



BRILL

Gender and the Mesopotamian Incantation Bowls

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Abstract

This article discusses three gender-related aspects found in the Mesopotamian incantation bowls (a field where the topic of gender has only been addressed in a limited fashion): the scholarly terminology, the bowls' beneficiaries, and their creators. It begins by clarifying the terminology, a task that is essential for a better understanding of the gendered aspects of the incantation bowls. Second, the article considers the bowls' beneficiaries. While many of these objects were meant to benefit entire households, or at least couples, quite a few of them only display a female name or a male name. Can anything be concluded about the beneficiaries of these bowls based on the names they contained? The third part of the article addresses the creators of the incantation bowls. Can women be identified amongst the authors or producers of these texts, and if so, how?

Keywords

Mesopotamian incantation bowls – Jewish magic – gender – ritual practices – late antique magic

1 Introduction

This article is part of a larger project I initiated, meant to explore various aspects of gender and magic in the ancient and medieval world.¹ It focuses on the Mesopotamian incantation bowls, ritual objects produced in the area of present-day Iraq and some parts of Iran, approximately from the fourth–fifth to the eighth century CE.² The article discusses three gender-related aspects found in these bowls (a field where the topic of gender has only been addressed in a limited fashion): the scholarly terminology, the bowls' beneficiaries, and their creators.³ I will begin with a terminological discussion, a task that is essential for a better understanding of the gendered aspects of the incantation bowls. Second, I will consider the bowls' beneficiaries. While many of these objects were meant to benefit entire households, or at least couples, quite a few of them only display a female name or a male name.⁴ Can anything be concluded about the beneficiaries of these bowls based on the names they contain? Is there a difference in the aims and content of bowls written for females and those written for males? These questions deserve a closer treatment than they have received thus far, and more importantly, a change in methodology. In the third part of the article I will revisit the fascinating question of the incantation bowls' creators.⁵ Can women be identified amongst the authors or producers of these texts, and if so, how? Can ethnographic comparisons be employed in order to shed light on this matter? Lastly, the conclusions will outline some avenues for future research into the gendered aspects of the incantation bowls.

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- 1 See also O.-P. Saar, 'Men, Women and Children? Some Gender Aspects in Mesopotamian Incantation Bowls', in A. Warren and J.S. Mokhtarian (eds.), *The Aramaic Incantation Bowls in Their Late Antique Jewish Contexts* (Providence, RI: Brown Judaic Studies, forthcoming); O.-P. Saar, 'Reading and Writing Magic: The Gendered Use of Magic Books', forthcoming.
 - 2 For a contextualized introduction to the Mesopotamian incantation bowls, see G. Bohak, 'Jewish Amulets, Magic Bowls, and Manuals in Aramaic and Hebrew', in D. Frankfurter (ed.), *Guide to the Study of Ancient Magic* (Leiden: Brill, 2019) pp. 388–415 (with an extensive bibliography on pp. 394–395 n. 18).
 - 3 The article focuses on bowls inscribed in the Jewish Aramaic dialect. More comparative research into bowls inscribed in the Mandaic and Syriac dialects remains a desideratum.
 - 4 This article refers to the apparent biological sex of the individual mentioned, by relying on their name. A person bearing a male name is referred to as male, even though the biological sex is not identical to a person's gender. However, the ancient data discussed in this article precludes a distinction between sex and gender.
 - 5 The term 'creator' is employed here as an umbrella that includes author and producer/inscriber, two terms that are not identical and should not be conflated, as explained further below.

The method I chose to explore the gendered aspects of the incantation bowls relies on a close reading of the evidence.⁶ By ‘close reading’ I mean first and foremost an increase in the exactitude with which the data is examined: asking *what the data really is or says*, rather than what we tend to assume. For example, the article employs the term ‘Mesopotamian incantation bowls’ rather than ‘Aramaic’ ones. The reason for this is that the discussion also includes bowls inscribed in pseudo-script, once labelled as the product of charlatans.⁷ These bowls, while Mesopotamian in their geographical origin, cannot be said to be ‘Aramaic’. Thus, an increase in exactitude also requires a terminology that is as specific as possible. The same attempt at close reading of the evidence will be reflected in the questions I wish to put forward, for example: When should one refer to *male* beneficiaries and when can one refer to *men*? As will be shown below, most studies in the field have overlooked these sort of distinctions. The methodology I propose in this paper can be applied to other aspects of the research into the Mesopotamian incantation bowls, as well as the study of magic in a broader sense. These aspects will be outlined in the conclusions.

2 Terminology, or: The Importance of Being Exact

Between five to six hundred Mesopotamian incantation bowls have been edited and published to date. Most of these are apotropaic and exorcistic, with a small number displaying other purposes, such as obtaining love, economic or legal success, as well as a distinct group of bowls with an aggressive focus.⁸ When belonging to the first and most common category, the bowls have as beneficiaries males, females, (married) couples, or households of one or more generations. They typically contain phrases such as ‘Healing from Heaven for

6 For methodologies of close reading in the field of incantation bowls, see, e.g., M. Morgenstern, ‘Linguistic Notes on Magic Bowls in the Moussaieff Collection’, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 68 (2005), pp. 349–367; Y. Paz, ‘Eternal Chains and the Mountain of Darkness: The Fallen Angels in the Incantation Bowls’, in I. Dorfmann-Lazarev (ed.), *Apocryphal and Esoteric Sources in the Development of Christianity and Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 2021) pp. 533–558.

7 For pseudo-script bowls, see below, note 18. In the words of Henri Pognon, ‘il est probable que des charlatans, ne sachant même pas écrire, vendaient souvent aux illettrés des coupes qu’ils prétendaient couvertes de formules magiques et sur lesquelles il n’y avait en réalité que des signes n’appartenant à aucun alphabet’. H. Pognon, *Inscriptions mandaites des coupes de Khouabir. Texte, traduction et commentaire philologique* (Paris, 1898) p. 15.

8 For the latter, see the corpus assembled by D. Levene, *Jewish Aramaic Curse Texts from Late-Antique Mesopotamia: ‘May These Curses Go Out and Flee’* (Leiden: Brill, 2013); O.-P. Saar, ‘An Incantation Bowl for Sowing Discord’, *Journal of Semitic Studies* 58 (2013), pp. 241–256.

the threshold and for the shop of Farrokh-Khusraw son of Barazdukh' (אסותא /מן שמה לאיסקופתיה/ ולחנותיה דפרוך כוסרו בר ברזודוך /ישמיד אני עושה דין קמיעא) or 'By your name I make this amulet in order that it may be for healing for this Hormiz son of Imma and for this Shaburdukh daughter of Tuṭay, his wife' (דיהוי להון לאסו/ להדין הוורמיז בר אמה ולהדא שבורדווך בת טוטיי איתתיה /אברהם ומן פנוי ומן שילי בני שרקוי ומן ביתהון ומן/ קינינהון ומן דירתהון דיחון ויפקון מן) דדבה בר אסמנדוך ומן שרקוי/ בת דאדה איתתיה ומן הוניק ומן יסמין ומן כופיית ומן מהדוך ומן /אברהם ומן פנוי ומן שילי בני שרקוי ומן ביתהון ומן/ קינינהון ומן דירתהון specified in these phrases are the beneficiaries of the bowls. They are the ones whom the bowl was meant to protect, heal, or otherwise benefit. In some cases, the bowls also include the names of human targets, who bore a relation to the beneficiaries. Most often these targets would be adversaries of the bowl's beneficiary, for example: 'This is a charm to overturn sorceries and vows and curses and afflictions and rites from Shilta daughter of Immi against Shishin daughter of Asmandukh and against Imme-d-avu daughter of Shilta' (/למיפד/ [לא] קיב) חרשי ונידרי ולוטתא/ ושיקופתא ואשלמתא מן שילתא בת אימי/ על שישין בבת אסמנדוך דין קיב [לא] למיפד/) (ועל אימדבי בת שילתא /וישקופתא ואשלמתא מן שילתא בת אימי/ על שישין בבת אסמנדוך מוזמן הדין כסא לישמיה דאנור..ד בר פרכוי דנישתוחון) (ונישתגר ונישתבב/ בתר אחת בת נבזאך /ונישתגר ונישתבב/ בתר אחת בת נבזאך).¹² In other cases, the bowl may refer to a target who should fall in love with the bowl's beneficiary, for example 'Appointed is this bowl to the name of Anur[...] son of Parkoi, that he be inflamed and kindled and burn after Aḥat daughter of Nebazakh' (ונישתגר ונישתבב/ בתר אחת בת נבזאך /ונישתגר ונישתבב/ בתר אחת בת נבזאך).¹³ In yet other instances, the bowl does not specify a beneficiary but only targets, as in a bowl meant to sow hate between a man and a woman—this action was probably performed for the benefit of a third person, who remains, however, anonymous.¹⁴

In all these cases the bowl texts provide information regarding beneficiaries and targets, but rarely can anything be glimpsed about the process of author-

9 S. Bhayro, D. Levene, and O.-P. Saar, *Aramaic Magic Bowls in the Vorderasiatisches Museum* (Leiden: Brill, 2018) pp. 11–15, bowl VA.2182, lines 1–2.

10 Sh. Shaked, J.N. Ford, and S. Bhayro, *Aramaic Bowl Spells: Jewish Babylonian Aramaic Bowls*, vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2013) pp. 123–125, bowl JBA 19 (MS 2053/132), lines 1–2.

11 J.A. Montgomery, *Aramaic Incantation Texts from Nippur* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Museum, 1913) pp. 174–177, bowl 12 (CBS 9009), lines 10–12. For corrections to Montgomery's readings, see J.N. Epstein, 'Glosses babylo-araméennes', *Revue des études juives* 73 (1921), pp. 27–58 and 74 (1922), pp. 40–72.

12 Levene, *Jewish Aramaic Curse Texts*, pp. 30–34, bowl VA.2509, lines 1–4.

13 Montgomery, *Aramaic Incantation Texts*, pp. 213–217, bowl 28 (CBS 2972), lines 1–2.

14 Saar, 'An Incantation Bowl for Sowing Discord'.

ship and production, through which these names came to be inscribed on the bowls. For the sake of exactitude it is important to consider two elements related to this process, that have a bearing on discussions of gender in the incantation bowls: beneficiaries and life stage.

2.1 *Beneficiaries*

The *beneficiary* of a bowl is not necessarily identical with the person who *commissioned* the bowl from a ritual practitioner. It is possible that some bowls were commissioned by a person who sought to assist the beneficiary, with or without their knowledge. For example, a bowl seeking to heal someone did not have to be commissioned by the ill person. It could have been commissioned by their family or friends.¹⁵ Similarly, a bowl seeking to bestow grace on a woman, possibly in legal circumstances, and asking ‘may she come to trial and win’ (תִּידוֹן וְתוֹרִי),¹⁶ could have been commissioned by the woman herself, but also by her husband or loved ones.

The distinction between *beneficiary* and *commissioner* is almost invariably overlooked in the scholarly literature on Mesopotamian bowls. These two identities are often bundled together under a single term, and designated as ‘the client’. The term ‘client’ is problematic in itself, because it takes for granted the existence of a professional practitioner of magic and a customer, while some of the bowls could have been produced by the beneficiaries themselves.¹⁷ Handbooks of magic from Late Antiquity onwards, both Jewish and non-Jewish, often prescribe recipes that involve writing. It is thus not impossible that some lay persons produced magical texts for themselves without resorting to a professional practitioner, with the aid of such recipes or even without it. This possibility also holds true for Mesopotamian bowls, particularly those inscribed in pseudo-script, for which no literacy skills were necessary (although some

15 For example, some bowls seek to protect siblings—these could have been commissioned by one or more of the siblings involved, or by their parent(s). See, e.g., Montgomery, *Aramaic Incantation Texts*, pp. 205–206, bowl 24 (CBS 2926), whose beneficiaries are three daughters of Mahlafta, for each of whom different aims are listed: fever, evil dreams, and perhaps child delivery.

16 Sh. Shaked, ‘Form and Purpose in Aramaic Spells: Some Jewish Themes (The Poetics of Magic Texts)’, in Sh. Shaked (ed.), *Officina Magica: Essays on the Practice of Magic in Antiquity* (Leiden: Brill, 2005) pp. 1–30 (on 25–26), bowl MS 1927/2, line 3.

17 See the still relevant comments of Montgomery, *Aramaic Incantation Texts*, pp. 27–28, 47–48; M. Morony, ‘Magic and Society in Late Sasanian Iraq’, in S. Noegel, J. Walker, and B. Wheeler (eds.), *Prayer, Magic, and the Stars in the Ancient and Late Antique World* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003) pp. 83–107 (99, note 36); O.-P. Saar, ‘Review of Shaked, Shaul / Ford, James Nathan / Bhayro, Siam: Aramaic Bowl Spells’, *Orientalistische Literaturzeitung* 110 (2015), pp. 324–326 (326).

of these bowls, too, would have been inscribed by professionals).¹⁸ Conversely, some skilfully inscribed bowls that designate a ‘rabbi’ as their beneficiary could have been produced by that very same person, who could have had both the ritual knowledge and aptitude needed to inscribe an incantation text. This possibility, however, tends to be overlooked and the discussion continues to focus on those ‘rabbis’ as ‘clients’, even though some of them may have been both the beneficiaries and producers of their own bowls.¹⁹ Lastly, a question that was not considered so far is: Who produced the bowls of the professional practitioners? Given the popularity of these objects and the many decades they subsisted, there would have been dozens of ritual practitioners who produced them. What did these practitioners do when they wanted to protect themselves and their households from evil? Did they resort to a colleague and ask to have bowls inscribed on their behalf? Or did they, instead, cater for themselves, and produce their own incantation bowls? In the latter case, ‘client’ and ‘producer’ would be identical.

Consequently, it would be advisable to discard the term ‘client’ and bear in mind that:

- a. some bowls may have been produced by persons for themselves, either by lay persons not involving a professional practitioner, or by professional practitioners producing bowls on their own behalf;
- b. the person for whose benefit the bowl was inscribed may have been different from the person who commissioned it from a professional practitioner, or from the person who produced it (in the cases where ‘a’ applies).

18 Pseudo-script bowls are inscribed in characters that resemble actual letters but are not so. Even when actual letters are found among these characters, they do not form textually meaningful sequences. Pseudo-script can resemble the Jewish Aramaic, Mandaean, and Syriac alphabets. On pseudo-script bowls, see C.G. Häberl, ‘Aramaic Incantation Texts between Orality and Textuality’, in J. Rubanovich (ed.), *Orality and Textuality in the Iranian World: Patterns of Interaction across the Centuries* (Leiden: Brill, 2015) pp. 365–399; D.J. Waller, ‘Curious Characters, Invented Scripts, and ... Charlatans? “Pseudo-Scripts” in the Mesopotamian Magic Bowls’, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 78 (2019), pp. 119–139; C.A. Evans and S. Stripling, ‘Two Pseudo-Text Incantation Bowls from the University of Pikeville’, *Near East Archaeological Society Bulletin* 64 (2019), pp. 43–49.

19 See, for example, Sh. Shaked, ‘Rabbis in Incantation Bowls’, in M.J. Geller (ed.), *The Archaeology and Material Culture of the Babylonian Talmud* (Leiden: Brill, 2015) pp. 97–121 (104): ‘In a number of cases a person with the title of “rabbi” or the alternative title “mar” is mentioned as the owner of the magic bowl. It may be assumed that the scribe who wrote the text on the bowl is not the same person as the owner of the bowl, and the use of the title may have been the honorific style by which the scribe felt bound to refer to the client for whom he was writing the text’.

The importance of these distinctions becomes apparent when one discusses the gender of the bowls' users. Instead of referring to bowls *used* or *owned* by women or men, it would be more exact to refer to bowls where the *beneficiary* is female or male. This exactitude will lead to different questions and consequent discussion of the data.

2.2 *Male and Female vs. Men and Women*

A second distinction I propose to make in the bowls data regards the age factor, or the life stage of the persons mentioned within.²⁰ A name denoting male or female gender, as well as the matronymic designation 'son of X', 'daughter of X', should not be taken to mean that these persons were men and women. A male name does *not necessarily* denote a man. It could also denote a male infant or a pre-pubescent boy, and the same holds for a female name. Thus, unless we have a clear indication that the person was an adult, such as a text referring to a female and her husband and children, or referring to a male's 'business, buying and selling' (ולכל עיסקי ולכל זיבני וזיבוני),²¹ we should consider the evidence as open on matters of age.²² Another criterion that might indicate

20 Life stages are defined in various ways and are socially and culturally constructed. What counts as an adult in one society in a given period can differ greatly from what counts as such in a second society. Furthermore, various disciplines, such as biology or sociology, understand life stages differently. The topic is vastly discussed in the social sciences; for some broad reviews see, e.g., A.M. O'Rand and M.L. Krecker, 'Concepts of the Life Cycle: Their History, Meanings, and Uses in the Social Sciences', *Annual Review of Sociology* 16 (1990), pp. 241–262; K.U. Mayer, 'New Directions in Life Course Research', *Annual Review of Sociology* 35 (2009), pp. 413–433. Information about life stages in Judaism during the Sassanian period is limited (for some rabbinic discussions, see BT Niddah 46a), and hence no specification of years will be attempted in this article. For useful comparisons, see M.T. Roth, 'Age at Marriage and the Household: A Study of Neo-Babylonian and Neo-Assyrian Forms', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 29 (1987), pp. 715–747.

21 D. Levene and S. Bhayro, "Bring to the Gates ... upon a good smell and upon good fragrances:" An Aramaic Incantation Bowl for Success in Business,' *Archiv für Orientforschung* 51 (2005), pp. 242–246, bowl SD34, line 13.

22 The same problem impacts the scholarship on other magic materials, such as metal amulets. For example, the excellent survey of metal *lamellae* by Hanan Eshel and Rivka Elitzur-Leiman states: 'There is an equal distribution of male and female names appearing on the amulets—five amulets were written for men (1–4, 6) and five for women (5, 7, 13–15)' (H. Eshel and R. Leiman, 'Jewish Amulets Written on Metal Scrolls,' *Journal of Ancient Judaism* 1 [2010], pp. 189–199). Some of these amulets, however, include no indication regarding the age of the beneficiary, e.g. their Amulet 4, first edited in J. Naveh and Sh. Shaked, *Magic Spells and Formulae: Aramaic Incantations of Late Antiquity* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1993) pp. 60–66, Amulet 19; or their Amulet 5, first edited in J. Naveh and Sh. Shaked, *Amulets and Magic Bowls: Aramaic Incantations of Late Antiquity* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1998³) pp. 44–49, Amulet 2. Simon son of Kattia and Yaitha daughter of Marian, who are

adulthood is property ownership, though this is not unequivocal.²³ One could, however, choose to regard beneficiaries who are mentioned together with their house / household as being adults who actually owned these properties. Still, there are bowls where no such ownership is mentioned. These should be considered as potentially belonging to individuals of all ages. Obviously, this has implications on gender-related aspects: a female infant, a girl, and a woman are not the same type of beneficiaries. The questions that should be applied to them are equally different. This point is extremely valuable to the study of the bowls in their social, cultural, economic, and medical contexts. For example, if one were to evaluate the number of bowls written for men and compare it to those written for women, or compare the aims of bowls written for men to those written for women, different conclusions will be reached when considering that some of those 'men' and 'women' may have been infants or children. Statements such as 'X bowls for women were aimed against the evil eye' will be modified and read 'X bowls for women and Y bowls for female beneficiaries of an unknown age were aimed against the evil eye'. Similarly, a study of the medical conditions mentioned in the bowls may reach different conclusions if considering beneficiaries in different stages of their lives—including infancy and childhood—than if treating all the beneficiaries as adults.

Curiously, the question of age and life stages has not been discussed in the bowls scholarly literature thus far. Although children in Late Antiquity are known to have been equipped with a variety of apotropaic and healing devices, including textual amulets, the possibility that some of the Mesopotamian incantation bowls were inscribed for children has been mostly overlooked.²⁴ The one exception are discussions of bowls explicitly referring to foetuses or infants and asking for the protection of both mother and child.²⁵

the beneficiaries of these amulets against fever and evil entities, could have been children as well as mature persons. The same is true of other named beneficiaries of amulets.

23 For a list of criteria for establishing adulthood in the bowls, see Saar, 'Men, Women and Children?'

24 For children's use of amuletic devices in Judaism, see, e.g., Mishna Shabbat 6:9 (knots and bells); BT Qiddushin 73b (amulet hanging on an abandoned baby); the child shirt uncovered in excavations in the Judean Desert in Y. Yadin, *The Finds from the Bar Kokhba Period in the Cave of Letters* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1963) pp. 256–258 and plates 89–90; the gold amulet with a Greek transliteration of the *Shema Israel* prayer in N. Doneus and A. Lange (eds.), *Golden Words: An Ancient Jewish Amulet from Austria and the Jewish Presence in Roman Pannonia*, special issue of *Journal of Ancient Judaism* 1 (2010). More generally on children's amulets, see V. Dasen, 'Probaskania: Amulets and Magic in Antiquity', in D. Boschung and J.N. Brenner (eds.), *The Materiality of Magic* (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2015) pp. 177–203.

25 E.g., D. Levene, *A Corpus of Magic Bowls: Incantation Texts in Jewish Aramaic from Late*

If, however, some bowls sought to protect foetuses, there is no reason to disregard the possibility that some of them were intended to protect infants or children. A text requesting ‘May Mahlefan son of Rewita be sealed at his four sides, on his right and his left, in front of him and in his rear, so that no tormentors will afflict him’ (ויתחתם מחלפא בר רביתא מן ארבע רוחתיה / מן ימיניה ומן שמליה) ויתחיה כל מזיקיה (מן קדמוהי ואחורוהי דלא יגעון ביה כל מזיקיה)²⁶ could have been written for an adult man as well as for a male infant or a boy, just as a text requesting the ‘sealing of Hormizdukh daughter of Mahdukh’ (לחתמתא להורמיזוך בת מדוך),²⁷ a person of which no other details are given, could have been written for a beneficiary of any age.

Coming back to the distinction between beneficiary and commissioner, the difference between male and man or female and woman is more evident. An infant or a young child did not commission, own, or produce their incantation bowls, but they could very well have been the beneficiaries of bowls.

The two terminological suggestions outlined above open the way to a more exact investigation of the Mesopotamian incantation bowls, their cultural and social functions, as well as their gendered aspects.

3 Gender and the Bowls’ Beneficiaries

The first gendered aspect to be discussed concerns a correlation between the stated gender of the bowl beneficiary and the content of the incantation. For example, one could expect bowls whose sole beneficiaries were women to mention aspects of life pertaining to safely bearing and delivering children, or the alleviation of gynaecological complaints. Similarly, bowls whose sole beneficiaries were men could be expected to mention the protection of shops and business venues from evil entities and curses. While instances of both

Antiquity (London: Kegan Paul, 2003), bowl M101; G. Abousamra, ‘Semomit in a New Incantation Bowl’, in M. Maeva et al. (eds.), *Between the Worlds: Magic, Miracles, and Mysticism*, vol. 2 (Sofia: IEFSEM—BAS & Paradigma, 2020) pp. 455–464; J.N. Ford, ‘Another Look at the Mandaic Incantation Bowl BM 91715’, *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society* 29 (2002), pp. 31–47.

26 T. Fain, J.N. Ford, and A. Lyavdansky, ‘Aramaic Incantation Bowls at the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg’, in L. Kogan et al. (eds.), *Babel und Bibel 9: Proceedings of the 6th Biennial Meeting of the International Association for Comparative Semitics and Other Studies* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2016) pp. 283–316, bowl S-442, lines 2–3.

27 Montgomery, *Aramaic Incantation Texts*, pp. 183–184, bowl 14 (CBS 16917), line 1; Epstein, ‘Gloses’, p. 46.

do exist,²⁸ a preliminary survey of the published data seems to indicate that this was usually not the case: women and men did not employ gender specific incantations.²⁹

Bowls whose beneficiaries can be clearly understood as women (as opposed to female infants or girls) largely display similar aims to those inscribed for male beneficiaries.³⁰ Some bowls exist in which pregnancies are mentioned.³¹ In other cases, specific protection from child-harming demons is sought in bowls mentioning adult female beneficiaries. The latter aim, however, can also be found in bowls whose beneficiaries are couples. For example, bowl 11 from Montgomery's *Aramaic Incantation Texts* was inscribed for a woman and has a duplicate in Segal, *Catalogue of the Aramaic and Mandaic Incantation Bowls*, bowl 013A, that was inscribed for a couple.³² Both bowls were directed against lilitis, with mentions of abortions and barrenness. Similarly, bowl Schøyen MS 1928/47 was aimed for the protection of a man named Farrokh and his wife Mashkoi from lilitis who harm children.³³ In such cases it is unknown who commissioned the bowl, and hence, whether the concern about the protection

28 For example, female-specific: Shaked, 'Form and Purpose in Aramaic Spells', bowl MS 1927/9; S. Bhayro, 'An Aramaic Magic Bowl for Fertility and Success in Childbirth: Lisboa, Museu da Farmácia (Lisbon, Pharmacy Museum), Inv. No. 10895', *Aramaic Studies* 15 (2017), pp. 106–111. Male-specific: bowls CAMIB 021A and CAMIB 022A, both meant to protect a man named Aban son of Daday, his house, and shop from the evil eye, and for securing prosperity for them; Naveh and Shaked, *Magic Spells and Formulae*, bowl 24, meant to improve and protect the wine of Burzbahram son of Dutay; or the bowl edited by Levene and Bhayro in "Bring to the Gates".

29 The present survey focuses on: (a) bowls whose sole beneficiary is a woman, (b) bowls whose first-named beneficiary is a woman, even when more beneficiaries are listed together with her, such as her husband and children. The majority of bowls for multiple beneficiaries list first a male name, followed by that of his wife and children. Cases where the wife is listed first in the list of beneficiaries might be incidental, but might also reflect a situation where the wife was the commissioner of the bowl: perhaps she was the one who contacted the practitioner and supplied the names to be listed on the bowl. For a different stance on this matter, see Morony, 'Magic and Society in Late Sasanian Iraq', p. 105: 'the texts identify to whom the house, possessions and children belonged'. For a broader analysis, see Saar, 'Men, Women and Children?'

30 See also Morony, 'Magic and Society in Late Sasanian Iraq', esp. pp. 106–107.

31 For example, Montgomery, *Aramaic Incantation Texts*, pp. 205–206, bowl 24 (CBS 2926), where one of the three daughters was either pregnant and wished to safely deliver her child, or had a son already and wished to protect him.

32 See note 45 for the full reference.

33 Published by Sh. Shaked, 'The Poetics of Spells: Language and Structure in Aramaic Incantations of Late Antiquity 1: The Divorce Formula and Its Ramifications,' in Tz. Abusch and K. van der Toorn (eds.), *Mesopotamian Magic: Textual, Historical, and Interpretative Perspectives* (Leiden: Brill, 2000) pp. 173–195 (193–194).

of children stemmed from the man or the woman. Thus, it is difficult to relate its aim exclusively to the woman who is mentioned in the text, and claim that protection from child harming lilitis was specifically sought by women rather than by men who wished to protect their wives and offspring.

One exception to the similarity in aims for both genders concerns the class of aggressive bowls, those cursing or sending curses back to human individuals. Here, the vast majority of named beneficiaries is male. The few females that appear usually do so within a couple or group of beneficiaries. It would seem that aggressive bowls with named beneficiaries were primarily employed by males.³⁴

I assume that the reasons for the general similarity that can be observed in the bowls' aims are the formulaic nature of the bowl texts and their fairly restricted aim repertoire. It can also be that by being placed in houses rather than carried on persons, bowls were generally conceived as broadly protective and as applicable to all residents, rather than to specific individuals (despite quite a few exceptions). In such a case, there would be a lack of gender correlation between bowls and aims, because the bowls could be seen as applying to the entire household. In either case, a closer analysis is required in order to ascertain these hypotheses. For now, a survey of published bowls does not indicate that, broadly speaking, bowls naming female beneficiaries had different aims or formulae than those naming families or even single men. Exceptions do exist, but their number is not high. In order to explore this aspect better, a closer reading of the data is necessary than has been attempted to date. Methodologically, the hundreds of published bowls ought to be analysed bearing in mind the terminological distinctions outlined in the above section. First, one would need to establish which bowls have a woman or a man as beneficiary (rather than a female or a male), then list the aims stated in each text, and lastly compare these aims systematically to each other.³⁵

34 Further study would be necessary to analyse this situation in detail. For now, see Saar, 'Men, Women and Children?.'

35 For a discussion of emotions in magical items produced for female beneficiaries, see D. Frankfurter, 'Desperation and the Magic of Appeal: Representations of Women's Emotion in Magical Spells and Ritual Figurines', in A. Chaniotis (ed.), *Unveiling Emotions*, Vol. 3: *Display and Arousal of Emotions in the Greek World* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2019) pp. 503–522.

4 Gender and the Bowls' Creators

In what follows I address the questions of the bowls' authorship and production and put forward some suggestions for means of answering them. As before, the discussion will focus on bowls inscribed in the Jewish Aramaic dialect that were presumably produced by Jews, while keeping in mind also the pseudo-script ones. The Syriac and Mandaic data needs to be treated separately, due to the different cultural context they entail. There may have been gender-related attitudes and distinctions within each of these three religious groups that could have impacted the role of gender in the field of ritual and magic (bowls and other forms). Since the gender roles in Christian and Mandaean Mesopotamia have not been treated extensively in the scholarship, the discussion of gender roles in the ritual practices of these two groups must wait.

4.1 *Some More Exact Terminology*

Before embarking on an exploration of the topic of gender and the bowl creators it is essential to distinguish two aspects it entails: authorship and production. These are not the same, although often they are not distinguished in the scholarly discourse.³⁶ The reason for this might be a sort of mental calque: In our modern world the author of a text is also its writer/producer. This was not so in ancient ritual practice. Some of the bowls formulae were authored or conceived by one individual and subsequently spread and were used by other persons. These other persons wrote the formulae (that is, inscribed them with ink on clay), but did not author them. This is evidenced by bowls that exhibit nearly identical textual units but that were inscribed by different hands. A bowl *producer*, thus, was not necessarily identical with the *author* of a particular textual unit. Moreover, bowl producers were not merely scribes in a limited sense of the term, that is, people who simply copied or reproduced memorized texts by inscribing them on clay. They could—and did—combine different textual units, modify them, and rearrange them within a single bowl, in a way similar to that of editors of volumes of articles. In this capacity, they too can be seen as creators, because the 'finished product', the bowl, is a combination of their

36 The conflation between authors and producers is also found in specific discussions of gender in the incantation bowls, e.g., D. Kedar, *Who Wrote the Incantation Bowls?* (Ph.D. Diss., Freie Universität Berlin 2018), published in Hebrew as *מי כתבה קערות השבעה?* (Tel Aviv: Idra Press, 2019); A. Manekin-Bamberger, 'Who Were the Jewish "Magicians" behind the Aramaic Incantation Bowls?', *Journal of Jewish Studies* 71 (2020), pp. 235–254; T. Ilan and D. Kedar, 'The Female Authorship of Babylonian Jewish Incantation Bowls', *Journal of Jewish Studies* 73 (2022), pp. 288–304.

writing skills and their editorial or improvisational ones, and quite probably, also their ritual skills.³⁷

4.2 *Skills for Creating an Incantation Bowl*

The second essential aspect to be discussed is that of the skills needed by the authors and producers mentioned above, skills that ultimately resulted in the creation of incantation bowls. These will be listed below.

- a. Knowledge of folk traditions and incantations (sometimes).³⁸ In order to author *historiolae* such as that of Semamit, who gave birth to twelve sons, and all were killed by Sideros the wicked,³⁹ or that of the three old men who were sitting in a furnace and two that were sitting on the Sea of Salt,⁴⁰ a person needs to be aware of the traditions that circulate, or, alternatively, be able to invent such stories (and subsequently originate a tradition). Similarly, one needs to be familiar with names and attributes of supernatural entities.
- b. Liturgical, scriptural, halakhic, and legal knowledge (sometimes).⁴¹ In order to author a text that includes the *Shema* prayer or quotations from Psalms a person needs to know these verses; in order to author textual units such as the 'divorce formula' from demonic entities, one needs to be acquainted with the wording of the Jewish divorce deed.⁴²

37 For the 'scribal innovation and spontaneity' of the bowl producer, see E.C.D. Hunter, 'Combat and Conflict in Incantation Bowls: Studies on Two Aramaic Specimens from Nippur', in M.J. Geller, J.C. Greenfield, and M.P. Weitzman (eds.), *Studia Aramaica: New Sources and New Approaches. Papers Delivered at the London Conference of the Institute of Jewish Studies, University College London, 26th–28th June 1991* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) pp. 61–75 (74–75).

38 I employ the term 'folk traditions' with the broad meaning of *folklore*, namely the traditional beliefs, customs, legends, and stories of a given social group (similar to the expression 'reservoir of content' used by S. Gross and A. Manekin-Bamberger in their article 'Babylonian Jewish Society: The Evidence of the Incantation Bowls', *Jewish Quarterly Review* 112 [2022] 1–30 [7–8]). These traditions include, e.g., angelology, demonology, and mystical traditions such as the Hekhalot. The term 'folk traditions' is not meant to qualify these traditions as non-professional, incompetent, or inexperienced, nor is it meant as contrast to 'rabbinic traditions'.

39 E.g., Naveh and Shaked, *Amulets and Magic Bowls*, pp. 188–197, bowl 12.

40 E.g., Levene, *Jewish Aramaic Curse Texts*, pp. 35–44, bowl VA.2423.

41 The term 'halakhic' refers here to Jewish legal-religious rules and procedures, such as those found in the Mishna, that are sometimes reflected or quoted in the bowls. Some examples are the divorce (*get*) procedure and the excommunication / ban (*shmata*, *herem*).

42 For discussions of the contingencies between the incantation bowls and liturgy, see, e.g., Shaked, *The Poetics of Spells*; Shaked, Ford, and Bhayro, *Aramaic Bowl Spells*, pp. 99–100;

- c. Ritual knowledge. The term 'ritual' here is understood in its broadest sense, meaning the supernatural and performative concepts underlying the incantation bowls, their purported functions, and their manner of use. Little is known about the rituals surrounding the bowls; for example, it is known that they were often buried upside down, but it is not clear who performed the burial, and whether it was accompanied by a ceremony or was merely a mechanical act. These elements, however, had to be known to persons involved in the bowl production.
- d. Literacy (sometimes). This skill is needed in order to *inscribe* a bowl text. It is not needed in order to *author* a text or textual unit. Literacy is also not needed in order to inscribe a bowl in pseudo-script.
- e. Scribal skills (sometimes). In order to inscribe a bowl text in a neat, beautiful hand, a person needs to be both literate and experienced in calligraphy.
- f. Ability to produce drawings (sometimes). The drawings and other non-textual elements in the bowls were not necessary for the bowls production and could have been produced by another person than the one who inscribed the text.

The above list indicates that the skills needed to author bowl texts or textual units were distinct from those needed to physically produce an incantation bowl. The most important distinction pertains to matters of literacy. This skill is not needed in order to author a magical formula, a *historiola*, or a textual unit of any other form. The skills pertaining to authorship are: knowledge of folk traditions, liturgical / scriptural or halakhic knowledge, and ritual knowledge—not necessarily all of them. Conversely, literacy and scribal skills pertain to the production of the bowls. The first is needed in order to inscribe a text, and the second, scribal skills, in order to inscribe it in a beautiful manner. These two skills are, however, not necessary for the production of pseudo-script bowls.

4.3 *The Gender of the Creators: The Authors*

In what ways can one approach the gender-related aspects of the bowls creation? One way is to try to extract information from the bowls themselves, as insider sources.⁴³ Secondly, one may look at fonts of information external to the bowls, that is, outsider sources, primarily discussions found in the Babylonian Talmud. Thirdly, I would like to consider some ethnographic parallels.

D. Marx, 'What's in a Bowl? Babylonian Magic Spells and Kol Nidre', in L.A. Hoffman (ed.), *All These Vows: Kol Nidre* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2011) pp. 26–30.

43 For the distinction between 'insider' and 'outsider' sources in magic, see G. Bohak, *Ancient Jewish Magic: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) pp. 70–73.

A simple overview of data from the first two types of sources does not yield many results. Nevertheless, a closer reading of these sources can be attempted, in order to shed light on questions of authorship and production. I will begin with the former.

The insider sources, that is, the incantation bowls, do not usually contain statements such as 'This amulet was written by so-and so'. Occasionally, however, they do attribute a specific formula or a textual unit to a certain person, one of the most famous examples being the bans and divorce deeds explicitly attributed to Rabbi Joshua bar Peraḥia.⁴⁴ Typical example of this textual unit are: 'A magical act, behold, I perform. And that which was in the court-session of Rabbi Joshua bar Peraḥia, I write to them a deed of divorce, to all the demons', or 'Rabbi Joshua bar Peraḥia said to us: A deed of divorce has come to us from across the sea, and there was found written in it ...'. This does not mean that the textual unit was composed by Joshua bar Peraḥia, but that it was transmitted in his name and traditionally attributed to him. Another example (in which the attribution is, however, implicit), is that of the spell 'hot dung in torn baskets'.⁴⁵ This spell appears on some incantation bowls with no attribution, but it also appears in the Babylonian Talmud, where it is attributed to the (female) chief of witches.⁴⁶ This chief is unnamed and her nature is debatable: she might be human or a supernatural being. One can say for certain that she is female, because the Talmud explicitly employs verbs in the female gender to refer to her.

Additional examples of explicit or implicit attributions exist in the bowls, occasionally to non-legendary but ordinary persons, both male and female.⁴⁷

44 For this figure and a selection of bowls text mentioning him, see Shaked, Ford, and Bhayro, *Aramaic Bowl Spells*, pp. 103–154.

45 J.B. Segal, *Catalogue of the Aramaic and Mandaic Incantation Bowls in the British Museum* (London: British Museum Press, 2000) pp. 74–75, bowl 035A and the partial parallels listed there.

46 BT Pesahim 110a–b. It should be stressed that the chief of witches, whom Amermar cites, does not advise to inscribe the incantation but to utter it ('say this', *נִמְאָה הִכִּי*). The spoken formula she supplies is then encountered in writing on several bowls.

47 Note that these are attributions, not the real state of affairs. Another good example is Montgomery, *Aramaic Incantation Texts*, 121–126, bowl 2 (CBS 2945), lines 1, 3–4: 'Again I come, I Pabak son of Kufithai, in my own might (...) I have said to them that if at all you sin against Abuna son of Geribta and against Ibba son of Zawitai, I will lay a spell upon you, the spell of the sea and the spell of the monster Leviathan' (*תּוּב אֹלְנָא אַנְהָ / פּאַבַק בַּר כּוּפִיתִי בַחִילִי דַנְפְּשִׁי ... / אַמְרַת לְהוֹן דָּאֵת מִדְעַם חֲטִיתוֹן בֵּיהּ בַּבּוּנָא בַר גְּרִיבְתָא / וּבְאַיבָא בַר זְוִיתָאִי אִישְׁפְּנָא לְכוּן בְּאַישְׁפָּא / דִּימָא וְאַישְׁפָּא דְלִיּוּתָן תְּנִינָא*). The same incantation is expressed in another bowl in the name of two different persons, Yezidad son of Izdandukh and Mihrdukh daughter of Banai; see *ibid.*, p. 212, bowl 27 (CBS 16041).

Such attributions to men like Joshua bar Peraḥia, women like the unnamed chief of witches, or ordinary persons, fictitious as they may be, clearly indicate that the creation of some bowl textual units was attributed to both genders.

It is useful to look back now on the list of skills needed to author an incantation formula, a textual unit from a bowl, or even a full bowl text. As mentioned above, bowl authors had to possess some of these three skills: knowledge of folk traditions, liturgical/scriptural and halakhic knowledge, and ritual knowledge. Could these skills pertain to both men and women in the period and location when the bowls were created? The answer is positive. For the first and third elements this is easily conceivable, because such knowledge could be passed down orally, both in professional and lay contexts.⁴⁸ No special conditions were required to attain it. Knowledge of liturgy, scripture, and halakha may have been more restricted, and one might tend to ascribe it to Jewish men rather than women. The ancient sources, however, contradict such an assumption. To begin with, liturgical and scriptural texts were uttered in synagogues and could have been known to women as well as men regardless of their literacy skills. Additionally, as shown by Judith Hauptman and others, some Jewish women in Sassanian Mesopotamia seem to have had possessed halakhic knowledge that was learned and transmitted within their households.⁴⁹ Thus, *some* women would have had sufficient liturgical, scriptural, and halakhic knowledge in order to author incantations of the type found in *some* of the bowls. I do not propose that they did so, but that they could have.

4.4 *The Gender of the Creators: The Producers*

Proceeding now to the second gender-related aspect, namely the producers of the bowls, one may note that modern scholars typically presume they were

Pabak, Yezidad, and Mihrdukh did not author the incantation, and possibly (or probably) also did not inscribe it on the surface of the bowl. Nevertheless, it is attributed to them, through the use of the first person ('I have said'; אמרת). Such multiple attributions sheds light on the fact that the textual units or formulae were authored by persons who were not identical with the beneficiaries nor with the persons who inscribed them on clay.

48 For possible oral transmission of incantations, see BT Yoma, 84a: for curing the bite of a mad dog, one should write upon the skin of a male hyena: 'Kanti, kanti, kliros' and some say 'Kandi, kandi, kloros' (לה קלירוס ואמרי לה) (קנדי קנדי קלורוס).

49 J. Hauptman, 'The Talmud's Women in Law and Narrative', *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues* 28 (2015), pp. 30–50; T. Ilan, 'Women Quoting Scripture in Rabbinic Literature', in T. Ilan, L. Miralles-Maciá, and Ronit Nikolsky (eds.), *Rabbinic Literature* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2022) pp. 45–70.

male.⁵⁰ This presumption is not limited to the Mesopotamian incantation bowls, where the producers are usually described as ‘he’, but also to textual magical artifacts from other chronological contexts.⁵¹ Are such assumptions, regarding the gender of the bowls’ producers, justified? Here, too, the insider information is scant. Some bowl texts do employ a male or female first person voice, as seen in the previous section. However, such bowls do not tell us much about their actual authors or producers, unless we choose to read them as having been actually authored or inscribed by the individual ‘speaking’ in the first person. This reading can easily be challenged by the fact that the use of the first person voice is very common in magic, both ancient and modern.⁵² As already noted by James Montgomery, ‘in general there is a breaking down of the distinction between personalities in magic’, and the practitioner responsible for *inscribing* the spell text thus takes on the role of the spell *beneficiary*.⁵³ This state of affairs is confirmed by texts employing the first person and using different names, but inscribed by the same hand.⁵⁴ Consequently, the bowl texts contain little information that may assist us in answering the question ‘who produced them?’

Some scholars, however, have interpreted the use of a first person voice in bowls written for women as indicating that they were actually inscribed

50 E.g., Shaked, Ford, and Bhayro, *Aramaic Bowl Spells*, p. 10: ‘(...) we may assume that most practitioners of this type of magic were men.’

51 For example, in an article on early-modern birth rituals the authors refer to a ‘pool of information on obstetrics (...) unquestionably written by a man’, and state further: ‘The Jewish literature on magic recipes is a male literature, meaning one written by men within a male textual and conceptual world, to be used by men. The language of the recipes in the list discussed here does not deviate from this rule and we have no doubt that the author was a man’. See Y. Harari and Ch. Avizohar-Hagay, ‘Childbirth Magic in Amulets and Recipes from the Gross Family Collection’, in Sh. Sabar, E. Schrijver, and F. Wiesemann (eds.), *Windows on Jewish Worlds: Essays in Honor of William Gross* (Zutphen: Walburg Press, 2019) pp. 335–349 (347, and 349, note 25). Conversely, in one of his articles Gideon Bohak cautiously states that ‘By referring to our scribe as “he,” I do not wish to exclude the possibility that the amulets in fact were produced by a female practitioner, but given the gendered aspects of medieval Jewish literacy, a male producer seems more likely’. See G. Bohak, ‘Some “Mass Produced” Scorpion-Amulets from the Cairo Genizah’, in Z. Rodgers, M. Daly-Denton, and A. Fitzpatrick McKinley (eds.), *A Wandering Galilean: Essays in Honour of Seán Freyne* (Leiden: Brill, 2009) pp. 35–49 (39, note 8).

52 For discussions of this phenomenon in the bowls, see, e.g., Shaked, Ford, and Bhayro, *Aramaic Bowl Spells*, p. 15; Manekin-Bamberger, ‘Who Were the Jewish “Magicians”’, pp. 237–240.

53 Montgomery, *Aramaic Incantation Texts*, p. 48.

54 Kedar, *Who Wrote the Incantation Bowls?*, p. 101. For examples from the Cairo Genizah, see Saar, *Jewish Love Magic*, pp. 156–157.

by women. The extent of these interpretations varied. Rebecca Lesses, for instance, asked: 'Could women, as well as men, have had the necessary knowledge to write the bowls or to dictate them to scribes?'.⁵⁵ This important question carefully takes into account the distinction between author and producer, though without explicitly referring to it. Lesses further suggested that some women, such as Komish daughter of Maḥlafta, could have been responsible for writing the incantation bowls.⁵⁶ Her suggestion was based on the fact that some bowls using the first person have a woman as beneficiary and also on the fact that the Babylonian Talmud describes some women as being knowledgeable in matters related to magic, for example Abbaye's foster-mother or nurse. A similar direction was taken by Yaakov Elman, who, in addition to the use of the first person voice, also discussed the question of female literacy in the period when the bowls were produced. *Could* women write bowls? Elman claimed that 'the type of literacy needed to produce a magic bowl is fairly minimal, as demonstrated by a number of fairly corrupt—or even unreadable—magic bowls'.⁵⁷ To a certain extent I agree with this claim, in particular where the pseudo-script bowls are involved. But does the *ability* to produce a bowl imply the actual act of doing so? The answer is no.

A recent PhD thesis written by Dorit Kedar further argued that the bowl producers were women, but more extensively than Lesses or Elman, suggesting that 'certainly women wrote some of the incantation bowls, and probably most of them'.⁵⁸ Kedar's arguments, too, both in the thesis and in the article co-authored with Tal Ilan, did not succeed to prove that women have actually produced bowls, but mainly that they could have done so if they wished.⁵⁹ The interpretations put forward have been criticised by Avigail Manekin-Bamberger.⁶⁰

55 R. Lesses, 'Exe(o)rcising Power: Women as Sorceresses, Exorcists, and Demonesses in Babylonian Jewish Society of Late Antiquity', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 69 (2001), pp. 343–375 (361).

56 Lesses, 'Exe(o)rcising Power', p. 362: 'it is possible that she was actively involved in creating this bowl, either reciting the incantation in a ritual, inscribing the incantation on the bowl herself, or dictating it to a scribe'. Note Lesses' use of the verb 'creating', that expresses ideas similar to those put forward in the present article.

57 Y. Elman, 'Saffron, Spices, and Sorceresses: Magic Bowls and the Bavli', in K.B. Stratton and D. Kalleres (eds.), *Daughters of Hecate: Women and Magic in the Ancient World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) pp. 365–385 (373–374).

58 Kedar, *Who Wrote the Incantation Bowls?*

59 See, e.g., Kedar, *Who Wrote the Incantation Bowls?*, p. 111 on the switch from the first person to the third.

60 'Who Were the Jewish "Magicians"', pp. 237–240.

One direction to consider when seeking an answer regarding the bowls' producers is the iconographic evidence. The majority of bowls lack illustrations, and those where a drawing is present usually depict various demons. However, in a number of cases, it may be presumed that the illustration was meant to depict the person who produced the bowl or authored (parts of) its text. In other words, these depictions could represent the bowl's creator(s). Such identifications are based, for example, on the absence of fetters or shackles binding the individual, or on the presence of a raised weapon in his hand. In all these instances, the figure is that of a man. To the best of my knowledge, no women are represented in illustrations as performing the magical acts associated with the bowls. Iconographic evidence, thus, does not relate women to either bowl authorship or production.

The next source to consider is the Babylonian Talmud, the outsider source redacted in approximately the same period as when the bowls were produced. The Talmud, while being relatively rich in discussions of magical practices, unfortunately contains no clear-cut reference to incantation bowls. This is such a fascinating question, particularly taking into account the vast popularity of these objects, but so far no one has been able to offer an answer to it. Nevertheless, I would like to examine two points that may help to shed light on the question of the bowl producers. For this it is necessary to look at the general data on magical practices found in the Talmud. Despite the often-quoted infamous statement that 'most women engage in sorcery' (רוב נשים מצויות בכשפים),⁶¹ the Talmud depicts both men and women as practicing what may be defined as magic or uninstitutionalized ritual practices. Women are portrayed as performing healing and apotropaic practices, aggressive practices, or simply 'magical' acts, like the story of Rabbi Nachman's daughters who used to stir cauldrons with their bare hands.⁶²

When one examines these stories it appears that the type of practices in which women engage differ in one respect from those performed by men. They are oral, not written. That is not to say that each time a man performs a magical act it involves writing. There are examples of rabbis who 'say a word' and impact the surrounding reality. However, in all the instances where writing is involved,

61 BT Sanhedrin 67a.

62 BT Gittin 45a. For examples and discussions, see, e.g., S. Fishbane, "Most Women Engage in Sorcery": An Analysis of Sorceresses in the Babylonian Talmud, *Jewish History* 7 (1993), pp. 27–42; Bohak, *Ancient Jewish Magic*, pp. 293–298; S. Ronis, 'Gender, Sex, and Witchcraft in Late Ancient Judaism', in N. Koltun-Fromm and G. Kessler (eds.), *A Companion to Late Ancient Jews and Judaism: Third Century BCE to Seventh Century CE* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2020) pp. 391–404.

the performer is invariably male. One of the most relevant examples for the present discussion is found in the Babylonian Talmud Pesachim 111b, the famous story of the town official who sat under a sorb bush and was attacked by a host of sixty demons. He went to a young rabbinic scholar who did not know that the bush was haunted by sixty demons, and so he wrote a one-demon amulet (*qame'a*) for it. The amulet proved ineffective, and the demons laughed at the practitioner's lack of expertise. Another, more experienced scholar came along, who wrote the appropriate amulet for sixty demons, and they promptly departed. The word 'amulet' in this story might refer to a written piece of parchment or metal to be hung on one's body, but it might just as well refer to an incantation bowl. A significant number of these are self-designated as amulets and bear corresponding inscriptions (e.g., קמיע דגן, קמיע דגא, קמיע, הדין קמיע). It is thus not impossible that the *qame'a* in Pesachim 111b was actually a clay bowl and not an inscribed piece of other material. However, whether the *qame'a* was a suspended one or an incantation bowl, its writers were men.

A reverse form of such stories are those where women are depicted as engaging in magical / ritual practices or transferring information about them. The one in Pesachim 110a–b, which I mentioned earlier, relates the formula transmitted to Rabbi Amemar from the female chief of the witches, a formula that can also be found on some of the bowls. Interestingly, in the Talmudic story the chief of witches does not recommend writing the formula, but uttering it. Similarly, all the magical remedies transmitted throughout the Babylonian Talmud as coming from the mouths of women (chiefly Em, Abbaye's foster-mother / nurse or friend), if containing an incantation, are always oral. However, when Abbaye reports a magical remedy that includes writing (a formula to be written on the skin of a hyena), the famous introductory line, 'My foster-mother / nurse told me' is missing.⁶³

Why are women not mentioned as engaging in the writing of incantation texts? One reason could be prosaic: The data in the Talmud concerning women and ritual practices of this kind is limited. Had more discussions on the topic survived, a different picture might have emerged. Moreover, the Talmud never explicitly mentions incantation bowls. It could be that, had these ritual objects and their producers been mentioned, women would appear among them. Be that as it may, whatever scant information may be derived from the insider and outsider sources, it does not indicate that women produced incantation bowls.

63 BT Yoma 84a. For the word / name Em, see C.E. Fonrobert, 'A Woman's Voice in the Talmud? The Case of Abaye's Mother', in C.E. Fonrobert (ed.), *Menstrual Purity: Rabbinic and Christian Reconstructions of Biblical Gender* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000) 151–159.

4.5 *Questions of Literacy, Ability, and Will: Some Ethnographic Considerations*

In the previous passages I have shown that some Jewish women had the required skills to author incantation bowls. But were they also able to produce bowls, meaning to inscribe incantations on clay? The answer seems to be positive, and not only when it comes to pseudo-script bowls, for which no literacy is necessary. This issue relates to the level of female literacy in the period and location under discussion. If Jewish women could not write, then they would not have been able to produce written texts. However, some Jewish women could definitely write, even if the percentage of literate ones was probably less than that of men. BT Menachot 42b even includes women in a list of people capable of writing Torah scrolls, phylacteries, and *mezuzot*.⁶⁴ Jewish and non-Jewish literate women who inscribed texts, some even professionally, are known from Graeco-Roman antiquity and the medieval period.⁶⁵ However, women are absent in the capacity of writers when the Talmud mentions magical practices. Could it then be that women were capable of producing written ritual objects, including incantation bowls, yet refrained from doing so?

Ethnographic comparisons, if used carefully, may shed some additional light on the topic. I propose to take a chronological leap and consider the writing of amulets in modern Jewish society. Ritual healing and protection, including through textual amulets, is a sought-after commodity for numerous Israelis, regardless of their country of origin or social status. Jewish healers, too, come from different backgrounds, Ashkenazi and Sephardic, rabbis and laypeople, men and women. When one observes the type of ritual practices they perform, it appears that writing is habitually carried out by men. Textual amulets are produced by male hands, be it those of established religious figures like Rav

64 'A Torah scroll, phylacteries, or *mezuzot* that were written by a heretic, a Samaritan, a gentile, a slave, a woman, a minor, or a Jewish apostate are unfit (...) (שכתבן צדוקי כותי עובד כוכבים עבד אשה וקטן מומר פסולין ספר תורה תפילין ומזוזות)'. The reason given for this is that only those who bind the phylacteries are allowed to write these sacred texts. In much later periods Jewish women are known to inscribe religious texts, such as Esther scrolls.

65 See, e.g., K. Haines-Eitzen, "Girls Trained in Beautiful Writing": Female Scribes in Roman Antiquity and Early Christianity', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6 (1998), pp. 629–646; M. Riegler and J.R. Baskin, "May the Writer Be Strong": Medieval Hebrew Manuscripts Copied by and for Women', *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues* 16 (2008), pp. 9–28; S. Kattan Gribetz, 'Women as Readers of the Nag Hammadi Codices', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 26 (2018), pp. 463–494. For women as authors of literary texts (though not necessarily scribes / producers), see B.A. Natoli, A. Pitts, J.P. Hallett, *Ancient Women Writers of Greece and Rome* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2022).

Yitzhak Kaduri, or self-designated ritual experts specializing in ‘practical Kabbalah’ (*Kabbalah ma’asit*).⁶⁶ Women, in contrast, perform other types of healing, employing plants, minerals, animal substances, eggs, and textiles.⁶⁷ Some of these *materia magica* are supposed to be bundled up and carried upon the body of the beneficiary, just like one would expect from an amulet (and in some cases these objects are actually defined as amulets by the female practitioners who produce them). Usually, however, they do not include any writing.⁶⁸

Anthropologist Yoram Bilu describes in his book *The Saints’ Impresarios* an amulet of above-mentioned type: a mixture of herbs designed to keep away demons and the evil eye, bound in a piece of green cloth and sown with a red thread.⁶⁹ The object, which was produced by a lady named Esther Souissa, does not include even a single inscribed word. Ms. Souissa had a male competitor, who catered for the same audience as she. He, however, was known for writing magical texts. When comparing herself to this man she stressed: ‘I do not open a book ... I do not hold a pen in my hand ... I also don’t know how to write much’. Esther may have been only partially literate, but the majority of female ritual practitioners in modern Israel know how to write. If they wanted to write amulets, they could. But they won’t.⁷⁰

Given this ethnographic picture, one can ask what is the reason for the clear-cut division between male and female practices. Why do modern Israeli women refrain from producing textual amulets, even when they are perfectly capable of doing so? The answer for this is beyond the scope of this article, but I suspect

66 For a modern example, see Y. Harari, “‘Rabbi’ Nissim “the Sorcerer” and the Magic Plate of Yeruham: A Political-Folkloristic Rashomon,’ *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 14 (2019), pp. 392–420.

67 See, e.g., L. Lieberman-Avital, *In the Name of the Mother: Traditional Women Healers of Maghreb Origin in Israel—Narratives, Models, and Types* (Ph.D. Diss., Ben-Gurion University of the Negev 2015) (in Hebrew). The author states that ‘among all the healers I have interviewed, amulets were perceived primarily as a male business, done in writing’ (123). A similar state of affairs can be observed among Muslim ritual practitioners in Israel, for which see A. Popper-Giveon and J.J. Ventura, ‘Blood and Ink: Treatment Practices of Traditional Palestinian Women Healers in Israel,’ *Journal of Anthropological Research* 65 (2009), pp. 27–49.

68 Incidentally, this gender-related division corresponds to the Talmudic classification of ‘an amulet of writing and an amulet of roots’ (אחד קמיע של כתב ואחד קמיע של עיקרין), found in BT Shabbat 61a.

69 Y. Bilu, *The Saints’ Impresarios: Dreamers, Healers, and Holy Men in Israel’s Urban Periphery* (Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2010) p. 247.

70 A similar state of affairs may be observed in the world of motor sports: women can drive and are allowed to compete in car races (the earliest female competitor in a Formula One race was in 1958). However, a tiny percentage of professional race drivers are women.

a similar reluctance prevailed also fifteen-hundred years ago, when the incantation bowls were written.

5 Conclusions

This article began by setting forth a list of methodological and terminological considerations related to the Mesopotamian incantation bowls. I suggested that a closer reading of the data, leading to terminological exactitude, can better inform the research on these objects, particularly with respect to gender aspects. Summing up, the following distinctions are essential:

- beneficiary and commissioner
- male / man or female / woman—a male or female name does not imply adult age
- bowl author (the person who conceived particular formulae and textual units) and bowl producer (the person who edited such units and inscribed them on clay). The authors and producers are, together, the creators of the bowl.

The article also discussed two central aspects of gender in these ritual objects: the gender of their beneficiaries and its relation to the aims of the incantation, and the gender of the bowls' creators (authors and producers).

Additionally, the article outlined a set of skills needed for the creation of incantation bowls. Some of these are necessary for authoring bowl texts, and some for the actual production of the bowls. It was suggested that both men and women could have been among the authors of formulae and textual units found in the bowls, as they both had the necessary skills for this. A formula such as 'hot dung in torn baskets', found in some bowls, is even quoted in the Babylonian Talmud as coming from a female. It is possible that more such authorships existed, and women may have authored formulae, *historiolae*, and textual units for a variety of aims. Also the main skill needed for producing incantation bowls—literacy—could be found in both men and women, though to different extents. Some Jewish women were literate and able to write. The skills required for the neat writing of bowls, namely scribal knowledge and experience, would probably pertain mostly to men who were trained as scribes, although exceptions are possible. To conclude, the list of skills indicates that women as well as men could have both authored and produced incantation bowls.

However, a survey of the ancient evidence, both from insider and outsider sources, does not indicate that women were usually among the producers of incantation bowls. To shed some light on this matter I proposed to resort to ethnographic comparisons from present-day Israel (which should, however, be

treated with caution). It appears that today, most Jewish women who act as ritual practitioners do not employ writing. They use instead a variety of organic and inorganic substances in order to produce non-textual amulets. Written amulets, in contrast, are produced by male ritual practitioners. This state of affairs, in which literacy is of secondary or no importance (since most modern Israeli women can both read and write), might inform us about the situation in late antique Mesopotamia. Women might have been able to produce incantation bowls, but chose to resort to other ritual practices: non-scribal ones.

The gendered aspects of the incantation bowls ought to be explored in additional directions. One avenue for further research is the examination of the gender of the beneficiaries and its connection with the bowl aims (a topic which was discussed only briefly in the present article). Another topic concerns the gender of supernatural entities mentioned in the bowl, both negative and positive ones. Were there more male or female dangerous entities from which one sought protection?⁷¹ Can patterns be found in the bowls in which a connection exists between one gender and the reference to specific supernatural entities, or the use of specific formulae? Lastly, a related question, addressed in a separate article, is the use of magic manuals by women.⁷² This issue is different from the writing of amulets, curses, and any form of ritual products. Could women have been among the users of magic manuals that contained recipes for performing magical practices, or did they transmit and use their ritual lore orally?

These questions, in addition to the ones raised throughout the article, await a broader-scale investigation that should ideally be carried out using consistent methodologies and exact terminology. I have shown how a close reading of the data can impact the understanding of incantation bowls, even through simple terminological distinctions, such as between male and man. The gendered aspects of ritual practices, when closely explored, can illuminate many aspects of life, culture, and society in the periods under discussion.

71 While negative entities tend to appear as both male and female, it is easy to think of positive entities as exclusively male: either God or His angels. However, a closer reading will reveal other genders, such as the Presence of God (שכינת אל), which in Hebrew is female.

72 Saar, 'Reading and Writing Magic'.