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Curious Characters, Invented Scripts, and . . . Charlatans? “Pseudo-Scripts” in the Mesopotamian Magic Bowls

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Introduction

The present article represents an initial attempt to complicate some of our ideas about the act of writing in the magic bowls from late antique Mesopotamia.¹

* The impetus for this article grew out of a suggestion by Natalie Lantz, and I am grateful to her for sowing the seeds of the present work. I am also indebted to Drew Longacre and Gemma Hayes for lending me their eyes and paleographic expertise; to Mladen Popović and Kocku von Stuckrad for their feedback and bibliographic suggestions; and to the members of the 2018 Dirk Smilde Research Seminar at the Qumran Institute, Groningen. I would also like to thank this article's two anonymous referees for their valuable comments and suggestions.

¹ The use of the term “magic” in scholarship is fraught with difficulty, and there has been much battling and ink shed over its deployment as an analytic category. I use the term here (conventionally, but advisedly) to reflect the fact that the bowls are predicated on the existence of a supernatural or transmundane realm of invisible beings; that they direct language towards these special beings that is instrumental and coercive; and that they aim to achieve clearly defined, locally delimited, personal goals through the manipulation of those beings. On the pros and cons of the term, as well as two compelling arguments for the continued use of “magic” as an analytic category, see Christopher Lehigh, “Magic in Theoretical Practice” and Jesper Sørensen, “Magic Reconsidered: Towards a Scientifically Valid Concept of Magic,” both in *Defining Magic: A Reader*, ed. Bernd-Christian Otto and Michael Stausberg (Sheffield, 2013).

Setting aside the bowls written in Aramaic, it investigates through a series of case studies the variety of different inscriptional practices and manipulations of graphic signs that we encounter in the bowls. These range from invented signs and ostentatious displays of non-writing to pseudo- or imitation scripts that closely resemble the forms of known alphabets. This contribution considers the different conceptions of writing that may lie behind these diverse inscriptions, and challenges the received notion that these so-called “pseudo-script” bowls represent the work of illiterate charlatans. The large number of these bowls makes plain that this was not a marginal practice, while the diversity of their inscriptions shows that they were clearly not the exclusive domain of persons attempting to imitate an Aramaic script. Indeed, many of these bowls were plainly not intended to fool anyone into thinking they were written in Aramaic, or any other language. The bowls were produced by many different individuals in many different locations; we should bear in mind that different bowls reflect different sets of circumstances and intentions, and that the purpose and value attributed to these signs and scripts may well have varied from bowl to bowl.

Despite the great variety of their inscriptions, the magic bowls as a whole—let alone the pseudo-script

bowls—have not been taken into consideration when assessing the diversity and scope of late antique practices and perceptions of writing. There is also a good deal of debate in bowl scholarship as to where the Aramaic bowls sit along the spectrum of orality and textuality. These bowls represent the mutual interpenetration of written, oral, and memorial processes of production, and reflect a phenomenon of significant media complexity. This article shows that the pseudo-script bowls—as inscribed media that encode various visual strategies into “text”—demonstrate the centrality of writing and *writtenness* to bowl praxis as a whole. The pseudo-script bowls were plainly modelled on existing literate technologies, and derived their authority from the prestige of writing elsewhere in the social system.² This article therefore examines the instrumentalization of writing and inscription as magical technologies in the bowls. Focusing on the power and materiality of writing, and the rhetorical reach of *writtenness*, this article shows that the much-neglected pseudo-script bowls provide a valuable window onto processes of writing as a means of engaging with—inscribing, ordering, and manipulating—transmundane powers.

Aramaic and Pseudo-Script Bowls

The Mesopotamian magic bowls are a class of magical objects that were produced during the late Sasanian and early Islamic period. They consist primarily of apotropaic incantations which were inscribed upon plain earthenware bowls in Jewish Babylonian Aramaic (JBA), Mandaic, Syriac, and several other languages.³ Written using Jewish Aramaic,⁴ Mandaic,⁵ and Es-

trangelo and Manichaean scripts,⁶ these bowls were buried upside down in courtyards and under thresholds.⁷ They have been recovered in modern times in areas of Iraq and western Iran. The vast majority of the texts were designed to protect the owners of the bowls from various (supernaturally inflicted) ills, while their inscriptions reflect widely divergent degrees of literacy and legibility. The hands on display in the bowls vary from barely legible to beautiful, while the (ritual) manipulation of written signs is also common. This latter practice takes many forms in the bowls, from the wholesale invention of signs and scripts in some, to the inscription of others with symbols that (closely) resemble the forms of known alphabets and signs. Such inscriptions defy both reading and conventional sense, and are commonly referred to by bowl scholars using the term “pseudo-script.”⁸ The term prefixes the combining form “pseudo-” to the adjoining concept “script” to indicate a falsehood, a fake, or a pretense. Pseudo-scripts are known in other cultural contexts, including ancient Egyptian,⁹ Greek,¹⁰

⁶ On the two different scripts in which the Syriac bowls are inscribed, see Marco Moriggi, *A Corpus of Syriac Incantation Bowls* (Leiden, 2014), 11–19. Moritz A. Levy produced an early study of the scripts of the incantation bowls in 1855, but its present use is diminished by that fact that only a scant handful of bowls were available to him for study at that point: “Über die von Layard aufgefundenen chaldäischen Inschriften auf Topfgefäßen: Ein Beitrag zur hebräischen Paläographie und zur Religionsgeschichte,” *ZDMG* 9/2 (1855). James Alan Montgomery, *Aramaic Incantation Texts from Nippur* (Philadelphia, 1913), 26–39 provides a fairly extensive discussion of the bowl scripts, but the most substantial study of the bowl scripts to date remains Alexander Cornelis Klugkist, *Midden-Aramese Schriften in Syrië, Mesopotamië, Perzië en aangrenzende gebieden* (PhD diss., Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, 1982), 184–216.

⁷ On bowl praxis, see Montgomery, *Aramaic Incantation Texts*, 40–101; Joseph Naveh and Shaul Shaked, *Amulets and Magic Bowls: Aramaic Incantation of Late Antiquity* (Jerusalem, 1985), 13–19; and David Frankfurter, “Scorpion/Demon: On the Origin of the Mesopotamian Apotropaic Bowl,” *JNES* 74/1 (2015).

⁸ For a broad survey of “pseudo-scripts,” see *Non-Textual Marking Systems, Writing and Pseudo Script from Prehistory to Modern Times*, ed. Petra Andrassy, Julia Budka, and Frank Kammerzell (Göttingen, 2009).

⁹ See *Pictograms or Pseudo Script? Non-Textual Identity Marks in Practical Use in Ancient Egypt and Elsewhere: Proceedings of a Conference in Leiden, 19–20 December 2006*, ed. B. Haring and O. Kaper (Leuven, 2009). On the religious and magical connotations of the “funny signs” that characterize many ancient Egyptian quarries, see Maria Nilsson, “Pseudo Script in Gebel el Silsila: Preliminary Results of the 2012 Epigraphic Survey,” in *Current Research in Egyptology 2013: Proceedings of the Fourteenth Annual Symposium*, ed. Kelly Accetta et al. (Oxford, 2014).

¹⁰ On the fashion for “nonsense” inscriptions in Attic vase painting, originating in the impaired literacy of the painters involved

² For a similar point, and a brief bibliography of contemporary examples, see Richard Gordon, “Caractères between Antiquity and Renaissance: Transmission and Re-invention,” in *Les savoirs magiques et leur transmission de l'Antiquité à la Renaissance*, ed. V. Dasen and J.-M. Spieser (Firenze, 2014), 253–54.

³ A few bowls are inscribed in a cursive Pahlavi script, which is yet to be deciphered; there also exist several bowls inscribed in Arabic script (as yet unpublished).

⁴ On the Jewish or Aramaic square script, which is found on well over half the bowls, see Joseph Naveh, *Early History of the Alphabet* (Jerusalem, 1987), 162–74. For two synthetic summaries of bowl scholarship, see Gideon Bohak, *Ancient Jewish Magic: A History* (Cambridge, 2008), 183–93; Yuval Harari, *Jewish Magic Before the Rise of Kabbalah* (Detroit, 2017), 133–40, 234–51.

⁵ On the Mandaic script, see E. M. Yamauchi, “Mandaic Incantations: Lead Rolls and Magic Bowls,” *ARAM* 11–12 (1999–2000), and the literature cited therein; see also Naveh, *Early History*, 132–37.

and Italian Renaissance settings.¹¹ The overwhelming consensus among bowl scholars is that these “pseudo-texts” were the work of ancient illiterate charlatans—unscrupulous magical practitioners who passed these “fakes” off onto unlettered clients.¹²

The label “pseudo-script” and its attendant conclusions about the bowls betrays the tacit assumption that drives the primarily philological and lexicological study of the bowls: that authors, ancient scribes, and magical practitioners all intended to mean something and to communicate this meaning in conventional semiotic terms. It is, of course, on the basis of this assumption that these scholarly fields achieve their results, and the regulative aims and rigorous techniques of the philological approach to the bowls have yielded extraordinary results indeed. That this is almost the sole interpretive mode brought to bear upon the bowls, however, means that its methods and its presuppositions merit closer attention.¹³ Particularly in bowl scholarship of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the use of the term pseudo-script reflects the assumption that inscriptions *should* have a decipherable meaning and *should* be communicative. Behind these assumptions often lie a further set of problematic biases, where “real” or “true” writing is understood to be that which represents speech, and where Latin alphabetical writing (implicitly) serves as the frame of reference for the definition of literacy. In order to plumb the large inscriptional record represented by the bowls, we need to conduct our investigations in recognition of the fact that our questions arise in a Western culture of reading and inquiry and that our ethnocentric cognitive schemata influence our interpretations and modes of scholarship.¹⁴

in the production of these vases, see Sara Chiarini, *The So-Called Nonsense Inscriptions on Ancient Greek Vases: Between Paideia and Paidia* (Leiden, 2018).

¹¹ Note the use of Arabic, Greek, and Hebrew pseudo-script in Italian art from the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries: see Alexander Nagel, “Twenty-Five Notes on Pseudoscript in Italian Art,” *RES* 59/60 (2011).

¹² This explanation for the so-called pseudo-script bowls was first suggested by Henri Pognon, *Inscriptions mandaites des coupes de Khoubir: Texte, traduction et commentaire philologique* (Paris, 1898), 15, and subsequently adopted *en masse* by bowl scholarship. Montgomery referred to the pseudo-script bowls as “original fakes” (*Aramaic Incantation Texts*, 14, 27–28).

¹³ For a critique of the limits of philology, see Keith M. Dickson, “Ritual Semiosis Mumbojumbo: Magic, Language, Semiotic Dirt,” *American Journal of Semiotics* 11/1–2 (1994).

¹⁴ These issues have been highlighted in recent work on non-Western writing-systems: Germaine Warkentin, “Reading the ‘Cheyenne Letter’: Towards a Typology of Inscription beyond

The majority of bowls *were* written in comprehensible (if non-standard) forms of Aramaic and their corresponding scripts, and the relative but more immediate intelligibility of these texts means that they are quite naturally privileged by us as scholars. However, the enclosed conformity of our focus on these bowls, as well as the subsequent disregard for the so-called pseudo-script bowls, means that we risk missing aspects of bowl praxis as a whole. The variety of inscriptional practices and manipulations of graphic signs in the bowls is vast, and the purpose and value attributed to these signs undoubtedly varied from practitioner to practitioner, and client to client. Unfortunately, the use of the term pseudo-script to designate this wide array of graphic practices breeds a kind of terminological incoherence. It works to both conflate and obscure the differences between a variety of different inscriptional practices—from invented to imitation scripts—while its pejorative overtones prejudice discussion of these diverse practices from the get-go. In sum, the variety of inscriptional practices in, and purposes behind, the bowls are not well served by our taxonomies and vocabularies of inscription and writing.

The present article seeks to both destabilize some of our ideas about inscriptional practices in the bowls, and to outline a framework that better accounts for their multidimensional nature. In particular, it aims to challenge the appeal to charlatanism that is frequently used to characterize the invented forms of inscription that we find in the bowls. In what follows, I turn first to consider the sole challenge to the received notion that the so-called pseudo-script bowls represent the work of cynical, semi-literate or illiterate magical practitioners. I then reflect briefly, as a case-study, on the inscriptional diversity of the pseudo-script bowls in the collection of the British Museum. I make some preliminary distinctions within this collection, and engage in a brief epigraphic analysis of these bowls. I then turn to consider the instrumentalization and manipulation of writing and other forms of inscription in ancient magical praxis. Building on recent work by Fritz Graf, I emphasize the importance of writing and *writtenness* to bowl praxis as a whole. I then posit a number of different ways that we might “read” the unusual inscriptions we encounter in the incantation

the Alphabet,” in *Approaches to the History of Written Culture: A World Inscribed*, ed. Martyn Lyons and Rita Marquilhaes (Cham, 2017); Pierre Robert Colas, “Writing in Space: Glottographic and Semasiographic Notation at Teotihuacan,” *Ancient Mesoamerica* 22 (2011).

bowls. One obvious but frequently forgotten aspect of the magic bowls is that they were inscribed for a supernatural audience. Communication with the divine does not necessarily entail the kind of “texts” that accord with established forms of (glotto)graphic expression, and I suggest that that some bowl inscriptions may represent a purposeful breach of continuity with ordinary forms of written communication.¹⁵ These “scripts” were perhaps attempts to remedy the (potential) failures of human languages and scripts to correspond to the realities of transmundane communication; they were perhaps attempts to render angelic or demonic speech in writing.

Pseudo-Scripts and Charlatans

In a recent analysis of performativity and illocutionary acts in the Aramaic bowls, Charles Häberl concludes by suggesting that the bowl texts were actually transcriptions of ritual utterances that represent the direct speech of bowl practitioners.¹⁶ Pointing first of all to the various hallmarks of oral transmission and composition that characterize the bowl texts, as well as to the frequent use of both explicit and implicit illocutionary (or performative) utterances within the texts, Häberl hypothesizes a ritual situation whereby the texts of the bowls were spoken out loud and simultaneously transcribed by the magical practitioner before an audience (presumably the client).¹⁷ Häberl

points out that, as writing surfaces, the bowls do not naturally lend themselves to great feats of calligraphy. Indeed, the unusual shape and texture of these unglazed earthenware bowls often resulted in elongated and otherwise misshapen letters. “Given these circumstances,” Häberl continues,

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 dismiss their creators as charlatans, as they would also need to be completely versed in the other components of the ritual in order to satisfy their clients.¹⁸

Bowl praxis is much undertheorized. But Häberl’s article does not just represent an attempt to theorize the ritual processes behind the production of the incantation bowls: its vision of the bowl texts as “hastily scrawled transcriptions of the actual speech of the magician” also offers a sympathetic reading of the poor hand-writing and so-called pseudo-scripts that characterize many bowls.¹⁹ In particular, it spares the latter category of inscriptions from being too hastily consigned to the netherworld of charlatanism.²⁰ Häberl’s wider framework, however, and the basis

¹⁵ Glottography refers to writing systems that represent spoken languages (by way of phonetic representations of their sounds). The term may be contrasted with semasiographic (idea-based) or other non-glottographic systems of inscription (which do not denote spoken language but instead represent ideational content). See Malcolm D. Hyman, “Of Glyphs and Glottography,” *Language & Communication* 26 (2006); Colas, “Writing in Space,” 14. For a treatment of inscriptions that were plainly not intended to be read, or which were perhaps intended only to be read by God as symbolic affirmations of faith, see Richard Ettinghausen, “Arabic Epigraphy: Communication or Symbolic Affirmation,” in *Near Eastern Numismatics, Iconography, Epigraphy, and History: Studies in Honor of George C. Miles*, ed. Dikran Kouymjian (Beirut, 1974).

¹⁶ Charles G. Häberl, “Aramaic Incantation Texts between Orality and Textuality,” in *Orality and Textuality in the Iranian World: Patterns of Interaction across the Centuries*, ed. Julia Rubanovich (Leiden, 2015).

¹⁷ The recitation of the bowl texts is a matter of some debate. Shaul Shaked assumes that “the text was not read aloud, as there are some bowls that contain fraudulent inscriptions: an illiterate practitioner in antiquity would sometimes scribble some gibberish on a bowl, and sell it off to his innocent customer as a valid text” (Shaul Shaked, “Popular Religion in Sasanian Babylonia,” *Jerusalem*

Studies in Arabic and Islam 21 [1997]: 104). However, Shaked does allow that—having gone to the trouble of faking a text—an illiterate practitioner would presumably have had the wherewithal to provide an adequate “recitation” of the “text” in order to satisfy any expectations the client may have had in this regard.

¹⁸ Häberl, “Between Orality and Textuality,” 396. The other components of the ritual that Häberl hypothesizes are whispered incantations, the construction of magical circles, and the inscription and burial of the bowls. The evidence from the bowls themselves for whispering is slight, and even in spite of the clear role of oral and memorial processes in the transmission and composition of bowl formulae, the fact that we possess no contemporary Sasanian manuals or magical recipe books means that we can only speculate as to whether the bowls were recited during or after their inscription.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 396.

²⁰ Häberl’s is the sole challenge thus far to the consensus that such bowls were “fakes” produced by charlatans. His article also emphasizes to great effect the illocutionary nature of many bowl formulae. Häberl argues that these written illocutions indicate the fundamentally performative nature of the incantation texts. He analyzes the variations in a popular bowl formula—“by the ban of Buḡdānā”—and reads the variations that characterize this formula within his performative framework as bearing all the hallmarks of oral transmission and/or composition. See below for an alternate reading of the illocutionary act in the incantation bowls.

for his challenge to the consensus about the pseudo-script bowls, risks distorting an important aspect of bowl praxis. That is, Häberl's idea of performativity ultimately leads him to argue that the writing of the incantation bowls "which was a reflection of the oral composition . . . was quite possibly of secondary importance"; he suggests that the bowl formulae were primarily oral compositions that just "happened to be written down."²¹ Critically, this conclusion risks misrepresenting the fundamentally *written* nature of bowl praxis.²² *Contra* Häberl, I suggest that writing—and the bowls' *writtenness*—were key to beliefs about the bowls' efficacy, and that writing should not be relegated to the level of a secondary consideration in the (ritual) production of the bowls.

In what follows, I seek to complicate both Häberl's conclusion and our picture of the pseudo-script bowls on several different fronts. In this regard, the first thing that needs to be considered is Häberl's use of the term "charlatan." While I ultimately agree with his conclusion that not all of the so-called pseudo-script bowls reflect the work of charlatans, Häberl's use of the term needs to be addressed; I also suggest that there are better bases from which to argue that pseudo-scripts do not imply charlatans. Charlatans are characterized primarily by their ability to use certain gestures and sounds that make them look like people versed in the profession in which they claim expertise. Thus, a person's ability to present themselves as well-versed in the (possible) components of bowl ritual (besides the bowl's inscription) does not necessarily negate a charge of charlatanism. To argue as much is like suggesting that a person who pretends to be a medical doctor is not really a charlatan because they

use the instruments employed by medical professionals and employ the Latin words characteristic of that profession, thereby fulfilling the expectations of their clients. Their ability to fulfill these expectations does not nullify their proper designation as charlatans. One might rejoin, however, that illiteracy need not have prevented a magical practitioner from gaining a well-deserved reputation as an effective professional. The production of spells and other magical technologies was not just a consequential (even pious) operation in the eyes of their makers, it was also a commercial enterprise, and economic considerations and/or wider trends—such as an increased epigraphic habit in late antiquity—may have led some illiterate but otherwise well-reputed and efficacious practitioners to incorporate "writing" into their praxis (which is perhaps Häberl's wider point).

Practitioners would have exercised their skills to the best of their ability, and could expect fair reward for their work; those who did not possess a high degree of proficiency in writing, but who were nevertheless charged with producing a bowl on the basis of their wider expertise, might expect lesser remuneration for their bowls. Others, who did not possess the ability to write (and who may have been void of proper magical technique altogether) may equally have capitalized on the fact that the writing of (efficacious) texts was a central part of the late antique magical practitioner's trade. Many bowls were undoubtedly cynically passed off onto people who were either illiterate or who could not read Aramaic (or were unable to recognize even a poor attempt to model Aramaic). The magic bowls were cross-cultural,²³ and it is simply good sense to assume that many non-Jews—for example—fell prey to Jewish Aramaic pseudo-scribbles, and that their expectations of an effective JBA incantation were fulfilled by these fake products. Jewish customers may equally have fallen prey to pseudo-Syriac or pseudo-Mandaic products, and so on.

Using charlatanism as an explanation for all the pseudo-script bowls needs to be problematized more than is common, however. Many bowl customers would indeed not have been able to read or write, but this explanation too easily presupposes a kind of total

²¹ Ibid., 369, 396.

²² Häberl's article also raises several other questions. At key points, Häberl draws certain conclusions about the entirety of bowl praxis on the basis of the small number of texts his article deals with. This reflects a common tendency in much bowl scholarship, but as with many aspects of bowl praxis, we need to be careful about taking a one-size-fits-all approach. We cannot exclude the possibility that different aspects of bowl praxis—such as the act of overturning and burying the bowls—had multiple significances or meant different things to different people. Thus, while it is certainly *possible* to imagine the kind of ritual situation that Häberl outlines, I nevertheless find it difficult to imagine with *probability* that bowl formulae were in many cases laboriously spoken out loud at up to one tenth the speed of normal speech in order to accommodate neater processes of transcription. Are we to imagine that the option to hastily scrawl a pseudo-text applied to the production of all bowls, or only to those incantations that contained performatives, and which—according to Häberl—would thus have been spoken out loud?

²³ For example, many of the bowls written in the Jewish or Aramaic square script were produced for non-Jews. This is clear from the names of the clients included in these bowls; these names are often non-Jewish, while some are demonstrably Christian or Zoroastrian. The same cross-cultural observation would also apply to the bowls written in Syriac or Mandaic.

illiteracy on the part of the general populace—a total inability to distinguish legitimate script from either invented script or the ostentatious displays of non-writing that characterize some bowls. In challenging this presupposition, it is necessary to pay attention not just to these very conspicuous displays of non-writing, but also the extent to which people—even if they could not read or write—nevertheless possessed a kind of visual or socialized literacy: the ability to recognize the basics of writing to some degree, and the ability to distinguish thereby between script and conspicuously poor examples of pseudo-script, or at least the ability to recognize an egregious display of non-writing *as* non-writing.²⁴

In this regard, one of the first things to say about many of the non-Aramaic bowls is that they were clearly not intended to fool anyone into thinking that they were written in Aramaic. Many bowls, for example, were inscribed with a single repeated sign; this lack of variation leads to an almost geometrical effect, and it certainly does not seem like these inscriptions were intended to resemble writing, let alone to model Aramaic or any other known system of writing. Such bowls also furnish a far more concrete basis from which to challenge the received notion that the pseudo-script bowls were the work of charlatans. If such bowls were sold to people, it was obviously on the basis that they were not written in Aramaic (or any other language), and the recognition that the magical practitioner either could not write—but was presumably felt to be an accomplished practitioner nonetheless—or that the practitioner had *chosen* to cover the surface of the bowl with this particular form of inscription (whether he was literate or not). Such bowls might be evidence that the people for whom they were made may have upheld their validity even when it was clear that the “script” or written “word” inscribed upon the bowls was not linked to a verbal or written utterance or spell.²⁵

²⁴ For different examples of socialized literacy, as well as the diffusion of literacy from scribal circles into the laity, see, e.g., Meir Bar-Ilan, “Socialized Literacy in Antiquity,” *Maarav* 21/1–2 (2014). See also Zachary Brooks, “Is Media Literacy Active or Passive?” *Journal of Educational Multimedia and Hypermedia* 19/3 (2010).

²⁵ It is also worth noting that, while writing and inscription are typically viewed from the perspective of speech, the forms and arrangements of inscription—their size, style, and format, for instance—are equally capable of expressing meaning—communicating, persuading, and performing in their own right. On the agency of writing, and the value of treating inscriptions as more

than finished texts whose meaning lies almost exclusively in their wording, see the contributions in *Writing Matters: Presenting and Perceiving Monumental Inscriptions in Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, ed. Irene Berti et al. (Berlin, 2017). In relation to the bowls, the arrangement of many of their texts into maze-like spirals and concentric circles (wherein demons may have become confused and trapped) conveys an easily legible *visual* message that both evokes and supports the verbal message of the bowl texts. For several recent treatments of “text as art,” see the contributions in *Sign and Design: Script as Image in Cross-Cultural Perspective (300–1600 CE)*, ed. Brigitte Miriam Bedos-Rezak and Jeffrey F. Hamburger (Washington, DC, 2016), and Sean V. Leatherbury, *Inscribing Faith in Late Antiquity: Between Reading and Seeing* (Oxon, 2018).

But if not all bowls were intended to be read or perceived as (conventional human) writing, what might their makers’ intentions have been? And if writing an efficacious text, or producing efficacious writings, were not side issues for late antique practitioners of magic, might this have meant abandoning Aramaic language and script altogether in order to take advantage of inscription’s many non-verbal aspects? In order to explore these questions, I turn to examine the diversity of inscriptional forms in the bowls currently bracketed together as “pseudo-scripts,” a term which pejoratively masks the diversity of these bowls. My goal in what follows is to problematize and complicate our existing picture of these bowls with an epigraphic analysis of the so-called pseudo-script bowls in the collection of the British Museum. As Alexandra von Lieven notes, “it is crucial in dealing with unreadable inscriptions to evaluate them in detail regardless of whether they make sense on first or even second or third view. They might still have a lot to say about their makers’ models and intentions.”²⁶ On the basis of this analysis and the multiplicity of inscriptional practices found in the bowls, I turn to argue *contra* Häberl that the pseudo-script bowls are evidence of the centrality of writing to bowl praxis as a whole, as well as the generative role writing and script played in the perceived efficacy of the bowls. (Examination of the pseudo-script bowls also shows that many of them are inconsistent with the ritual that Häberl proposes; more importantly, the inscriptional evidence invites further explanation and deeper reflection than is provided by either appeals to charlatanry or a hypothetical oral ritual.) It is the fact that inscription entails the production of permanent, visible marks that I suggest is key to beliefs about the efficacy of the bowls—it is the bowls’ *writtenness*,

²⁶ Alexandra von Lieven, “Script and Pseudo Scripts in Graeco-Roman Egypt,” in Andrassy, Budka, and Kammerzell, *Non-Textual Marking Systems*, 104.

and their subsequent permanency, that guarantees a promise of continued communication with the transmundane realm. I address this point in more detail below (pp. 134–136), however, and turn now to the abstract inscriptional sequences that characterize certain bowls in the collection of the British Museum.

The Pseudo-Script Bowls in the British Museum

The inscriptions on the twenty-two so-called pseudo-script bowls in the British Museum (BM) offer an ideal opportunity to reflect on the spectrum of inscriptional practices that we find in the incantation bowls, as well as the different conceptions of writing that these practices may have reflected.²⁷ These bowls exhibit a variety of graphic behavior, from ostentatious displays of non-writing to (highly cursive) scripts that strain the dividing line between legibility and illegibility. All incorporate elements of (invented) scripts to some degree, suggesting that their production was

contingent in large part upon the use of writing elsewhere in society. Many are also inscribed with different zoomorphic and geometric motifs, as well as with drawings of demons.²⁸ Some of the bowls' surfaces are inscribed solely with invented scripts, while others consist almost wholly of drawings and geometric designs, and only gesture at the act of writing. Yet other bowls contain unexpected and unusual combinations of familiar letter-forms inscribed in the Jewish script (occasionally interspersed with letter combinations that are meaningful in Hebrew and/or Aramaic). This variety of inscription types makes these bowls productive of both inquiry and explanation, while the evident consistency and clear command of an inscriptional repertoire in some of these bowls invites particular investigation.

In what follows, I provide brief epigraphic analyses of the so-called pseudo-script bowls in the BM. I also group these bowls into two rough categories: those that might properly be called pseudo-scripts, and which represent a clear attempt to mimic a known alphabet (for whatever reason); and those that represent the wholesale invention of scripts, some of which appear to represent a thorough-going attempt to instantiate a sign-system free from all communicative conventions. Within this second category, I distinguish between scripts that reflect a well-developed repertoire on the part of the magical practitioner, and those that appear relatively *ex tempore* (and which might support Häberl's thesis). I ask how the scriptural aspects of these bowls behave, what patterns are observable in the analysis of these inscriptions and their arrangement, how we might explain them, and what they might contribute to our understanding of the significance of writing in the bowls. I also examine how certain pseudo-scripts might have been generated by illiterate practitioners in light of written models available to them.

This section is perforce somewhat impressionistic, as the vocabularies and specialized terminologies developed for the paleography of North-West Semitic inscriptions cannot easily be adapted or (retro-)fitted to the non-Aramaic bowls (at least not those bowls which do not suggest that a concerted effort was made to model any of the Aramaic scripts). It has proved

²⁷ I focus on the BM collection for pragmatic reasons. Pseudo-script bowls are rarely documented (let alone documented photographically) in scholarly publications, and can often only be seen in the basements or special collections rooms of museums or in private collections. Photographs of the pseudo-script bowls in the BM are included, however, in the catalogue of these bowls produced by J. B. Segal, and can be consulted either in this volume or in the museum's digital catalogue (see J. B. Segal, *Catalogue of the Aramaic and Mandaic Incantation Bowls in the British Museum*, with a contribution by E. C. D. Hunter [London, 2000]). Photographs of the pseudo-script bowls in the Hilprecht Collection are also included in Christa Müller-Kessler, *Die Zauberschälentexte in der Hilprecht-Sammlung, Jena, und weitere Nippur-Texte anderer Sammlungen* (Wiesbaden, 2005). I will also refer to these bowls at several points, as well as to a number of non-Aramaic bowls which can be viewed in the online catalogue of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. It is difficult to know what proportion of the overall number of known bowls is made up by pseudo-script bowls, not least because the number of known bowls is constantly shifting; figures vary from 2,000 to 2,500 and up to 4,000 known bowls (depending on whom one consults). Erica Hunter estimates that up to 20% of incantation bowls may be pseudo-script bowls (Häberl, "Between Orality and Textuality," 366 n. 4), while Shaked remarks that "cases of fraudulent scripts are not very common" (Shaul Shaked, "Orality and Esotericism: Reflections on Modes of Transmission in Late Antiquity," in Rubanovich, *Orality and Textuality*, 53). Pseudo-script bowls comprise 15% of the total number of bowls in the BM. Because it only examines these twenty-two bowls, the present article is far from a representative (let alone complete) phenomenological inventory of non-textual signs and scripts in the bowls; such a goal is at this time unattainable and was deliberately not attempted. My intent here is only to gesture at the scope of usages and functions of pseudo-scripts in the bowls.

²⁸ See the contribution of Hunter in Segal, *Catalogue*, 173–79, 203. For a detailed study of the figurative iconography of the incantation bowls, see now Naama Vilozy, *Lilith's Hair and Ashmedai's Horns: Figure and Image in Magic and Popular Art: Between Babylonia and Palestine in Late Antiquity* (Jerusalem, 2017) (Hebrew).

difficult (at least at this early stage of research) to develop more than a broad typology of non-Aramaic inscriptional praxes in the bowls, primarily because of the great diversity of “script” types that we find in the bowls, the *sui generis* nature of many of these inscriptions, and the fact that—even when certain “script” types which do repeat across bowls—we possess so few exemplars of these types. The invented sign-forms that we encounter in these bowls reflect a variety of stylistic predilections and the innovation of signs along multiple, contemporaneous trajectories. All that said, insights from paleography may still prove helpful in assessing the style and execution of the “scripts” in the non-Aramaic bowls, which may correlate with their intention and/or function. As such, I pay attention to the evident speed and care with which these inscriptions were made—to their graphic arrangement, graphemic clarity, and the uniformity of graphemic form and size in these bowls. If the practitioners behind some of these bowls were writing either carelessly or hurriedly (in order to keep pace with speech, for example) we might expect to find a round, continuous ductus in these bowls (a smooth scrawl, or series of smooth, broad strokes) as opposed to short, concise letter strokes (or more precision in individual strokes). Besides these indicators, other signs of speed in writing are curved or loop-shaped joints between letter strokes, as well as a general inclination of the script (when writing from right to left) to lean to the right. These are general mechanical tendencies, however, and we should not necessarily expect such characteristics to be present in hasty scrawls that merely mimic the *act* of writing (though we might look for them in those bowls where an evident attempt has been made to imitate a known script).

Imitation scripts

Some of the bowls in the BM betray certain signs of speed.²⁹ BM 91752 (Segal 123Ps) (Fig. 1) consists of a relatively smooth, cursive Estrangelo-type pseudo-script, which is arranged in sixteen horizontal lines rather than in the familiar concentric spirals or less common radial arrangement. This arrangement of the

“text,” requiring no rotation of the bowl, would undoubtedly have been quicker to produce. Two other bowls in the BM collection also consist of Estrangelo-type pseudo-script (BM 91746 and BM 103361), while BM 103363 (124Ps) features five short radial lines of what may be proto-Manichaean pseudo-script. Most of BM 103363’s surface, however, consists of three drawings (two demons and a possible canine figure). The more extensive “texts” of BM 91746 (121Ps) and BM 103361 (122Ps) are arranged in neat concentric circles. The scripts of both bowls are cursive; neither is as smooth as BM 91752, however. A typical goal of fast letter strokes is the simplification of those strokes, but this is not in evidence in BM 91746, where the strokes of the signs—though clean and reasonably well-executed in many cases—often show a tendency to overcomplicate, and to overlap quite messily.

BM 91768 (125Ps) (Fig. 2) also represents a clear attempt to imitate a known script; in this case, the Jewish script.³⁰ The “text” of this bowl is arranged in concentric spirals and begins in the center of the bowl. The hand is angular and the letter shapes are distinct. The letter **ל** is not badly formed, but it is not apparent that the magical practitioner behind this bowl knew how to produce more than four or five letters of the Jewish script. The “text” thus comprises somewhat regular sequences of alternated **ה/ח** and **ס** (or circles), with the occasional **ד/ר**, **י/י** and **ל** thrown in.³¹ In this and many other cases, it is possible to outline a conceivable *modus operandi* behind the construction of the letter forms, whereby the magical practitioner began by identifying and extracting a set of features from the sign inventory of the writing system he desired to imitate (in this instance, the Jewish script).³² This writing system would naturally have occurred within the individual’s textual environment. In the case of the bowls, this environment would have encompassed

²⁹ See also B 2953 in the Penn Museum for a less able attempt.

³¹ Many letter-forms are particularly difficult to distinguish across the corpus of bowls written in the Jewish script; in particular, distinctions between **י** and **י**, **ב** and **ב**, **ד** and **ד**, **ה** and **ח**, **ס** and **ס** are not always clear and have to be decided on a lexical basis in the bowls written in JBA.

³² I assume that in the case of BM 91768, the practitioner was illiterate, or at least did not know how to write the Jewish script. In certain bowls which betray some knowledge of Jewish script, if these scribes knew how to write, the nature of their letter forms do not indicate that—in light of Häberl’s argument—they gained much time by employing a pseudo-script.

²⁹ In what follows, I give both the BM catalogue numbers of the bowls, as well as the document numbers assigned to the bowls by Segal. This is to facilitate the consultation of these bowls, photographs of which can be found either in Segal’s plates or online in the museum’s digital catalogue (by searching their catalogue numbers).

Figure 1—Imitation script: BM 91752 (Segal 123Ps).

the various types of writing encountered in everyday plurilingual and pluriscriptual Sasanian society. The next step would have been the development of a more or less extensive “grapho-grammar” built on the basis of the features extracted from the target writing system. The purpose of this grapho-grammar would not necessarily have been to generate real graphemes, but to generate graphemes that were conceivably Jewish and which—at the very least—avoided being con-

spicuously non-Aramaic, while also excluding impossible graphemes (and trying to exclude possible but conspicuous graphemes). It is also plausible that the mimicry of known scripts evolved somewhat spontaneously on the basis of exposure to known writing systems, rather than on the basis of systematic analyses of their distinctive features.

Some further bowls in the BM collection may lend some support to this theory, such as BM 91753

Figure 2—Imitation script: BM 91768 (Segal 125Ps).

(135Ps). This bowl consists solely of concentric circles of the letter η/π . It was thus presumably produced with some speed. There is some variation in the size and thickness of the strokes of the letters; the roof or upper stroke of the letter-forms is sometimes curved, while a quite pronounced sting or serif is created where this horizontal stroke meets the right vertical stroke. As there is no variation of letter signs, the effect created is almost geometrical. In fact, it does not appear that this bowl was intended to resemble an inscription at all; it certainly would not have fooled

anyone into thinking it was a written text.³³ Four other bowls in the collection—BM 113186 (136Ps) (Fig. 3), BM 113187 (137Ps), BM 113188 (138Ps), and BM 113189 (139Ps) (Fig. 4)—which were all produced by the same magical practitioner, may also represent attempts to mimic the Jewish script. All

³³ See also HS 3004 and HS 3045 (plates 38 and 49 in Müller-Kessler, *Zauberschalentexte*) and B 16010, B 16060, and B 2939 in the Penn Museum, which all consist either of repetitions of single signs or long chains of several repeated signs.

Figure 3—Imitation script: BM 113186 (Segal 136Ps).

four of these bowls consist of the same wavering (possibly wavy) script,³⁴ while two of them—which also feature drawings of a fish (BM 113189) and a bird (BM 113186)—were also produced with either greater confidence or care than the others. In all of

³⁴ It should be noted that “wavy” does not mean the same thing as “wavering”: wavy hands may reflect a type of stylistic flourish, while wavering hands may be said to betray a slow pen and/or a lack of confidence in writing.

these four bowls, there is no clear regular patterning of signs, though it is clear from the graphemic consistency of the signs across all four bowls that this particular practitioner had assembled a rough repertoire of signs. BM 113189 contains many well-formed instances of the letter 𐎠, while all four bowls contain multiple instances of signs that are similar to the letter 𐎡. The signs on these two bowls are more neatly shaped, and their concentric lines of ‘text’ less densely plotted. In BM 113188, the tight plotting of

Figure 4—Imitation script: BM 113189 (Segal 139Ps).

signs characteristic of this practitioner leads to some overlap in signs.

Invented scripts

Another three bowls in the BM collection were also produced by a single magical practitioner: BM 91747 (132Ps) (Fig. 5), BM 91749 (133Ps) (Fig. 6), and BM 131668 (128Ps). All three represent a highly

developed repertoire of similar and sometimes quite intricate signs. These recurrent signs are clearly purposeful repetitions produced by the use of the same generative differentia. In all three bowls, the signs are arranged in a radial design and bear little resemblance to any known systems of inscription. BM 91747 and BM 91749 are most alike, though the signs on the former sit much closer together and are somewhat more elaborate. Both of these bowls also feature three geometric lines that run from the center of the bowl

Figure 5—Invented script: BM 91747 (Segal 132Ps).

to its rim. BM 91749 is also inscribed with an anthropomorphic figure, as well as a canine figure. BM 91747 and BM 131668 both contain circles filled with dots at their center. BM 91749 and BM 131668 also both contain a line of symbols that—if “read” from the rim to the center of the bowl—may be said to resemble the letter **3**, but it seems unlikely that any of these three bowls were designed to resemble an actual script.

Two other bowls in the BM collection, though produced by different practitioners, also reflect a clearly-developed graphic repertoire. Both consist of well-formed, neatly spaced concentric circles of signs. BM 139523 (140Ps) (Fig. 7) features a neat, angular hand. The strokes that form each sign are short, sharp, and confident, and seem to suggest consistent practice in writing in this way. Many of the signs in this bowl repeat often enough to form a rough pattern;

Figure 6—Invented script: BM 91749 (Segal 133Ps).

there is also very little variation in the relative size of their forms (which may also represent an attempt to mimic the Jewish script), and very little variation in the thickness of the letter strokes. BM 117825 (141Ps) features six neatly-spaced concentric circles of well-spaced, fairly simple repeated signs. The hand here is just as precise as that of BM 139523, though the signs in BM 117825 are curved and drawn in the form of gentle hooks; they may be said paradoxically to resemble a precise form of squiggle. They are ar-

anged around a central circle in the middle of which lies a faded radial design; a small, large-eyed anthropomorph lies just outside this circle and merges with some of the signs. Many of the signs repeat, but there is no discernible pattern.

A further set of bowls by yet another individual practitioner presents an interesting case. BM 117885 (Segal 051A) and the fragmentary bowls BM 117878 (Segal 052A) and BM 117879 (053A) consist largely of a meaningless arrangement of letters written in the

Figure 7—Invented script: BM 139523 (Segal 140Ps).

Jewish script. It is very likely that BM 117878 and BM 117879 are fragments of the same bowl. In all two/three bowls, however, these apparently meaningless arrangements of letters are interspersed with variations on the Shema, as well as the words *אמן* (BM 117885 and BM 117878), *ליליתא* (BM 117879), and the concluding formula *אמן סלה הללוי* (BM 117885). A further bowl—BM 91725 (Segal 050A)—may also have been produced by the same magical practitioner. It locates the words *ליליתא* and *אמן סלה הללויא* (as well

as *אסרתא*) amongst an apparently meaningless arrangement of letters written in the Jewish script. The hand in BM 91725 is similar to the other bowl and bowl fragments, while the bowl also replicates the (decorative) features of BM 117885. The forms of the letter *ש* in this bowl are a bit off, but the practitioner behind this bowl forms the letters *מ* and *א* consistently, was clearly proficient with the alphabet, and possessed a rudimentary skill with the basic form of the Jewish script.

Random inspirations and hasty scrawls

At first glance, BM 91759 (Segal 131Ps) appears to confirm Häberl's thesis. It is inscribed in a flowing hand that consists chiefly of shorter curving or hooked signs, followed by longer (and sometimes wavy) horizontal lines. It seems evident that the practitioner behind this bowl had a feel for what they were doing: the same pattern of strokes is frequently repeated two to three times before the practitioner turned to a variation on the same theme. This "text," however, is enclosed within a large geometric design, and it difficult to tell whether the letter-forms were incorporated secondarily into this design, or whether the design was built around a hastily "written" inscription.

BM 103362 (126Ps), BM 108823 (127Ps), and BM 117873 (130Ps) may all be characterized as loosely differentiated squiggles, or hasty scrawls designed to mimic the act of writing.³⁵ BM 108821 (142Ps) appears to reflect either greater forethought or more care during the inscription, while BM 117884 (129Ps) consists of a series of smooth, thickly-formed signs that show some intent to differentiate the forms of each sign; it was also plainly inscribed with great speed.

Things Said, Things Done, and Things Written

This brief survey of the so-called pseudo-script bowls in the BM provides a small window onto the diverse capacity for inscription evident in the magic bowls. These twenty-two bowls instantiate a variety of graphic behaviors and modalities of expression—from designs that are individually comparable with contemporary script systems, to those which eschew mimicry altogether for the wholesale invention of signs and scripts. Some of these bowls suggest that—in spite of the precariousness of the writing surface—meticulous attention was paid to the preparation of the work, while others suggest different priorities. Only a rough quarter of these bowls bear inscriptions that indicate haste; the majority would not seem to confirm the

kind of ritual situation that Häberl outlines. In general, these bowls betray various mechanical aspects of sign formation that would have slowed down inscription (as opposed to facilitating speed), while others bear geometric designs and patterns of script (within and sometimes linked to these designs) that suggest a great degree of forethought and a deliberative mode of production. The signs or letter-forms in many of these bowls, for example, consist of short, straight (angular) strokes, or are densely and carefully plotted. Other indicators of care include the choice of neat, concentric circular arrangements of "text" (rather than spirals), as well as the meticulous spacing of carefully formed individual symbols in relation to one another. This is not to discount the ritual situation that Häberl outlines, but only to suggest that the clear evidence of variety in the pseudo-script bowls in the BM collection indicates multiple intentions and processes of production. It is plain from the diverse contents and many (scribal) hands behind the bowls as a whole, as well as the many archaeological sites at which bowls have been discovered, that the bowls were written by many different individuals in many different locations, and that each individual bowl reflects a different set of circumstances, and potentially very different understandings of how the bowls worked and what kinds of procedure should accompany them. Many of these bowls are clearly more (or something other) than a series of jottings that represent failed attempts at intelligible written communication or misleading acts addressed to illiterate customers.

In the following section, I seek to move beyond this binary and expand the ways in which we might "read" and understand some of these bowls. And though my intent is not to discount any one interpretation of the so-called pseudo-script bowls, I suggest nevertheless that the pseudo-script bowls—in and of themselves, and in light of the bowls as a whole—are better read as evidence for the centrality of writing to bowl praxis, rather than as evidence for a praxis where writing was only of secondary importance. While it is clear that the bowls sit somewhere on the spectrum between orality and textuality, because we possess only the end product of any potential bowl ritual, we can only speculate about the gestures and oral invocations (or recitations) that may have accompanied their inscription and burial.

What cannot be disputed, however, is that the incantation bowls emerged against a general ancient

³⁵ See also HS 3024 and HS 3049 (plates 40 and 39 in Müller-Kessler, *Zauberschalentexte*) and B 16071 in the Penn Museum. Other bowls in these collections do not gesture at the act of writing at all, and do not even reflect the repetition of a single sign or symbol; instead they feature striking black streaks of ink arranged in radial registers (B 2942 and B 2950), or large-eyed stick figures ranged round-about the inside of the bowl with their feet to the center and their heads to the rim (HS 3002; plate 42 in Müller-Kessler, *Zauberschalentexte*).

Near Eastern background wherein script and textual media were not necessarily separable from wider beliefs about the inherent power of language and the written and spoken word. Despite their obvious differences, different societies across the Near East held many ideas in common about words as vehicles of power (which extended to creation by fiat), as well as associations between the power of words and the invention of writing.³⁶ Writing and written documents across Babylonia and other parts of the Near East—particularly within Jewish society—bore great authority and prestige. Reliance on written documents was also widespread. People made constant use of writing, from deeds of sale to deeds of divorce, while both the *get* and the *ketubba* (or marriage contract) represent situations where written documents were mandatory from the earliest times in Jewish law. What begins to distinguish the early centuries AD from earlier periods, however, is a surge in the use of writing (in particular as a technology for communicating with transmundane powers), and it is against this background that I suggest we read the illocutionary act in the incantation bowls as reflective of the transfer of performativity from speech to writing.³⁷ Such transfers of performativity were common in eras—such as the Sasanian period—when writing was becoming institutionalized.³⁸ Performativity is simply a feature of language-in-use—whether spoken or written—which

may be expressed in (constitutive) ritual events (such as the inscription of a magical bowl). I suggest that the bowls reflect a movement towards a view of writing as a form of constitutive social action, wherein the products of writing and inscription are seen to be autonomous material objects with a life of their own.³⁹

The increasingly common ritual manipulation of writing across the ancient world (as exemplified by the magic bowls, and as practiced by both literate and quasi- or illiterate magical practitioners) derived its authority from “the prestige of true literacy elsewhere in the social system,” while the invented signs and scripts that characterized these practices in many cases were “likewise ultimately a function of the types of knowledge-practices regarding script current among literate specialists.”⁴⁰ Contemporary studies of magic nevertheless frequently neglect the important role of writing and text in ritual processes, and writing is seldom integrated thoroughly into studies of ancient magic. In a recent contribution, however, Fritz Graf has argued that scholars should seek to integrate writing more centrally into their descriptions of ancient magical practice.⁴¹ Given the existence of so many inscribed media in ancient magic, Graf argues that we should move away from the priority of oral incantation, and add “things written” to “things said” and “things done” in our analyses of ritual in the ancient world. Part of this project (as Graf conceives it) entails shifting the concept of writing in ancient cultures away from its communicative function. In this regard, Graf highlights four types of potent magical inscriptions that were seldom or not meant to be read: letter combinations with no reference to spoken language; written materials meant for eating or drinking; drawn images and texts; and *charaktères* (magical signs, easily recognizable by the addition of small rings to the tips of many of the individual signs). Graf’s ultimate

³⁶ The Egyptians, for example, referred to the hieroglyphic script as *mdw ntr*, “the words of the gods,” while “Egyptian letters were the chief technology of a hierocratic scribal elite who preserved and enacted rituals—and by extension the cosmic order itself—through the written word” (David Frankfurter, “The Magic of Writing and the Writing of Magic: The Power of the Word in Egyptian and Greek Traditions,” *Helios* 23/2 [1994]: 192). With reference to Mesopotamia, various statements by scribal elites reveal a conception of writing as *markas kullat* or “the cosmic bond of everything.” See Scott B. Noegel, “‘Sign, Sign, Everywhere a Sign’: Script, Power, and Interpretation in the Ancient Near East,” in *Divination and Interpretation of Signs in the Ancient World*, ed. Amar Annus (Chicago, 2010), with literature.

³⁷ See Daniel James Waller, “Transferring Performativity from Speech to Writing: Illocutionary Acts and Incantation Bowls,” *BSOAS* (forthcoming), which argues that the bowls represent a kind of popular or vernacular experiment with the performativity of writing, and that the use of speech acts in the bowls, such as oaths and curses, may represent a kind of “oral residue.”

³⁸ See Brenda Danet, “Speech, Writing and Performativity: An Evolutionary View of the History of Constitutive Ritual,” in *The Construction of Professional Discourse*, ed. Britt-Louise Gunnarsson, Per Linell, and Bengt Nordberg (London, 1997); Brenda Danet and Bryna Bogoch, “From Oral Ceremony to Written Document:

The Transitional Language of Anglo-Saxon Wills,” *Language & Communication* 12/2 (1992).

³⁹ The fact that writing may have an active and performative role is also emphasized by Béatrice Fraenkel, who considers “acts of writing” in the same way as Austin analyzed “speech acts” (Béatrice Fraenkel, “Actes d’écriture: Quand écrire c’est faire,” *Langage et Société* 121–22 (2007).

⁴⁰ Gordon, “Charaktères,” 254. On the scribalization of Jewish magic in the third to fourth centuries AD, see Bohak, *Ancient Magic*, 281–85.

⁴¹ Fritz Graf, “Magie et écriture: quelques réflexions,” in *Écrire la magie dans l’antiquité*, ed. Magali de Haro Sanchez (Liège, 2015).

point is that—rather than communicating words and ideas—writing grants a kind of permanence and materiality to ritual elements. Graf's article deals only with ritual in the Graeco-Roman world, however;⁴² in what follows, I expand upon his argument in relation to the magic bowls.

I suggest that the permanence of writing is key to bowl praxis. Stability and continuity inheres in the visual trace, and writing has the power to make visible and enduring what is otherwise transient and ephemeral (namely, the spoken word). Bowl praxis as a whole (from the inscription and burial of the bowl, to the apotropaic and exorcistic goals reflected in the bowl texts) seems to reflect a concern that constant communication and communion be somehow achieved with the bowls' transmundane interlocutors. Once inscribed, the bowl as a written object becomes an autonomous communication that can be maintained independently of the magical practitioner. In this view, the defining feature of the magic bowls is their *writtenness*, which includes not just the basic processes of inscribing or transcribing language into a visual form, but also the various cognitive processes involved in generating permanent and (often) extended inscriptions (which were adapted to the transmundane reader, and designed to satisfy the communicative goals of both the magical practitioner and their client). In sum, I suggest that written language—and by extension, simple *writtenness*—was the main instrument employed by the practitioners behind incantation bowls in order to protect their owners from affliction. The efficacy and performative power of the bowls was centered in the written word, sign, or script, and activated during the processes of writing, overturning, and burying the bowl. I suggest that the bowl—the material support for the inscription—also added to the felicity of these constitutive rituals. Inscribed on simple Sasanian household ware, the finished bowl both derived from and slotted back into the gestural world of the household. As David Frankfurter points out, the inscribed bowl simultaneously calls attention to its origin in day-to-day domestic life and to its transformation into a site of exorcistic power.⁴³

⁴² But see also Shaul Shaked, James Nathan Ford, and Siam Bhayro, *Aramaic Bowl Spells: Jewish Babylonian Aramaic Bowls*, MRLA 1 (Leiden, 2013), 7, which briefly addresses many of the same issues as Graf.

⁴³ Frankfurter, "Scorpion/Demon": 13.

"Reading" the So-Called Pseudo-Script Bowls

What does this all mean for the so-called pseudo-script bowls? In what follows, I further specify the foregoing (macrosocial) approach to the *writtenness* of the bowls. I outline several possibilities for "reading" the pseudo-script bowls that take into consideration the literate abilities of the public and of practitioners, as well as the multiple layers of meaning that objects can entail (and which depend on the knowledge and expectations of their users). In relation to the diversity of the bowl inscriptions, I consider what the individuals and communities behind the bowls may have required of their communicative practices, what their criteria for legibility were, and how these criteria related to their social understanding; that is, I ask what was considered legible, and what was considered legible in light of the transmundane audiences the bowls were addressed to.

As a social fact, the (perceived) ability to write in many ancient societies represented not just a particular skill but a status symbol, whether or not the product of this writing was legible and/or intended to be semantically meaningful. Opportunistic use was undoubtedly made of writing technology by many illiterate or semi-literate magical practitioners in order to capitalize upon the prestige it conveyed. Many bowls thus undoubtedly merit the designation pseudo-texts, being written by charlatans and cynically passed off to non-literate clients. But as I have noted, this use of charlatanism as an explanation for all the pseudo-script bowls is much too simple to be anything more than problematic. While it is true that many of the bowl customers would not have been able to read or write, it does not necessarily follow that they were "in no position to distinguish between genuine and arbitrarily invented script."⁴⁴ In this regard, we need to consider both the highly ostentatious displays of non-writing that characterize some bowls, and the plurilingual and pluriscriptual background from which the bowls emerge. Writing was present throughout Sasanian society, and people made constant use of it.⁴⁵ Even if these people could not read or write them-

⁴⁴ Shaked, "Orality and Esotericism," 53.

⁴⁵ The surviving record reveals a proliferation of written media (such as parchment, papyrus, metal and clay) across the late antique Mediterranean and Near Eastern world. Roger Bagnall thus notes that even "if a large portion of the population could not itself write or read . . . most adults nonetheless were participants in a system

selves, the question of exposure to writing, as well as writing recognition, needs to be raised. This question is especially important for a society in which scripts and signs functioned as expressions of identity (to the extent that readability and transmission of information might have been secondary factors).⁴⁶ One approach to this issue is to posit the existence of a kind of visual literacy when it came to the recognition of scripts. We have to be open to the possibility that at least some pseudo-script bowl texts—as quasi-alphabetical signs or wholly invented sign-systems—were recognized as non-scripts by all parties involved, but were nevertheless agreed to be invested with potency *through their very writtenness*. The writing on such bowls may have been understood in terms of other objects produced in the same circumstances. They may also have been understood to exercise a *sui generis* effect on reality through their unexpected styles of inscription and their “coefficient of weirdness.”⁴⁷ These bowls may have been intended to mean anything or everything, and to express this through the supersession of conventional processes of semiosis. As forms of ritual writing, the so-called pseudo-script bowls should not necessarily be asked to submit to the same kinds of hermeneutic schema as normative inscriptions. After all, (magic) rituals often operate by violating domain-specific expectations and by de-symbolizing conventional (written and linguistic) symbols in order to foreground their essential and/or intrinsic nature and structure.⁴⁸ Some bowls might thus represent the “alchemical” reduction of writing to a form stripped

of all glottographic convention, ready to represent whatever the practitioner and their client desired.

The inscriptions on other bowls—despite the apparent impossibility of their communicating anything—may in fact have been designed to be legible to the eyes of angels and/or demons. Because it does not necessarily follow that one would employ human language or human script when engaging in written communications with angels and demons, I suggest that we remain open to understanding the inventors of some of these scripts—on an analogy with glossolalia—as practitioners of a kind of glossographia.⁴⁹ The written representation of non-human language(s) would have required different technologies of forming or shaping meaning, as well as new sign-systems and scripts; alternatively, these invented scripts may have been understood to tap into an infra- or extralinguistic communicative sphere, or to point to a language beyond language, better suited to the specific communicative context of the bowls. Regardless, this dismantlement and reconstruction of language and its written forms does not just tap into the materiality and plasticity of writing in order to better control it; its reconfiguration and subsequent estrangement of inscription also effects a shift in attention to the form of these bowls as a medium of communication with angels and demons. These inscriptions invite the human viewer (the client) to hover in a state between reading and looking, thereby working to capture the liminal state of the special beings addressed by bowls. Writing is a way of extending cognition into the environment, and these inscriptions open up a cognitive space in the perception of the structure of writing where transmundane or counter-intuitive beings are themselves more “legible.” In this light, we might even begin to perceive the coefficient of intelligibility that may have obtained in some of these “weird” scripts; what is incomprehensible to human eyes may well have been understood to be perfectly

in which writing was constantly used” (Roger S. Bagnall, *Everyday Writing in the Graeco-Roman East* [Berkeley, CA, 2011], 4).

⁴⁶ Florian Coulmas notes that, as “the most visible items of a language, scripts and orthographies are ‘emotionally loaded’, indicating as they do group loyalties and identities. Rather than being mere instruments of a practical nature, they are symbolic systems of great social significance which may, moreover, have profound effects on the social structure of a speech community” (Florian Coulmas, *The Writing Systems of the World* [Oxford, 1991], 226–27).

⁴⁷ I borrow this phrase from Bronislaw Malinowski, *Coral Gardens and Their Magic: A Study of the Methods of Tilling the Soil and of Agricultural Rites in the Trobriand Islands*, vol. 2 (New York, 1978), 220: “powerful magical language is distinguished by a very high coefficient of weirdness.” Malinowski’s point is that human language is not often strange enough to be effective in magic, and that some successful magical practitioners thus seek other languages for their magic; this same observation is equally applicable to script.

⁴⁸ See Jesper Sørensen, “The Problem of Magic – Or How Gibberish Becomes Efficacious Action,” *Recherches sémiotiques/Semiotic Inquiry* 25/1–2 (2005), which considers how many types of actions

(such as writing) are disconnected from their default aspects inside ritual event-frames.

⁴⁹ Similarly, Richard Gordon has suggested that the invented signs or *charaktères* of Graeco-Egyptian magical practice should be understood in close relationship to—in fact, as the graphic complement of—*voces magicae*, the incomprehensible and strange-sounding words of power that feature prominently in many magical traditions: “Signa nova et inaudita: The Theory and Practice of Invented Signs (*charaktères*) in Graeco-Egyptian Magical Texts,” *MHNH* 11 (2011).

comprehensible to a transmundane addressee. Naturally, this interpretation of the so-called pseudo-script bowls can hardly be proven false; ultimately it draws its power of conviction from the rhetoric of the interpreter, and may even work to sanction a type of fraudulent product that should properly be understood as an elaborate attempt to mislead an illiterate clientele. It is not my intention to favor a mystically potent “reading” of all such inscriptions—as such an appeal to mystical processes only shuts down further inquiry—but only to emphasize the multiple possibilities, understandings, and aims that may have lain behind the production any given pseudo-script bowl. We also cannot discount the far more prosaic possibility that some bowls represent nothing more extraordinary than a form of do-it-yourself magic that sought to circumvent the costs associated with professional practitioners—the work of “laymen, who affected to write their own prescriptions.”⁵⁰

Conclusion

This article has sought to rethink the concept of “pseudo-script” in the magic bowls. This label is often applied pejoratively to different markings or inscriptional systems within the bowls that do not fall within the boundaries of established written languages and their scripts, regardless of the individual (and often highly individuated) forms and (potential) functions of these pseudo-scripts. In many cases, these invented or improvised signs and scripts seem to evince specific intentions, while some bowls clearly reflect the conscious development of highly stylized repertoires of signs. This has not led many scholars to inquire about the different ways in which these bowls might have been understood to be meaningful (or meaningless). The go-to assumption in most bowl scholarship is that the pseudo-script bowls betray illiteracy, and that they therefore represent the work of charlatans. In the foregoing, I have stressed the fact that the variety of inscriptions in the bowls need not reflect a single assumption about the praxis of inventing signs and scripts. I have also attempted to illuminate the diversity of creative practices instantiated in the bowls, a diversity which is often obscured or lost when the

individual instances of this inscriptional diversity are bracketed together under one umbrella term.

On the basis of this diversity, I have argued for several “readings” of the pseudo-script bowls, and have done so against the backdrop of the generative role that writing and script played in shaping ancient Near Eastern conceptions of the sign, the self, and one’s group or ethnic identity. Alphabets and other sign-systems were deemed loci of power in the ancient world, and I have developed a picture of the incantation bowls built on an understanding of writing as an efficacious instrumental technology, by which varieties of inscription were incorporated into the repertoires of different magical practitioners. This use of writing was—in many cases—undoubtedly opportunistic in the most cynical sense, and I have not sought to discount the role of charlatanry in the production of many pseudo-script bowls. Nor have I sought to discount the ritual situation hypothesized by Häberl, but only to introduce into the discussion the possibility that many pseudo-script bowls were produced by literate, semi-literate, and non-literate practitioners with no intent to deceive. In this regard, I have explored the uses of inscriptions as more than graphic counterparts of natural language, and have suggested that we allow for the possibility that some bowls represent different strategies for influencing the cosmos through specialized acts of writing. In particular, I have suggested that one fruitful way of understanding the pseudo-script phenomenon in the bowls may be to “read” these inscriptions as communications directed at transmundane readers. These invented signs and letter-forms also constitute an overlooked “artistic” signature. Recent scholarship on ancient magical texts has emphasized the creative and often improvisatory nature of magical materials, and many pseudo-scripts reveal not just the hand of the magical practitioner in their manual ductus, but also their conceptual style. As Alexander Nagel points out about the use of pseudo-Arabic scripts in Italian art, “Carefully conceived pseudoscripts are an excellent index of purely autograph work.”⁵¹

There is a debate in the literature about where the incantation bowls sit in regard to questions of orality and textuality, and the so-called pseudo-script bowls surely help to illuminate this question. They demonstrate the centrality of writtenness to bowl praxis,

⁵⁰ Montgomery, *Aramaic Incantation Texts*, 28; see also *ibid.*, 14 n. 9. The possession of the materials necessary for writing in late antiquity presupposes more than mere amateurism, however.

⁵¹ Nagel, “Twenty-Five Notes,” 242.

as well as the variety of forms this writtenness could take. Writing is not just a speech written down. In its material aspect, it is designed to be understood even when its creator is no longer present. It is this permanency of writing that I have argued is central to bowl praxis, which seeks constant communication with the transmundane realm. The so-called pseudo-script bowls also allow a window onto shifting practices and perceptions of writing in late antiquity, particularly

the instrumentalization of writing and inscription to counteract malign forces. This link between demonology and inscription works to impose written order on the transmundane realm and its demonic inhabitants in particular. It is also reflected in various other magical strategies in the bowls, such as invocations of the power of the word and the inscribed name, listing, and (implicit) hierarchization of transmundane powers and beings.