The Production and Reception of a Mandaic Incantation

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THE PRODUCTION AND RECEPTION
OF A MANDAIC INCANTATION

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1. Introduction

For over sixteen decades, ever since Austin Henry Layard began discovering Aramaic incantation texts inscribed upon terracotta bowls during the course of his excavations and convinced the British Museum to acquire a collection of them, scholars have examined these texts in the hope of answering the age-old question, “What possessed these people to create something like this?” Written upon garden-variety terracotta bowls, which are themselves quite unremarkable, the texts seem to betray our high expectations of the ancient civilizations of Mesopotamia, the birthplace of literacy. The handwriting of their authors is almost always sloppy to the point of illegibility, their language variously characterized as “corrupt,” “debased,” or “full of mistakes,” and their content often described as “formulaic,” “repetitive and stilted.”¹ Henri Pognon, who published the first corpus of Mandaic incantation texts in 1898, warned his readers that

Not all of the Mandaic inscriptions of Khouabir are interesting: they are filled with mistakes and inaccuracies, and some, composed of scraps of sentences borrowed from different formulas and written by ignorant scribes, do not, so to speak, make any sense. Others contain so many mistakes that they would be nearly untranslatable if the formulae which are read in them were not found written more correctly in other inscriptions.

Furthermore, many of them (22 out of the 120 in the collections of the British Museum) appear at first glance to have been “written” by complete illiterates, consisting of a series of repeated squiggles, dots, and lines not resembling any known alphabet – not even Pahlavi. Pognon was of the opinion that these were created by “charlatans” in imitation of legitimate

scribes in the hopes of duping the predominantly unlettered and therefore presumably gullible public.²

It was for these reasons (among others) that Rudolf Macuch and Ethel Drower refused to dignify the Mandaic texts among them by incorporating their contents into their dictionary of Mandaic, except where they “grudgingly quoted examples worth an entry or a reference and have omitted much that is doubtful or obviously corrupt”.³ In the introduction to his handbook of Mandaic, Macuch expresses his opinion that

Magic bowls and rolls usually contain a mass of hardly decipherable or completely incomprehensible nonsense. They were written against the demons who were supposed to understand their magic language. Their defective and often careless writing makes their reading difficult and their interpretation doubtful. The picture of the language they give us is very incomplete.⁴

Many of the scholars who have discussed these texts have done so explicitly in comparison with the standardized, written forms of Aramaic used by the communities who created them, occasionally allowing some degree of latitude for the “vernacular” nature of the texts. For example, in a recently published corpus of incantation texts, the late J.B. Segal remarked that “The incantation texts are written in popular language. We should not, then, expect them to conform to the standard norms of grammar”,⁵ as if grammar were something like a necktie that one could simply shrug off when a less formal occasion presented itself. By contrast, Macuch’s explanation, that language of the bowls was some kind of strange magical jargon incomprehensible to all but demons, is certainly original, though not supported by the evidence, as we shall see.

All of these scholars have also assumed that the primary focus of the bowl ritual was the writing of the text, which has given them occasion to frequently deplore the careless, sloppy, inconsistent, and otherwise lamentable state of this writing. Few have attempted to examine the texts and the language in which they are composed in their own right and according to their own merits. It is undeniable that these texts are formulaic and repetitive; far from reducing their value as sources for study of the region, its languages, and literatures, however, this observation

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provides the key to understanding their true nature, origin, and role in late antique Mesopotamia.

2. The Praxis of the Incantation Ritual

To what extent is the ritual that produced these texts reflected within the texts themselves? The texts themselves seem to suggest that the act of writing the text, described as taking place while seated upon a stone, was actually part of the ritual; it is usually described with the imperfect (1), suggesting that the writing occurred during the course of the ritual, but the action is occasionally rendered by the perfect as well (2), possibly suggesting a kind of performative speech act.6

1 ʿtib uaktubinin ʿl kasa hdta
   I am sitting and writing them (all the curses) upon a new bowl...7

2 iatbit uktbtinhin [...] ʿl kasa hdta
   I sat (or: hereby sit) and wrote (or: write) them [...] upon a new bowl...8

The texts also clearly indicate that the writing of the incantation was merely one aspect of the ritual. One text describes the use of a knife to draw an image of the house, presumably on the ground before the magician.9 Another text describes someone or something “making a circuit of the houses and marking the shape of the mansions of mankind”.10 Ritual circumambulations of this sort are described in other Aramaic incantation texts,11 and parallel other rituals known from the region, amply attested in Mesopotamian and Egyptian magical texts from previous eras and perpetuated to the present date in the form of the various types of tawāf performed by Muslims on ḥajj. In the context of ancient Near Eastern magic, the enclosure formed by these circles has a dual purpose: they can

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6 See, for example, W. Wright, A Grammar of the Arabic Language II §1(d), and W. Gesenius, E. Kautzsch, and A.E. Cowley, Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar §106 2(b) on the perfect and performative speech acts in related Semitic languages.
7 Found in 8 bowls: Pognon (1898) 18, and Lidzbarski (1902) I-III, and Segal and Hunter 094-097M.
8 Found in 3 bowls: Pognon (1898) 15, 24, and Gordon (1937) M.
9 Segal and Hunter 82M.
10 Segal and Hunter 107M.
11 See Segal and Hunter, Incantation Bowls, p. 28 for the evidence from other Aramaic texts.
either protect the contents from harm or restrain them from doing further harm.\textsuperscript{12}

Another such enclosure is provided by the \textit{zisurrû} or magic circle of flour, a word ultimately derived from Sumerian, which was drawn on the ground around prophylactic figurines as part of a Babylonian ritual to thwart evil spirits, in much the same way the bowls thwart demons and curses.\textsuperscript{13} According to Erica Hunter, this magic circle may have provided the model for the bowl texts, as the rim of the bowl resembles the \textit{zisurrû} both in form and function.\textsuperscript{14} The magic circle, or \textit{miṣrā} as it is called in Mandaic, continues to be a trope of Mandaean folktales even today.\textsuperscript{15} Another possible prototype for the incantation bowl is the ritual pit or \textit{mundus} which was constructed as a kind of vestibule to the netherworld, for the purpose of luring out its denizens—spirits and other infernal beings—in order to communicate with them and which, when not in use, was buried (like the incantation bowls) or otherwise sealed.\textsuperscript{16}

Once this ritual was completed, the bowls themselves were buried, usually upside down but also occasionally face to face with another bowl to form an enclosure. According to a tradition collected by Ethel Drower, a little salt was placed between two such bowls before they were buried.\textsuperscript{17} While comparatively few of these bowls have been discovered in a secure archaeological context, the texts suggest that they were buried beneath a threshold or a gate, within a household at the four corners of a room or a bed, and also, it would seem, in cemeteries.\textsuperscript{18}

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{Speiser} See E.A. Speiser’s discussion of the etymology of the Akkadian word \textit{uṣurtu} in his “The Translation and Etymology of Uṣurtu,” \textit{The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures} 40.2 (1924): 137–139.
\bibitem{Montgomery} James A. Montgomery, \textit{Aramaic Incantation Texts from Nippur} (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1913), 42.
\bibitem{Segal-Hunter} Segal and Hunter, \textit{Incantation Texts}, 176–179.
\bibitem{Drower} See, for example, Hirmiz bar Anhar’s tale about “The Hauntings” in Ethel S. Drower, \textit{The Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed. reprint (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2000), 333–341.
\bibitem{Hoffner} Based upon 2\textsuperscript{nd} millennium antecedents, Harry Hoffner has argued that the \textit{ʾôḇ} used by the Witch of ʿEyn Dôr to summon the spirit of Samuel in 1 Samuel 28:3–25 (see v. 8 especially) was one such ritual pit; see Harry A. Hoffner, Jr., “Second Millennium Antecedents to the Hebrew \textit{ʾÔḇ},” \textit{Journal of Biblical Literature} 86.4 (1967): 385–401. If this is correct, it may be possible to discern a continuity of magical traditions between and among these various praxes.
\bibitem{Drower-Mandaeans} Drower, \textit{The Mandaeans}, 348, note 2.
\bibitem{Pognon} See Pognon, \textit{Inscriptions mandaïtes}, 3 and Segal and Hunter, \textit{Incantation Texts}, 27.
\end{thebibliography}
Intriguingly, the texts indicate that the incantation itself was “intoned in whispers” (\lhwśy lhyšyn).\footnote{Segal and Hunter, \textit{Incantation Texts}, 27. Yamauchi also addresses the oral component of the ritual in his dissertation, \textit{Mandaic Incantation Texts} (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI, 1964) 67–68, and even explicitly compares it to magical rituals as performed in oral cultures today.} Thus, in addition to the written component of the ritual, there was also an oral component. This is not at all unexpected.

3. Incantations as Performative Utterances

Although the Mandaeans had been a literate culture for several centuries by the time of the advent of Islam,\footnote{See my article “Iranian Scripts for Aramaic Languages,” in the \textit{Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research} 341 (2006): 21–30.} the process by which they internalized literacy was extremely gradual.\footnote{As is typical for most traditional oral cultures that have adopted a writing system; see Walter J. Ong, \textit{Orality and Literacy}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed. (London: Routledge, 2002), 26.} It is only through gradual stages that written compositions become compositions in writing, rather than a verbatim mimicry of speech. In languages such as Arabic, Hebrew, and Aramaic, the verb describing the act of reading is not distinguished from that of reciting a text aloud, suggesting that the earliest to write in these languages, like others the world around, spoke their compositions aloud while writing them. In fact, many cultures have known writing for centuries but never fully internalized it, relying heavily on formulaic thought and expression. Even today, the Neo-Mandaic language continues to bear the hallmarks of an oral culture; in addition to the aforementioned verb, \textit{qārā} \textasciitilde \textit{qāri} (\textit{qāri}) which means both “to read” and “to recite (aloud),” the act of watching or keeping a eye on someone is expressed by the verbs \textit{sāğ} \textasciitilde \textit{ṣoṭ} (\textit{sāyeṭ}) and \textit{guš \textit{shad} \textasciitilde \textit{shod} (\textit{ābed}), both of which actually mean “to listen”. This suggests a culture that is much more aural than our own culture, which relies more heavily upon visual cues.

Bear in mind that sound is dynamic in comparison to the static nature of printed material—as it is being produced, an utterance is immediately gone, and cannot be captured or frozen (although it can obviously be recorded with the proper technology). The concept of the utterance as a concrete action as well as an instrument of thought is perfectly illustrated by the double meaning of the word \textit{dāḇār} in Hebrew, which can
mean both a “word” and an “action”—and even an “event”.\(^{22}\) Malinowski was perhaps the first to identify speech as a mode of action for traditional or “primitive” cultures rather than merely an instrument of thought and its communication,\(^{23}\) but Wittgenstein pointed out that plenty of actions are accomplished by means of language, even among literates.\(^{24}\)

Utterances serve as actions most transparently in the form of performative speech acts, according to which real actions are performed by an oral utterance (such as “I hereby pronounce you man and wife,” “I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost,” or “I name this ship Generalissimo Stalin”).\(^{25}\) Readers familiar with the history of the literature on performative speech acts will recognize the last utterance as a banner example of an “infelicitous” act, one which is unsuccessful due to the circumstances under which it was performed and its reception by its audience.

Suppose that you are just about to name the ship, you have been appointed to name it, and you are just about to bang the bottle against the stem; but at that very moment some low type comes up, snatches the bottle out of your hand, breaks it on the stem, shouts out, “I name this ship Generalissimo Stalin,” and then for good measure kicks away the chocks. We agree that the ship certainly isn’t now named the Generalissimo Stalin, and we agree that it’s an infernal shame.\(^{26}\)

Just as the success of a given performative speech act depends upon the details of its production and reception, so too must it be noted that courses of action and even basic attitudes towards a given issue depend upon


\(^{26}\) Ibid., 239.
rhetoric, or the effective use of words, particularly among preliterate cultures, which are much less object-oriented than literate cultures. Imagine, for a second, the difference between business in a souq and in a supermarket. The interaction between the buyer and the seller becomes an object in itself. Likewise, all parties to such a ritual perceive the circumstances under which it is performed, the effective use of rhetoric in the composition of the incantation, and its reception at the moment of utterance as integral to its success.

4. Magic, Literacy, and Orality

It is worth noting that the belief in the magical power of words, and particularly names, is near universal across preliterate cultures. But what, exactly, is intended by the term “magic”? Since Frazer, it has been customary to speak of “magic” in opposition to other abstract concepts such as “religion” and “science”. As the classical and ancient Near Eastern sources attest to a distinction between what we might deem magical practices and religious ones, this approach has enjoyed a certain degree of legitimacy, even if it has been subject to much criticism. Unfortunately, by defining “magic” not independently according to its own distinctive features but rather in opposition to these other categories, we neglect to explain precisely what it entails. Furthermore, the contrived nature of these categories is apparent from the lack of precise boundaries between them, which have never been fixed and probably never will be. Any attempt to define the term “magic” either within the context of late antique Mesopotamia or even according to its use in recent scholarship would fall well beyond the ambit of this paper, so for the sake of brevity we shall restrict the discussion to the bowl incantation rituals, which may be considered as “magical” insofar as they do not bear the hallmarks of contemporary religious rituals, but nonetheless represent an important

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28 For a history of the discussion, see Fritz Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World*, translated by Franklin Philip (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997). In the context of the ancient Near East, note the numerous prohibitions contained within the text of the Hebrew Bible against ritual practices that we would consider “magical,” such as Deut. 18:10–12.
29 Note, for example, that the bowl texts are, as a rule, composed in the profane language of the people rather than the sacred language of scripture; for more on the distinction between sacred and profane language in the context of magical and religious rituals, see Stanley J. Tambiah, “The Magical Power of Words,” *Man* 3.2 (1968): 179–182.
element of the ancient Near Eastern relationship between the human and the supernatural.\textsuperscript{30}

While rituals are a universal feature of human societies, it has long been acknowledged that magical rituals are more typical of preliterate cultures than literate ones.\textsuperscript{31} The incantation texts in particular bear the many of the hallmarks of oral compositions rather than literary compositions: they were composed in the popular language rather than any literary standard, most are attested in multiple variants, similar to one another in their content and “formulaic”, “repetitive and stilted” structure\textsuperscript{32} but differing in some way from one another as well. They are clearly what we might categorize as folk compositions.\textsuperscript{33} That being the case, what relevance does this bear upon our understanding of these texts?

In his work on the psychodynamics of orality, Walter Ong uses the term “oral universe of communication” when discussing the difference between the “mentalities” of primarily oral and primarily literate cultures.\textsuperscript{34} Clearly those languages that are represented by a corpus of written literature compose a small set of the languages of the world; Ong remarks, “Of the some 3000 languages spoken that exist today only some 78 have a literature”.\textsuperscript{35} Nevertheless, most literates lose sight of the fact that writing is a “secondary modeling system” dependent upon spoken language, which he calls the “primary modeling system”. Orality can exist without literacy, but literacy obviously presumes orality and therefore cannot exist without it.\textsuperscript{36} This has had a profound effect upon how these texts are interpreted and how their functions are understood.

The most salient example of the insight that this approach can provide is provided by the history of scholarship on the Homeric epics. For over two millennia scholars of literature have dedicated themselves to the study of Homer, with varying degrees of insight, misinformation, and prejudice, both conscious and unconscious.\textsuperscript{37} Milman Parry’s discovery, that the distinctive formulaic nature of Homeric poetry is due to the economy

\textsuperscript{30} Graff, \textit{Magic}, 19.
\textsuperscript{31} Ong, \textit{Orality and Literacy}, 28.
\textsuperscript{32} Segal and Hunter, \textit{Aramaic and Mandaic Incantation Bowls}, 29.
\textsuperscript{33} Cf. Alan Dundes, \textit{Holy Writ as Oral Lit: The Bible as Folklore} (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999). 2: “the basic distinctive criteria of folklore: namely, multiple existence and variation.”
\textsuperscript{34} Ong, \textit{Orality and Literacy}, 2.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 6–7; K. David Harrison suggests that at least 6,912 distinct human languages were spoken worldwide; K. David Harrison, \textit{When Languages Die} (Oxford: Oxford, 2007), 3.
\textsuperscript{36} Ong, \textit{Orality and Literacy}, 7.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 17.
enforced upon it by oral methods of composition, resulted in the restoration of the ancient tradition that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were the works of an oral poet rather than the product of a literate mind, and provided a framework to discuss the implications of this discovery on this history of literature.\(^{38}\) Ong argues that neglect of the psychodynamics of orality, his aforementioned “oral universe of communication” in which Homer’s works were first composed before being committed to writing, has resulted in grave misconceptions about oral compositions. He calls these the “blind spots of the unreflective chirographic or typographic mind”.\(^{39}\) One of the fundamental theses of Ong’s work is that it is difficult for people who have been steeped in a literary tradition to comprehend the context within oral compositions are created and the roles that they play in a primarily oral society. With reference to the bowl incantations, it is an obvious matter to think of these texts purely as epigraphic data, divorced from this context, but for composers of these texts, it would be just as obvious that there is little if any existence to them apart from it.\(^{40}\)

### 5. The Production of the Incantations

Certain literary compositions, particularly those from cultures that have not yet fully internalized literacy but still remain primarily oral, betray certain hallmarks of this oral universe of communication. Parry and his successors attempted to identify these hallmarks from their content, particularly by the extent to which they were composed of formulaic material and formulas such as the ones that are found in the bowl texts, and thereby reconstruct the production of the texts. His protégé Albert Lord established a quantitative statistical analysis for metrical texts to assess the extent to which their composition was oral.

Subsequently, the work that Parry and Lord initiated has been greatly amplified and refined, and applied to a wide variety of formulaic compositions from many different cultures. In the context of metrical compositions such as Homeric poetry, Parry defines the formula as a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea. Ong defines the formula in a more general context as phrases or set expressions (such as proverbs) that are more or less exactly repeated, and that have a function in oral culture.

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\(^{38}\) Ibid., 21.

\(^{39}\) Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 17.

more crucial and pervasive than any they may have in literate societies.\(^{41}\) This definition is more appropriate for non-metrical compositions such as the incantation texts. Ritual and magical texts differ from other oral compositions in that their recitation tends to be more fixed and that greater efforts are made at reproducing the formulae verbatim, although the rate of success varies, as is obvious from the study of the incantation texts, particularly those that reproduce the same material.

In the tables below (Tables 7.1 to 7.3), I have provided a sample of the most common formulae found throughout the bowl corpus, phrases which appear in certain places of the incantation (either in the beginning, the middle, or the end) and in certain specific contexts (such as after the names of the client).

Table 7.1: Introductory Formulae

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Formula</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>bšuma(ihun) ḫ-hiia</td>
<td>In the name of life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>asuta thuilh l-</td>
<td>May there be healing be for …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>asuta uhtmta uzrzta unṭrta uzkuta</td>
<td>Health and sealing and arming and guarding and victory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘ṣira ukbiša luṭta uaqraita ḫ-</td>
<td>Bound and suppressed be the curse and invocation against …</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7.2: Concluding Formulae

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Formula</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>hiia zakia / zakin</td>
<td>Life is victorious!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘in uamin</td>
<td>So be it! Amen!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>asuta thuilh l-</td>
<td>May there be healing be for …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>amin amin sala</td>
<td>Amen, Amen, Selah!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition to their frequent use of formulaic expressions, oral compositions also betray a certain playfulness with language normally not found in written texts. Mandaic texts in particular are littered with what we might consider to be bad puns. In the bowl texts, these puns usually revolve around the functions of the demons and angels invoked – thus the demon Shiṭ'il seized (shiṭinin) the sorcerers who have cursed the bowl magician's clients, and the angels Šr'il and Brk'il release (šrunin) and bless (brkunin) the curses. Paronomasia is more typical of colloquial speech than written texts. Certainly, it is also found in certain genres of literature, but even in such instances it generally reflects usages common in current speech. Paronomastic curses and blessings (sometimes called “root-echo responses” or “cognate blessings” and “cognate curses”), such as the ones found in the bowl texts, are extremely well documented in the vernacular dialects of Arabic, among other Semitic languages, and continue to fulfill important pragmatic functions in colloquial discourse.

Of the bowls found at Khouabir and published by Pognon, fully seven contain the formula “Hark! The voice that I hear is the voice of the weak who are broken and the voice of the men that are fighting and go down in the battle and the voice of the impious women who curse and knock and bewitch and cause pain”, or minor variations upon it. This phrase either appears at the beginning of the text, or follows one of several short introductory formulae (Table 7.1). This formula is followed by as many as eight other formulae, which always appear in the same basic order even if not all of them are reproduced and those that do appear are rarely verbatim. All in all, one or more of these nine formulae appear in nine other texts from the Mandaic corpus, including three of those published by Mark Lidzbarski in 1902 and five of those that found their way into the collections of the British Museum and were subsequently published by J.B. Segal and Erica Hunter. Segal and Hunter identified this series of formulae as a “Refrain”, the largest of four they discovered in the corpus of texts at the British Museum. Sadly, none of these other bowls were discovered in an archaeological context, so it is impossible to draw conclusions as to the prevalence of these formulae in a given time period or region.

The most complete example of this Refrain is not found in any of the bowls from Khouabir or the British Museum but rather one that the Biblical scholar Cyrus Gordon purchased from an antiquities dealer in

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1 In a Semitic context, see Gen. 32:29 and 1 Chr. 10:13–14.
3 The genre of “cognate curses” was first introduced and defined by Devin Stewart; see his “Impoliteness Formulae: the Cognate Curse in Egyptian Arabic,” Journal of Semitic Studies 42.2 (1997): 327–60.
Baghdad and subsequently donated to the Harvard Semitic Museum. This bowl, accession number 931.1.1, is a rather large specimen, fully 5.5” high and 17” in diameter. The writing on it, which spirals out from the center, is reasonably clear, and on the back appears an illustration of a person performing the orant, a traditional Near Eastern gesture indicating worship, consisting of arms held perpendicular to the body, with the hands raised, and the palms facing outwards. This image is accompanied by a couple of captions. Bowl M is not the longest version of this particular incantation—that distinction belongs to bowl 103M in the British Museum, which begins with the phrase “bound and suppressed be the curse and invocation against …” repeated seventeen times (see Table 7.1 above).

The composition itself, a translation of which can be found in the appendix, is fairly straightforward. To the right of each of the formulas I have included a list of other bowls in which they appear. Note that no two bowls are precisely the same, and that most of the bowls are missing several of the formulas, although significantly the ones that they do reproduce always appear in the same order. After the introductory formulae, the bowl magician calls upon several demons, here identified by name, to attack the sorcerers assaulting his clients. He then launches into a laundry list of curses that is found in at least thirteen other bowls, indicating that he is probably covering all of the possibilities. This text identifies the sorcerers who are responsible for the curses, Iahbuia and Bindaduia, which is rare but not unique among the incantations. The sorcerer exhorts one of the demons to aid the clients. He never makes it entirely explicit which one of the six he is addressing, although his use of the phrase anat shūṭin “you seize them” suggests that he may be playing upon the name of the demon Shiṭil. It is at this point in the text that the aforementioned formula, “On a stone that is not split, I sat and wrote all the curses that they have cursed against [CLIENT] on a new bowl of clay”, appears, variations upon which are also found in twelve other texts. Finally, having deflected the curses back upon the original sorcerers, the bowl magician predicts that they will be forced to exorcize the curses with the help of two angels. The text then concludes with the formula amen, amen, selah. This formula, common in incantation texts known from other Aramaic dialects, is not found elsewhere in the corpus of Mandaic incantation bowls (for other concluding formulae, see Table 7.2 above).4

4 Drower and Macuch (A Mandaic Dictionary, 312) note that the phrase amin amin sala is, however, quite frequent in Mandaic exorcisms.
6. The Reception of the Incantation

One of Ong’s personal contributions to the study of oral compositions was a major shift of focus from the production of the oral compositions, which had been the primary concern of Lord and Parry, to their reception, as oral compositions are necessarily addressed directly to a specific audience. This explains many of the distinctive characteristics that separate them from written compositions. For example, Ong notes that oral compositions more commonly use coordinating conjunctions than subordinating conjunctions. He explains this phenomenon by nothing that written compositions lack the full context of the oral utterance, including non-verbal “paralinguistic” cues such as intonation and body language, and are therefore much more dependent upon linguistic structure and a much more elaborate syntax to impart meaning. To eyes accustomed to this elaborate syntax, such as ours, the repeated use of the coordinating conjunction u- in the text of Bowl M seems excessive and simplistic, but in the context of an oral recitation, such elaborate syntax is not only unnecessary but might even hamper comprehension.

Additionally, oral expressions tend to rely more heavily upon parallel terms, phrases, or even entire clauses, as well as epithets (for some examples of this, see Table 7.3 below). Ong relates this tendency to the oral reliance upon formulae to implement memory. To the literate eye, these appear to be cumbersome, tiresomely redundant, and in a word “clichéd”. Oral compositions prefer not merely the son, but “the masculine son,” not merely the daughter, but “the feminine daughter,” and not merely the animals, but “the animals with the cloven hoof and the animals without cloven feet” (see Table 7.3). The angels and demons in this text are generally identified as such, given names like Brk’īl Mlaka and Azdai Diua (“Brk’īl the Angel” and “Azdai the Demon”). Likewise, the major figures of the Mandaean mythology are frequently given heroic epithets—Hibel Ziwā, Anoš Uṭrā, Šišlam Rabbā, and so forth.
Table 7.3: Internal Formulae

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Formula</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ašbitalak umuminalak</td>
<td>I adjured you and bid you swear …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mumina lak umašabana lak</td>
<td>I bid you swear and adjure you …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ʿsira uhtima uzgira ublima umšmta uṣlipa umura … umṭrš luṭta</td>
<td>… bound and sealed and cut and hobbled and banned and whipped and blinded … and deafened be the curse …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>harbia sipia ḏ-bildbabia</td>
<td>… swords [and] sabers of the enemies …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ubnaihun zikria ubnatun nuqbata uahiuanatun kulhin ḏ-ṣria ṯupraihih ud-ḥaṣria ṯupraihih</td>
<td>… and their masculine sons and their feminine daughters and all their animals, with cloven hooves and without cloven hooves…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pgra ruha unišimta</td>
<td>… body, spirit, and soul …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bāita dura hikla biniana</td>
<td>… house, residence, mansion, [and] buildings …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lhma umia</td>
<td>… bread and water …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>arsa ubisadia</td>
<td>… bed and bolster …</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Consequently, oral compositions tend to be redundant. Ong explains this redundancy by noting that it serves several purposes—it helps to preserve continuity when there is no model to follow such as a written text, by forcing the speaker to consider simultaneously what he is saying, what he has already said, and what follows in the series, keeping him on track, and the repetition of information allows larger audiences to keep track of what is being said even when they have difficulty hearing all of the information. An extreme example of this is the formula repeated seventeen times at the beginning of bowl 103M in the British Museum.

Oral compositions also tend to be conservative vis-à-vis written compositions. As knowledge in an oral culture tends to disappear unless it is frequently repeated, oral cultures must invest great energy in repeating knowledge that has been acquired over the ages over and over again. This need encourages and even demands a highly traditionalist or conservative mindset that shuns intellectual experimentation, and for good reason. I do not intend to suggest that oral cultures are bereft of creativity or originality, but merely that this creativity consists chiefly of variations upon established themes.

Finally, knowledge is rarely presented in the abstract, but almost always in reference to situations derived from the human experience. As a corollary, oral compositions are always directed towards a particular audience, as it would be pointless to deliver them while alone. In fact, one
of the most common situations that occasion an oral composition is that of a competition. Poems and proverbs are used not merely for storing knowledge, but also to engage others in verbal and intellectual combat. Likewise, conflict is one of the most common topics of oral compositions—including, for obvious reasons, the incantation texts.

7. Conclusion

If it is indeed true that these texts are primarily oral compositions rather than purely literary ones, then the answer to the puzzle posed by the poor quality of the writing (not to mention the large number of bowls covered not with actual writing but with a crude imitation or “pseudo-script”) becomes obvious. In a primarily oral milieu such as that of the Middle East in antiquity, such compositions were made not to be recited alone but rather in the presence of others, as a kind of performance. Returning to the Generalissimo Stalin, it is clear that the other components of this performance—the whispered incantations, the construction of a magic circle, and finally the burial of the bowl—would have to be done properly in order to satisfy this audience of the efficacy of the ritual. The writing, which was merely a reflection of the oral composition, “trapped” as it were within the bounds of the circle formed by the rim of the bowl, was of secondary importance, and the circumstances of its execution (on a crude terracotta bowl during the course of a ritual) certainly did not lend themselves to great feats of calligraphy, in any case. Given these circumstances, and the fact that writing is typically much slower than speech (being typically about one tenth its speed), it is not surprising that some magicians may have merely mimicked the act of writing during the course of the ritual, thereby producing the so-called “pseudo-script texts”. We therefore need not resort to Pognon’s explanation, dismissing their creators as charlatans, as they would also need to be completely versed in the other, ultimately more important, components of the ritual in order to satisfy their clients.

In addition to illuminating much about the thought world of the Mandaeans in late antique Mesopotamia, these bowl texts also have great potential to teach us much about the language they spoke, provided that they are not confused or conflated with the standard versions of this language represented by other literary traditions. In fact, as hastily scrawled transcriptions of the actual speech of the magician, presumably recorded more or less verbatim, they offer us insight into aspects of the spoken language that are not provided by the more prestigious literary texts.
Averted and thrust aside are the curses and incantations from [CLIENT]

Hark! The voice that I hear is the voice of the weak who are broken and the voice of the men that are fighting and go down in the battle and the voice of the impious women who curse and knock and bewitch and cause pain to this body of [CLIENT].

There have gone down against them Azdai and Iazarun and Iaqarun and the great Pr‘il and ‘Urp‘il and Shṭ‘il, who has seized them (shṭinin) and taken them by the tuft of the hair of their heads and by the tresses of their pates, and he has broken their horns that were high, and he has bound them by the tuft of the hair of their heads and by the tresses of their pates, and has said to them: “Remove what you have cursed against [CLIENT].”

And they said to him: “From the anguish of our heart we cursed and from the bitterness of our palate we resolved to curse”.

And I say to them: “I have made you swear and I adjure you in the name of the demon Azdai and the demon Iazarun and Iaqarun and the great Pr‘il and Rup‘il and Shṭ‘il that you will release and free [CLIENT] from all the curses and all the invocations that you have cursed and from the curses of the father and the mother that they curse, and from the curse of the harlot and singing girl and from the curse of the grandmother and the newborn, and from the curse of employee and employer who stole his wages from him, and from the curse of the brothers who have not divided (an inheritance) among themselves fairly, and from that of [SORCERER] that they have cursed and invoked in the name of the shrines and the idols, and have worked.

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5 094–097M “cause pain to spirits and souls.”

6 Text M has amarlia ‘he said to them’

7 Pognon 1898 15, 16, 18: šrai; Lidzbarski I/II 1902 and Gordon 1937 M kruk; 094M–097M, 103M bruk
You are the healer who heals all maladies with the word(s). Heal the maladies with the word(s) and the curses that [SORCERER] have cursed against [CLIENT], and that any sons of man have cursed against [CLIENT].

You seize and take all the curses that they have cursed against CLIENT and heal in the name of Azdai and Iaqrun and the great Prʿil and the great Rupʿil and Shṭʿil. You (Shṭʿil) seize and take the curses that they have cursed against [CLIENT]. May he heal the curse that they have cursed against [CLIENT]. And send them to their (original) owners until they release and free and bless (them).”

On a stone that is not split, I sat and wrote all the curses that they have cursed against [CLIENT] on a new bowl of clay that cannot be annulled.

I have sent away and thrown the curses that they have cursed against [CLIENT], to their owners until they release and free and bless in the name of the angel Šrʿil and the angel Brkʿil.

You angels, release (šrunin) and bless (brkunin) all the curses that they have cursed against [CLIENT], as a man is freed from prison and from the stockade.

_Amen, amen, selah._

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8 Simplified to “He will seize and heal the curse that they cursed against [CLIENT]” in Lidzbarski 1902 III.

9 In 094M and 095M the angels are named as šria ušrula uširua uširua [usbaria]
References


