zmrt' wznyt' lylyt' 'Zanay the fornicating singing girl, the Lilith'*)

(JBA nos. 50-54, all written for the same client)

*hdyn gyṭ' dlylyt' dlyṭṭ' dy ktbyt l'ymy bt q'qy wkl šwm d'yt lh*

This is the deed of divorce of the accursed Lilith, which I have written for Immi the daughter of Qaqay, and any (other) name that she has

*dy 'm thwyy n r'š' wšlyṭ' bnpšyky lkl 'ynš dytšbyn dyktbyt lyky gyṭ' gyṭ pyṭwryn mn hd'  
'ymy bt q'qy wkl šwm dy 'yt lyky*

in order that if you may have authority and power over yourself to any man that you wish, for I have written to you a deed of divorce (and) a deed of release from Immi daughter of Qaqay, and any name that you have

*mwmn' mšb'n' lyky 'nty zny znyt' zmrt' lylyt' dšryh bbytyh d'ymy bt q'qy 'm dkr 'm  
nyqbh etc.*

I adjure (and) beswear you, you, Zanay, the fornicating singing-girl, who is dwelling in the house of Immi daughter of Qaqay, be it male or female etc.

*ḥtm' dgyṭ' yh šmyh*

the seal of the deed of divorce: Yah is his name.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION

Reis Israel

Belang van ontsluiting van materiaal

Er zijn mensen met databases (Ford, Morgenstern, Waller)