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Issue 25

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## Magic as the Basis for Social Cohesion in pre-Islamic Mesopotamia

With the fall of the Sasanian Empire in 651 CE, the situation that greeted the Arab conquerors in Mesopotamia was as rich as it was complex, with several communities coming under the banner of Islam. This included five communities with strong non-native traditions: a large and well-organised Jewish diaspora under the authority of the Exilarch, which had produced classic works of Jewish literature such as the Babylonian Talmud; a Mandaean Gnostic community that produced great works like the *Ginza Rabba* - “the Great Treasury”; a Zoroastrian community, closely associated with the ruling Sasanian dynasty; several distinct eastern churches, separated by the great Christological controversies; and the Manichaean community, whose missionary zeal took their faith along the Silk Route into China. There were also those we call, for want of a better term, Pagan -- that is, those who adhered to the worship of the older, traditional, Mesopotamian deities.

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There were, therefore, a number of distinct communities living side-by-side, whose prescribed customs, such as manners of worship, dietary laws etc., attempted to enforce distinctiveness and separation in communal life. Our knowledge of these customs and their impact on intercommunal relations principally derives from manuscript sources that have been transmitted over

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centuries and subjected to continued editorial activity. They represent, therefore, a series of officially sanctioned histories that are replete with anachronisms and distortions of anything relating to those from without the community.

One of the very few primary textual sources that has not been subject to such rigours is the corpus of incantation bowls that date to between the fourth and seventh centuries CE. These are ordinary, wheel spun and not glazed earthenware vessels, which are inscribed with incantations written in a variety of Aramaic dialects (Jewish Aramaic, Syriac and Mandaic) as well as Pahlavi (Middle Persian). The incantations typically invoke divine and angelic powers against the demons that

were thought to oppress the clients. Most of the texts are seeking healing from physical ailments, such as headaches, or protection for infants, property etc. A minority are more devious in intent, seeking to incite desire or bring a curse upon a rival. They are, therefore, of the utmost importance for those interested in the medical, magical and socio-religious history of Sasanian Mesopotamia, the period between that attested in Mesopotamian cuneiform sources and the later reception of Greco-Roman culture under Abbasid patronage.

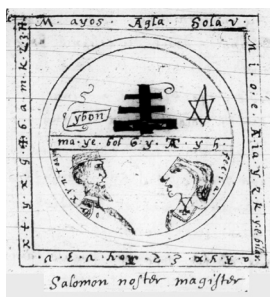
The majority of the texts are written in a Jewish Aramaic dialect that is very similar to that of the Babylonian Talmud. They are clearly Jewish, often containing Hebrew quotations from the Bible, as well as other

distinctively Jewish elements such as quotations from Jewish liturgy, legal formulae and even the Mishnah. A minority of the texts are written in the script of the Mandaeans and contain distinctly Mandaean elements, such as references to the *hiia rba*, “the Great Life.” Others are written in a Syriac script that was used by Christians, Pagans and Manichaeans.<sup>1</sup>

Judging by the superb quality of the scribal skills on display, many of the Jewish Aramaic incantation bowls appear to have been written by Jewish scribes, the same professionals who would have written legal documents at the local Jewish court. The clients for whom the bowls were written, however, were very often not Jewish. We can tell this by their names, some of which are Zoroastrian while others are Christian.

## The Societas Magica invites proposals for essays to run in future issues of the newsletter.

We are looking for short essays (1500-2500 words) announcing new developments deriving from research in the study and teaching of magic and its related topics. We would be especially interested to see lead articles on modern magic, or periods other than medieval. We are also looking for smaller pieces for our notes and queries column. News about dissertations in progress or completed, manuscript discoveries, or other such items are all welcomed.



Please contact David Porreca: [dporreca@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:dporreca@uwaterloo.ca)



[www.societasmagica.org](http://www.societasmagica.org)

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There is even an example of a Christian family who sought the services of both Jewish and Mandaean practitioners. Given the very personal nature of the incantations, this is testimony to a level of interaction between the communities that the official sources deny. But the level of interaction goes beyond clients seeking the services of those from other communities. There is much evidence for an interaction, possibly even fellowship, between practitioners from different communities.

One example relates to a piece of Jewish liturgy that is still used today, a bedtime prayer that invokes angelic protection on all sides: "Michael is on my right, and Gabriel is on my left, and Uriel is before me, and Raphael is behind me, and the Presence of God is above my head." This formula occurs in a number of Jewish Aramaic incantation bowls. In one case, it appears that the clients were a Zoroastrian family.<sup>2</sup> Given what was just said above, this is not unexpected. What is surprising, however, is the use of this piece of Jewish liturgy in a few incantation bowls that are inscribed in Syriac script, and that have distinctly Manichaean features. It would appear, therefore, that a Manichaean

practitioner was sufficiently aware of the repertoire of his Jewish colleagues to be able to incorporate some of it into his own work, albeit with a slight Manichaean innovation: "Azriel at its front, Azir at its back, Michael at its right hand, Raphael at its left hand, over the name Harbiel Mani is invoked."<sup>3</sup>

Another example relates to the appropriation of Jewish legal formulae. The most popular type is the use of Jewish divorce terminology and practice in formulating an incantation intended to send a demon away from the client's house, e.g.: "For I dismiss and release you by a deed of divorce, a document of release, and a letter of dismissal, according to the law of the women of Israel."<sup>4</sup> There are several versions of the magical *get*, or Jewish bill of divorce, one of which refers to the Iranian deity Bagdana, "the king of the demons and the *devs*, and the great ruler of the liliths." Once again, this formula is not only used by Jewish scribes for non-Jewish clients, but it is also used by non-Jewish scribes, e.g., in a number of Mandaic incantation bowls that show a considerable degree of Jewish influence, yet also contain distinctly Mandaean features.

It appears, however, that the direction of influence was not simply from Jewish to non-Jewish scribes. There is one intriguing example of a Jewish scribe making an explicit reference to both Jewish and Christian elements at the same time: "By the name of 'I am who I am,' the LORD of hosts, and by the name of Jesus, who conquered the height and the depth by his cross, and by the name of his exalted father, and by the name of the holy spirits, for ever and eternity. Amen, Amen, Selah."<sup>5</sup> Earlier, the same text invokes "Shamish, the king of the gods," a reference to the traditional Pagan solar deity. So it seems that Jewish scribes were not averse to incorporating Christian and Pagan elements

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## 20% Discount

Members of the Societas Magica are entitled to a 20% discount on all books in the Magic in History series put out by Pennsylvania State University Press. Mention that you are a Societas Magica member when ordering books by phone (800-326-9180) or fax (877-778-2665). These telephone numbers work from the US and Canada.



# Notes and Queries

Colleagues,

I am currently investigating the possibility of holding a once or twice annual e-Seminar in which an invited speaker will deliver a paper of 40-50 minutes and another will respond. I write to ask if there would be interest in such a project that would build our intellectual community beyond the confines of disciplinary conferences, but would also facilitate graduate student involvement.

Current technology allows us to include by live feed a significant number of remote locations, where groups of people may participate, allowing live questions and discussion after the talk (increasingly universities have dedicated e-conference rooms). For those lacking the technical support at their institution, participation may be available in special circumstances through individual computers, but certainly the talk will be live streamed on the internet and thus available to all. Participation in discussion would thus also be possible by e-mail.

My university belongs to an international consortium of universities with a common network known as Access Grid and I would seek to facilitate the talks through it. (See <http://accessgrid.org>.) Universities that are not part of the consortium may also be included live in the seminar so long as the equipment and staff support are available. I attended a seminar that involved 8 locations and it seemed to work quite well.

I foresee the following as a possible configuration. Nodes would be established at select central locations where groups of people might collect to attend. I think it would be best to give preference for live participation to locations where researchers and students working on the topic might be found.

I plan to bring this to our Annual Meeting in May but would like input from a wider group at this time. My questions are as follows:

1. Would you be interested in participating in such an e-Seminar?
2. Would you be interested in investigating your local resources to see if you could establish a node at your institution?
3. Are there certain locations near to you (particularly those part of Access Grid) which might offer access to a number of local participants?
4. Do you have any comments on my suggestions for the organization of these talks?

If this proposal is of interest to you, please contact me at [frank.klaassen@usask.ca](mailto:frank.klaassen@usask.ca).

Frank Klaassen



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into their texts.

The Aramaic incantation texts are perhaps the most important source we have for studying the everyday beliefs and practices of the Jewish, Christian, Mandaean, Manichaean, Zoroastrian and Pagan communities of Mesopotamia in the Sasanian period. Their content testifies to a counter-narrative to the official histories, and is an uncensored witness to the clients' anxieties, desires and methods of seeking to influence the divine realm. The texts illuminate the relations between the various religious and ethnic groups. We even see families where the two spouses have names of different religious and ethnic origins, and where the children again have names that indicate different ethnic and religious groups.

We find that magic provided a medium that fostered intercommunal relations on a number of levels, with scribes from various communities apparently engaging in meaningful fellowship with each other and with their clients, often on quite intimate terms. Furthermore, we can now locate these practices at the core rather than on the periphery of these communities. Some of the

unpublished bowls contain explicit dates, which can help in fixing the time and location of the communities involved. Crucially, some of the ideas circulating in these magical circles subsequently found their way into the Quran, so the corpus remains very important in the study of the Mesopotamian religious context on the eve of the arrival of Islam.

Of the approximately two thousand texts that have been discovered to date, only around two hundred have been published. This is due, in part, to the esoteric nature of the material and the scarcity of competent palaeographers and philologists who are able to read accurately and analyse the texts. This means that a crucial corpus of material remains beyond consultation for the majority of academics, especially those who cannot access the texts in their original languages. Over the last fourteen years, Professor Shaul Shaked (Hebrew University, Jerusalem) has been engaged in preparing for publication the world's largest collection of Aramaic incantation bowls - over 650 texts held in the Martin Schøyen Collection. In this task, he has been assisted by Dr James Nathan Ford (Bar Ilan University) and, more recently, by the present author.

The first volume, containing sixty-two texts, will be published later this year.<sup>6</sup> Once all the volumes are published, we will have more than trebled the number of texts in the public domain.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> A useful introduction can be found in Shaul Shaked, "Jews, Christians and Pagans in the Aramaic Incantation Bowls of the Sasanian Period," in A. Destro and M. Pesce (eds.), *Religions and Cultures* (Binghamton: Global Publications, 2002), 61–89.

<sup>2</sup> See Shaul Shaked, "Peace be Upon You, Exalted Angels': on Hekhalot, Liturgy and Incantation Bowls," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 2 (1995), 197–219 (211–216).

<sup>3</sup> See Shaul Shaked, "Manichaean Incantation Bowls in Syriac," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 24 (2000), 58–92.

<sup>4</sup> See Shaul Shaked, "The Poetics of Spells. Language and Structure in Aramaic Incantations of Late Antiquity. 1: The Divorce Formula and its Ramifications," in T. Abusch and K. van der Toorn (eds.), *Mesopotamian Magic: Textual, Historical, and Interpretative Perspectives* (Groningen: Styx, 1999), 173–195 (179).

<sup>5</sup> See Dan Levene, "... and by the name of Jesus...' An Unpublished Magic Bowl in Jewish Aramaic," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 6 (1999), 283–308.

<sup>6</sup> To be published as: Shaul Shaked, James Nathan Ford and Siam Bhayro (eds.), *Aramaic Bowl Spells: Texts from the Schøyen Collection. Jewish Babylonian Aramaic Bowls, Volume 1* (JBA 1-60) (Leiden & Boston: Brill, expected 2011).

# Sessions Sponsored by the Societas Magica at the Forty-Sixth International Congress on Medieval Studies May 12–15, 2011

## 1. Session 123, Thursday 3:30 PM, Fetzer 2040

### BOOKS AND SECRETS: EPIGRAPHS AS SYMBOLS/CIPHERS AS SIGNS

(Co-sponsored by the Research Group on Manuscript Evidence)

Organizer: Sarah Celentano Parker, Univ. of Texas–Austin

Presider: Sarah Celentano Parker

*Cryptic Portraits in the Sobieski Hours: A Mother's Love and a Daughter's Devotions*

Joni Hand, Ringling College of Art and Design

*The "Family Tree": Emblems and Dynastic Desire in the Carrara Herbal*

Sarah Kyle, Univ. of Central Oklahoma

*"Old Stories in Bedes Boke": The Venerable Bede, MS Bodleian Hatton 56, and Middle English Prophecy*

Justin Noetzel, St. Louis Univ.

*What's in a Script? The Expressive Power of Monumental Script in the Catacombs of Rome*

Natalie Hall, Univ. of Arkansas–Fayetteville

## 2. Session 206, Friday 10:00 AM, Schneider 1245

### COGNITION AND MAGIC

Organizer: David Porreca, Univ. of Waterloo

Presider: David Porreca

*Current Trends in the Application of Cognitive Science to Magic*

Edward Bever, SUNY College–Old Westbury

*Experiencing Medieval Magic: A Classroom Experiment*

Frank Klaassen, Univ. of Saskatchewan

**Respondent:** Michael A. Ryan, Purdue Univ

## 3. Session 260, Friday 1:30 PM, Schneider 1245

### AFTER THORNDIKE: THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF MAGIC

Organizer: David Porreca, Univ. of Waterloo

Presider: Claire Fanger, Rice Univ.

*Making Sense of Mantic Alphabets*

László Sándor Chardonnens, Radboud Univ.

Nijmegen

*In the Shadow of Trachtenberg: The Study of Medieval European Jewish Magic, Seventy Two Years Later*

Katelyn Mesler, Northwestern Univ.

*The Historiography of Medieval Middle Eastern Magic*

Edgar W. Francis IV, Univ. of Wisconsin–Stevens Point

*Extracting the "Oyls": Addressing Academic*

*Discourses on Witches' Ointments in Twentieth-Century Medieval Studies*

Thomas Hatsis, Taft Institute of Government

## 4. Session 318, Friday 3:30 PM, Schneider 1245

### PROPHECY, ESCHATOLOGY, AND MAGIC

Organizer: David Porreca, Univ. of Waterloo

Presider: Michael A. Ryan, Purdue Univ.

*The Death of Baldur, Norse Mythology, and Ominous Invisibility in an Icelandic Grimoire*

Thomas B. de Mayo, J. Sergeant Reynolds

Community College

*Between Reality and Unreality: The Female as Witch in Late Medieval Italian Towns through the Mirror of*

*Mendicant Preachers*

Fabrizio Conti, Central European Univ.

*Apollonius of Tyana through (a) Medieval Lense(s)*

David Porreca, Univ. of Waterloo

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