Mesopotamian Double-Jar Burials and Incantation Bowls

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The corpus of late antique Babylonian incantation bowls comprises a class of double-bowl sets, consisting of two bowls facing each other, fastened together with bitumen. Occasionally, such bowl sets have been found to contain inscribed egg shells or human bones. The double-bowl configuration is highly reminiscent of the double-jar burial practice attested in Mesopotamia from the second millennium to the sixth century BCE. The double-jar (or double-pot) burial involved placing the deceased between two wide-mouthed jars, occasionally joining them with bitumen at the rims. This article explores the double-bowl configuration and suggests a connection between double-jar burials and the later ritual artifacts of the Sasanian period. The double-bowl sets attached with bitumen may have originated on analogy to the ancient burial practice, intending symbolically to bury evil entities or human adversaries.

INTRODUCTION

In an article from 2011, Dan Levene identified a distinct class of Babylonian incantation bowls.[1] It consisted of bowl pairs that originally, at the time of interment, had been fastened together. Their concave surfaces faced each other and they were attached at the rims using bitumen. Levene maintained that this physical configuration was often associated with a magical text of the *qibla* type, that is, a counter-charm aiming to return curses to an adversary. In what follows I suggest that such bowl pairs could also be linked to a specific burial practice common in ancient Mesopotamia: the double-jar burial. If so, this physical configuration of incantation bowls may have been motivated by analogical reasoning of the sort often encountered in ritual practices.

This article consists of four sections: First, I will describe the features of late-antique incantation bowls that pertain to the double-bowl configuration. The second section will discuss instances of earlier, uninscribed double-bowl sets that have been uncovered at ancient Mesopotamian sites. These sets were obviously ritual objects, but their relation to the late-antique sets of incantation bowls fastened with bitumen is unclear. They may or

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1. Dan Levene, "'This is a Qybl' for Overturning Sorceries": Form, Formula—Threads in a Web of Transmission," in *Continuity and Innovation in the Magical Tradition*, ed. G. Bohak, Y. Harari, and Sh. Shaked (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 219–44. See also Dan Levene, *Jewish Aramaic Curse Texts from Late-Antique Mesopotamia: May These Curses Go Out and Flee* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 10–12.

may not have been precursors of the bowls that are the focus of this article. I believe another antecedent can be suggested, as explained in the third section. Here, I propose linking the double-bowl sets with Mesopotamian double-jar burials. These burials, consisting of two wide-mouth jars attached at the rim, and sometimes fastened with bitumen, are closely similar in form to the sets of double incantation bowls. So close, in fact, that Robert Koldewey remarked in his excavation report of Babylon: "[When found] Undisturbed, two of them [i.e., the incantation bowls] are cemented with the hollow sides together, like a small, but empty double-jar grave."[2] Lastly, in the fourth section I argue that the formal similarity observed above derived from a desire on the part of late-antique ritual practitioners symbolically to bury human adversaries or supernatural malignant entities.

1. THE DOUBLE-BOWL CONFIGURATION IN LATE-ANTIQUE INCANTATION BOWLS

All the bowls pertinent to this discussion display bitumen traces on their rims and/or on their bases. As demonstrated beautifully in Levene's article, bowl pairs were occasionally tied together with a cord that was wrapped around them and was held in place with bitumen blobs. The cords had disintegrated over time, nonetheless leaving clear signs in the bitumen. In one instance small holes were drilled near the bowls' rims and strings were threaded through them, binding the bowls together, after which bitumen was applied to the holes.[3] In other cases, one or two holes to which bitumen was applied are found in the base of the bowl, possibly serving the same function as above, that is, for threading a cord.[4] Other bowls may simply have been glued together, without the use of cord (see Figures 1 and 2).

Although Levene's discussion about this class of double-bowls focuses exclusively on Jewish Aramaic texts, there are bowls with similar bitumen marks also in Mandaic, Syriac, and, interestingly, in pseudo-script.[5] I am aware of the existence of ca. fifty bowls that show signs of having been joined together with bitumen. Some of them are easily identifiable as pairs. Their bitumen marks match when placed rim to rim, each pair is inscribed by the same hand, and displays the names of the same beneficiaries and sometimes targeted individuals. In some of these pairs the incantations are duplicates,[6] while others contain a different incantation on each bowl.[7]

Occasionally, bowls with bitumen marks contain an incantation that begins *in medias res*, for instance: ולא ליתיבון לה שינתא לעניה ("And let them not restore sleep to her eyes").[8] Such

2. "Unberührt haften zwei von ihnen mit den Hohlseiten aneinander gekittet zusammen, wie ein kleines, aber leeres Doppeltopfgrab." Robert Koldewey, *Das wieder erstehende Babylon, die bisherigen Ergebnisse der Deutschen Ausgrabungen* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1913), 242. English translation: *The Excavations at Babylon* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1914), 248 (where the word "empty" is missing). Quoted also in Victor P. Hamilton, "Syriac Incantation Bowls" (PhD Diss., Brandeis University, 1971), 10.

3. James N. Ford and Dan Levene, "'For Aḥata-De-'Abuh Daughter of Imma.' Two Aramaic Incantation Bowls in the Vorderasiatisches Museum, Berlin (VA 2414 and VA 2426)," *JSS* 57 (2012): 53–67.

4. E.g., University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology collection, bowls B8824, B8836 (from Nippur, unpublished). For a bowl with two holes in its base, see Edward M. Cook, "An Aramaic Incantation Bowl from Khafaje," *BASOR* 285 (1992): 79–81, although I do not know if there are any bitumen traces on it.

5. E.g., Mandaic: VA.2435; Syriac: VA.Bab.2835; Pseudo-script: VA.2420 and VA.2421 (Bhayro et al., *Aramaic Magic Bowls*, 51–53; 161–62; 81–82).

6. E.g., VA.2496 and VA.2575 (Levene, *Jewish Aramaic Curse Texts*, 62–73).

7. E.g., VA.2484 and VA.2509 (Levene, *Jewish Aramaic Curse Texts*, 20–34).

8. Julian Oberman, "Two Magic Bowls: New Incantation Texts from Mesopotamia," *American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* 57 (1940): 1–31, bowl YBC 2393, l. 1. It is worth citing here Oberman's comment: "The mysterious *they* and *her*, also the beginning with *and*, are so striking that, in an ordinary inscription, we would feel inclined to suspect the scribe to have omitted, for whatever reasons, the actual beginning of the text he was copying. As it is, we will have to assume this abrupt beginning to have been in the established manner of imprecatory inscriptions" (p. 20).

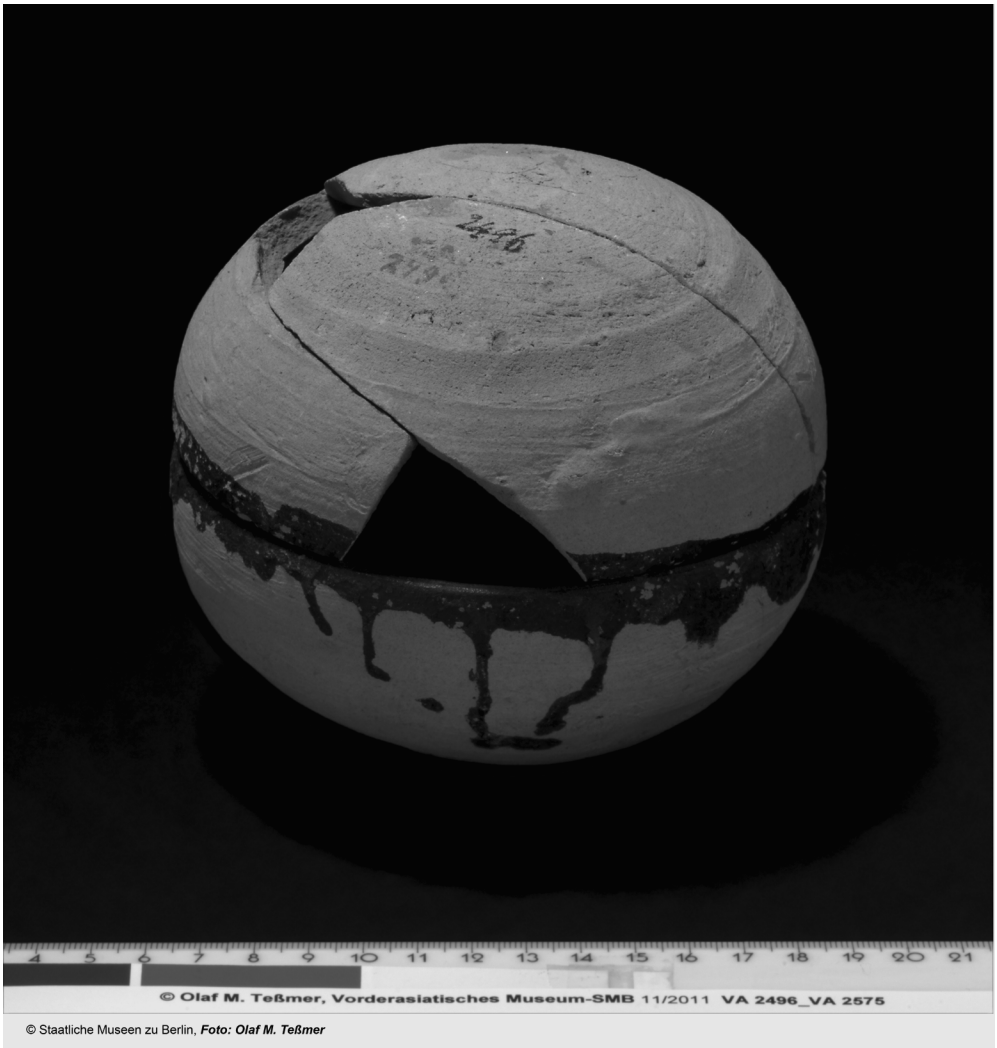

Fig. 1. Pair of late-antique incantation bowls originally attached with bitumen, VA.2496 and VA.2575. After Levene, *Jewish Aramaic Curse Texts from Late-Antique Mesopotamia*, p. 73.

abrupt incipits indicate that the text was continued from another bowl that has not yet been identified or published. Lastly, there are bowls for which the only indication that they had once been part of a pair lies in the bitumen residue they display around the rim or base. These bowls are harder to identify, because one needs to look specifically for black marks on the clay surface and recognize them as traces of bitumen. Consequently, there are surely more than fifty bowls that originally presented this physical configuration, that is, being interred as a pair, facing each other. However, scholars either did not note the bitumen traces or did not consider these worthy of attention and thus omitted to mention them in the bowl editions.[9]

9. For example, Oberman, "Two Magic Bowls." The bitumen marks are visible in the photograph he published.

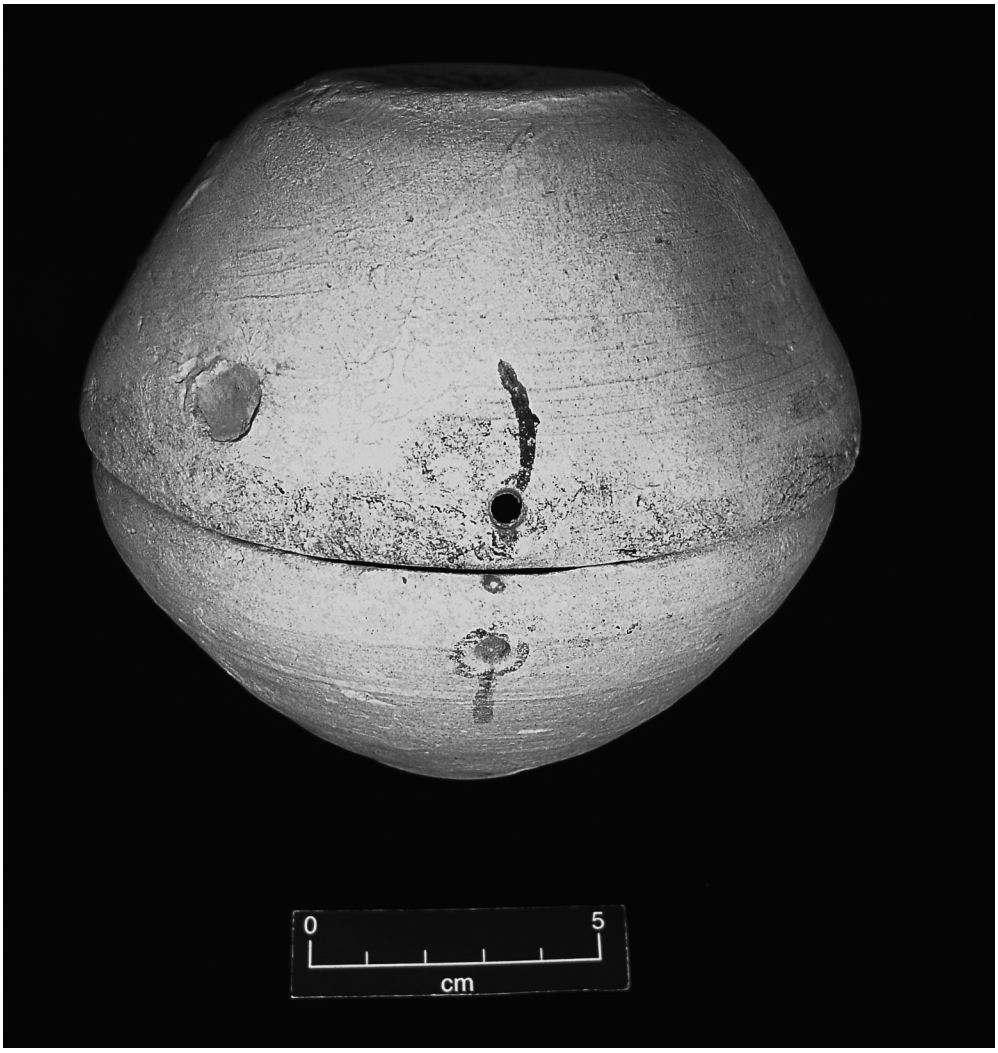

Fig. 2. Pair of late-antique incantation bowls displaying holes for fastening with string and bitumen marks, VA.2414 and VA.2426. After Ford and Levene, "'For Aḥata-De-'Abuh Daughter of Imma'," p. 67.

The following remarks concerning the textual contents of double-bowls must therefore be treated with caution, since they do not refer to a complete corpus of these ritual objects.

Levene notes the existence of bowls that comply with the *qibla* form but whose texts are not aggressive or seek to return curses to adversaries.[10] Indeed, there are quite a few such bowls. Their texts are apotropaic, exorcistic, and curative, and resemble the typical incantation bowls that have been published thus far. For example, one of the Nippur bowls published by James Montgomery seeks to drive out a murderous spirit and the angel of death from the household of a man named Ardoy,[11] and a bowl from the Vorderasiatisches Museum collection demands

10. Levene, *Jewish Aramaic Curse Texts*, 12.

11. James A. Montgomery, *Aramaic Incantation Texts from Nippur* (Philadelphia: The University Museum, 1913), 127–32, Bowl 3. Montgomery did not mention the bitumen marks, which are noted, however, on the Penn Museum website.

that evil entities depart from the household of a man named Shaboy.[12] It is important to note the existence of such texts in light of the following suggestion regarding the double-bowl form.

2. THE DOUBLE-BOWL CONFIGURATION: ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIAN EXAMPLES

It is interesting to note that sets consisting of one bowl inverted over the other have also been found in excavations of ancient Mesopotamian sites. They bear no cuneiform inscriptions nor do they display traces of bitumen or any other adhesive material. In a way, they bring to mind one of the Aramaic incantation bowls uncovered at Choche, which lay inverted over another, uninscribed bowl, with a third smaller bowl enclosed between them.[13] In an excavation report regarding an Old Babylonian house in Nippur, the authors note that "Sets consisting of two crude pottery bowls were found apparently purposely placed against the walls, with one bowl inverted over the other. . . . The bowls seemed to be associated with doorways."[14] This report was mentioned by Michael Morony in his pivotal article on incantation bowls, yet he did not comment on the possible relation between these early specimens and the late-antique type.[15]

A later excavation report of the Chicago expedition to Nippur contains the following note regarding these artifacts:[16]

> [W]e found several sets of bowls, one inverted over another, against the walls and especially near the doorways. In two of the bowl sets we found animal bones . . . We are convinced that these bowl sets were deposited either as foundation offerings or to ward off illness or other misfortunes. . . . we have recovered other examples, usually at doorways or near hearths, and often buried below the floors, in private houses of every period we have excavated from Early Dynastic through Achaemenid. We expect now to find such deposits in houses of all periods, and think that the burying of bowls for apotropaic purposes was a general practice throughout Mesopotamia. Aramaic incantation bowls of Sasanian and Early Islamic times were merely an elaborated version of the practice.

From these notes as well as other archaeological reports (e.g., Tell Brak, see below), it seems quite likely that such bowls, inverted or in pairs facing each other, were conceived as ritual objects. Yet what may be surmised about their purpose and about the way they were thought to function? One possibility is that the bowls contained a perishable offering of sorts, like food. Thus, when found inverted, they could have served as a cover above this offering, and when found in pairs, one over the other, they might have served as a lidded container.

12. VA.2485 (Bhayro et al., *Aramaic Magic Bowls*, 108). This bowl seems to begin *in medias res* (וכל מידעם ביש דיזוערן ויזוחו ויפירחון), and it bears a clear connection to bowl K3449, published by Izak Jerusalmi and re-edited by Markham J. Geller, "Four Aramaic Incantation Bowls," in *The Bible World: Essays in Honor of Cyrus H. Gordon*, ed. G. Rendsburg et al. (New York: Ktav Publishing House and the Institute of Hebrew Culture and Education of New York University, 1980), 47–60 (60). Bowl K3449 also begins with the conjunction "and," suggesting that it too was part of a double-bowl set. Both bowls were written by the same hand for the same beneficiaries, but I am not sure if they were actually one pair or were perhaps paired with two different bowls, thus constituting two sets.

13. Fulvio Franco, "Five Aramaic Incantation Bowls from Tell Baruda (Choche)," *Mesopotamia* 13–14 (1978/79): 233–49 (233, regarding C_{10}-116).

14. McGuire Gibson et al., *Excavations at Nippur: Twelfth Season* (Chicago: The Oriental Institute, 1978 [reprinted 1992]), 56.

15. Michael G. Morony, "Magic and Society in Late Sassanian Iraq," in *Prayer, Magic and the Stars in the Ancient and Late Antique World*, ed. S. Noegel, C. B. F. Walker, and B. M. Wheeler (University Park: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 2003), 83–107 (95 n. 19).

16. McGuire Gibson, James A. Armstrong, and Augusta McMahon, "The City Walls of Nippur and an Islamic Site Beyond: Oriental Institute Excavations, 17th Season, 1987," *Iraq* 60 (1998): 11–44 (24–26). Also quoted in Rebecca Lesses, "Ex(e)orcising Power: Women as Sorceresses, Exorcists, and Demonesses in Babylonian Jewish Society of Late Antiquity," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 69 (2001): 343–75 (345 n. 2).

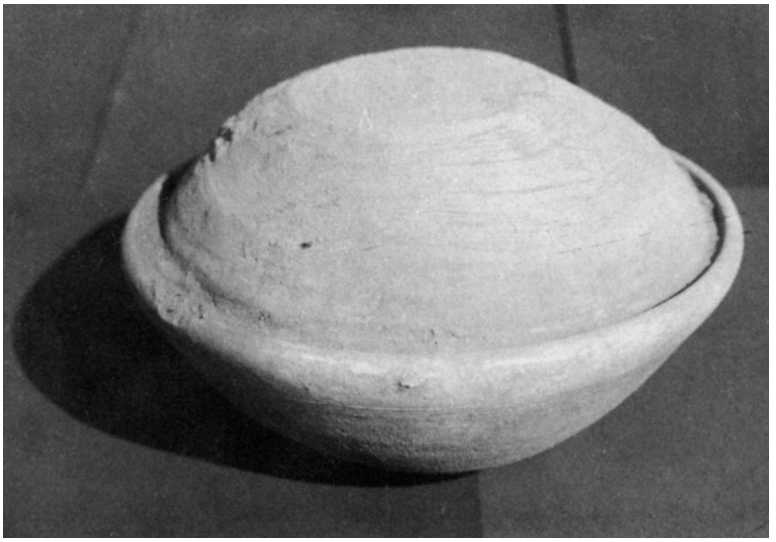

Fig. 3. Covered bowl of food. After Oates and Oates, "Excavations at Tell Brak 1990–91," Plate XXXI.d.

The excavation report of Tell Brak mentions the discovery of inverted bowls as well as "two covered bowls of food," although it is unclear if actual food remains were discovered between the vessels.[17] In the Nippur report cited above, the excavators mention animal bones retrieved from two of the bowl pairs, and it is possible these could have been food remains (see Figure 3).

Another possibility is that these early bowls were not meant to function as containers for food offerings but, in a similar way to that suggested for the late-antique specimens, as apotropaic devices. After all, they appear in contexts and layout similar to those of their late-antique counterparts. Moreover, both possibilities might have been true. Whatever the case, there is no way to provide one certain explanation for this phenomenon, due to the lack of textual sources. Furthermore, the relative simplicity of the ritual form, i.e., an inverted clay vessel or two such vessels facing each other, means that any later parallel could be purely coincidental. Could there be a more substantial formal parallel to the late-antique double-bowls fastened with bitumen? This is what will be argued below.

3. DOUBLE-JAR BURIALS AND DOUBLE-BOWLS: A SIMILARITY IN FORM

On the fortunate occasions when Babylonian incantation bowls are uncovered in controlled excavations they are usually found upside down (a fact that generated the hypotheses regarding their function as "demon traps"), or in the double-bowl configuration, which is the focus of this article.[18] The latter form is highly reminiscent of Mesopotamian double-jar burials. As the name implies, these burials consisted of two large, wide-mouthed jars (equally termed "pots"), whose rims faced each other, the deceased being laid to rest in the space between them.

17. David Oates and Joan Oates, "Excavations at Tell Brak 1990-91," *Iraq* 53 (1991): 127–45 (135).
18. For a brief history of research, see Montgomery, *Aramaic Incantation Texts*, 40–42.

At times, the rims were fastened together with bitumen. A variant of this burial form consisted of a jar and a large bowl, similarly facing each other.[19] It appears that the two jars represent the earlier grave type of the two, dated from the Late Kassite period until the early post-Kassite period. The jar topped with a bowl seems to be a later variant, dated approximately from the beginning of the first millennium to the sixth century BCE.[20] Geographically, they have been uncovered primarily throughout Mesopotamia (e.g., Babylon, Nippur, Isin, Uruk, Ur) but are also attested in locations like Hazor (Israel) (no bitumen noted)[21] and Tell Fecheriye (northern Syria) (see Figures 4 and 5).[22]

Also similar to the incantation bowl pairs is a burial form reserved for newborns, in which the deceased was interred between two bowls of ca. 35 cm in diameter, resting one on top of the other. These burials are encountered in places like Uruk and Nippur and are dated to the nineteenth-eighteenth centuries BCE.[23] As opposed to the double-jar burial, the double-bowl burial did not involve the use of bitumen, and was obviously not as frequent as adult burials, so it may be less relevant to the following hypothesis.

A later burial practice consisted of placing an upturned clay sarcophagus *over* the deceased, rather than laying the latter *inside* the sarcophagus.[24] This practice continues into the Sasanian period. It is not impossible that here, too—as will be argued below—the burial type influenced the practice of placing incantation bowls upside down, with the intention of burying the evil entities they targeted. However, the similarity with the incantation bowl practice is less obvious than in the case of the double-jar burials.

As already mentioned, the resemblance of the incantation bowl pairs to the double-jar burials was actually noted in the early twentieth century by the German archaeologist Robert Koldewey. However, his observation was not picked up by later scholars, and the possible ritual implications of this similarity remained unexplored. Is it possible that the double-bowl configuration uncovered in late-antique Mesopotamia had any connection to the double-jar burial type dating back at least nine centuries earlier? And if so, what was the meaning of this connection?

4. BOWLS AND BURIALS: AN ANALOGY?

Koldewey's remark cited in the introduction compared the bowl pairs to an *empty* grave, implying that the ones he encountered *in situ* did not contain anything. However, in the very next sentence he mentioned the discovery of eggs inscribed in Aramaic, which suggests that he came across them in the same context as the bowl pairs, or possibly enclosed between such bowls.[25] Some bowls uncovered in controlled excavations contained inscribed egg-shells, for

19. For the double-jar burial form (*Doppeltopfgrab*), see Eva Strommenger, "Grabformen in Babylon," in *Baghdader Mitteilungen* 3 (1964): 157–73 (illus. 2, nos. 4 and 5); eadem, s.v. "Grab," in *Reallexikon der Assyriologie*, vol. 3 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1957-1971), 583–84; Heather Baker, "Neo-Babylonian Burials Revisited," in *The Archaeology of Death in the Ancient Near East*, ed. S. Campbell (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 1995), 209–20 (esp. 210–13), mentioning the distinction between the two types of double-jar burial.

20. Baker, "Neo-Babylonian Burials Revisited," 211–13. Note that according to Strommenger ("Grab," 583), double-jar burials are found already in the Ur III period.

21. Jeffrey Zorn, "More on Mesopotamian Burial Practices in Ancient Israel," *Israel Exploration Journal* 47 (1997): 214–19.

22. Dominik Bonatz et al., "Bericht über die erste und zweite Grabungskampagne in Tell Feḫerīye 2006 und 2007," *Mitteilungen der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft zu Berlin* 140 (2008): 89–136 (113).

23. R. M. Boehmer, F. Pedde, and B. Salje, *Uruk: Die Gräber* (Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 1995), 16 and pls. 14, 15.

24. Strommenger, "Grab," *Sarkophasgrab*, 584–85; Baker, "Neo-Babylonian Burials Revisited," 213–15.

25. Koldewey, *Das wieder erstehende Babylon*, 242.

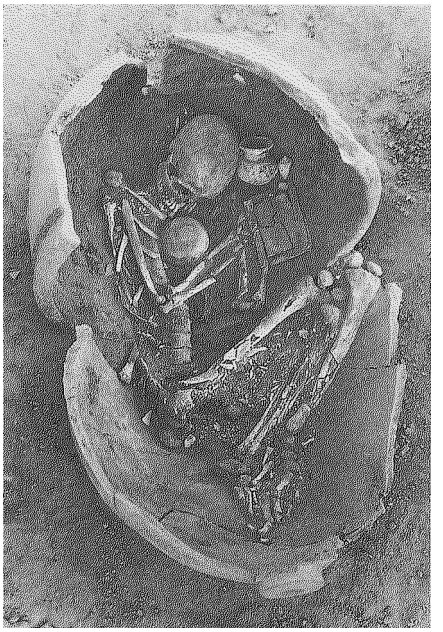

Fig. 4. Double-jar burial from Uruk. After Boehmer, Pedde, and Salje, *Uruk: Die Gräber*, Pl. 158, grave 423.

Fig. 5. Double-jar burial from Isin. After Hrouda et al., *Isin–Išān Bahrīyāt I, Die Ergebnisse der Ausgrabungen 1973–1974* (Munich: Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-Historische Klasse Abhandlungen, Neue Folge, Heft 79, 1977), Pl. 5, no. 2.

example at Tell Omar in Seleucia,[26] Umm Kheshm,[27] and Nippur.[28] An eggshell covered with pseudo-script is also found in the Vorderasiatisches Museum collection, its provenance listed as "Amran," indicating that it derives from the German excavations in the city of Babylon.[29] Although the museum logs do not specify this, it is probable that the delicate shell was uncovered in some sort of container that permitted its preservation. Based on the similarity of the "handwriting," I would suggest that it was related to bowl VA.Bab.2764, also uncovered in Amran, inscribed in pseudo-script, and displaying some traces of bitumen.

Yet more important than the attestation of egg shells enclosed in bowl pairs is the presence of bones. Hermann Hilprecht's description of incantation bowls uncovered in Nippur contains the following note: "The upper strata and the slopes of the mounds yielded . . . about thirty Hebrew and Mandean bowls, among them two containing an inscribed skull in pieces. . . ."[30] Even though Hilprecht did not mention if the two bowls had been attached with bitumen or in some other way, the fact that they contained bones is significant. It suggests that occasionally bowl pairs resembled a small-scale double-jar grave not only in *form* but also in *contents*.

Similarly, one of the skulls bearing magical inscriptions that was published by Dan Levene is said to have originally been placed between two clay bowls, just like the bowl pairs described above, although uninscribed.[31] These two, however, had not been glued together with bitumen, and if they were initially bound together with a piece of cord, no evidence for it survives. The inscription on this skull, requesting health and progeny for a woman and a man, appears to be of the type commonly found on the incantation bowls.

What may be concluded from the information gathered above? The configuration of incantation bowl pairs attached at the rim with bitumen is very similar in form to the double-jar burials of earlier periods. I suggest that the formal similarity is not coincidental but derives from an analogy conceived by magical practitioners in late-antique Mesopotamia. In this analogical reasoning the double-bowls represented a miniature double-jar grave, enclosing not a human body but a variety of negative entities, be they demons, curses, or human adversaries. The practitioners who first conceived this magical technique wished to bury these entities, literally or figuratively. It is further possible that the skull fragments and the eggs occasionally enclosed in these bowls may have stood as representations of a living body. Parallels from different cultural milieus may be found in Egyptian and Graeco-Roman rituals for burying effigies of human enemies or malevolent supernatural entities.[32]

26. Leroy Waterman, *Preliminary Report upon the Excavations at Tel Umar, Iraq* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1931), 61–62. One of the bowls and the inscribed eggshell are preserved today in the Kelsey Museum in Ann Arbor, Michigan (nos. 33756 and 1905); see https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/bitstream/handle/2027.42/108169/index-magic.hmtl?sequence=1&isAllowed=y and http://www.kornbluthphoto.com/images/KelseyEggShell.jpg (retrieved 18 April 2018).

27. Jeremy Black, "Excavations in Iraq 1985-86," *Iraq* 49 (1987): 231–51 (251).

28. Herman V. Hilprecht, ed., *Explorations in Bible Lands during the 19th Century* (Philadelphia: A. J. Holman and Company, 1903), 448. It is not entirely clear from Hilprecht's phrasing if the eggshell had been uncovered beneath a single incantation bowl or enclosed in one of the bitumened double-bowl sets he mentioned above.

29. VA.Bab.2840.

30. Hilprecht, *Explorations*, 440.

31. Dan Levene, "Calvariae Magicae: The Berlin, Philadelphia and Moussaieff Skulls," *Orientalia* 75 (2006): 359–79 (Skull 5, 372–76). In this article Levene edits three other inscribed skulls, one from the University of Pennsylvania Museum (first published by James Montgomery) and two others from the Vorderasiatisches Museum. According to the museum logs, the latter were purchased from dealers in Baghdad, so no information on their find spots is available. The former, however, might have been uncovered in the Hilprecht excavations mentioned above (see n. 28).

32. See Christopher A. Faraone, "Binding and Burying the Forces of Evil: The Defensive Use of 'Voodoo Dolls' in Ancient Greece," *Classical Antiquity* 10 (1991): 165–205, 207–20, including a discussion of ancient Near Eastern examples.

A possible objection that may be adduced against this hypothesis concerns the chronological gap between the use of double-jar burials and the double-bowls inscribed with incantations. While both types of objects are attested in the same geographical location, e.g., Nippur, they derive from different periods. Nevertheless, I believe it is highly probable that inhabitants of mounds came across earlier constructions and graves when digging during their domestic and agricultural activities. Such chance encounters with funeral remains are not only common sense, but even alluded to in literary sources. For example, an omen from the series *Šumma Ālu* refers to a man who digs a well: "If he discovers a skull, he will see wealth."[33]

Hence, the chronological gap between double-jar burials and incantation bowls could have been bridged by the casual acquaintance of one (or more) late-antique magical practitioner(s) with earlier graves. This practitioner or school of magicians then devised the ritual praxis of coupling incantation bowls to form a symbolic grave, at times populated with bones or inscribed eggs.

The notion of creating an analogy between human burials and the burial of malevolent forces may have already been known to late-antique magical practitioners. Parallels for this magical technique are found in ancient Mesopotamian rituals for driving away evil. Some of these texts recommend personifying the unwelcome entity in the form of a clay figurine, and then providing it with a human burial, for instance in a jar:[34]

> If a ghost afflicts a person (and) continually pursues him, or an *alû*-de[mon, or a *gallû*-demon], or a *mukil rēš lemutti*-demon afflicts him or anything evil continual[ly] afflicts him . . .
> You make a figurine of whatever evil thing (it is) . . .
> You put it (the figurine) in a jar and then you make it swear . . . and then you close its (the pot's) mouth [. . .] You bury it (the pot) in an abandoned waste.

The possible connection between such figurines and the late-antique incantation bowls was already mentioned by Erica Hunter, who suggested that the figurines may be predecessors of the drawings found in the bowls.[35] However, the option that ritual burying of evil entities may have been reflected in the burial of incantation bowls, and more specifically, those double-bowls resembling double-jar graves, has until now remained unexplored.

5. CONCLUSION

In this article I propose a connection between late-antique pairs of incantation bowls attached with bitumen and the double-jar burial form. This suggestion does not contradict the resemblance noted in McGuire Gibson's report between late-antique, inscribed bowl sets and the uninscribed ones uncovered in ancient Mesopotamian sites. We simply do not know the meaning of the earlier double-bowl configuration. It may have served for ritual food offerings, but also as a means of burying or trapping evil entities. In the latter case, it would indeed be a conceptual predecessor of the late-antique incantation bowls.

The late-antique double-bowl configuration is not restricted to aggressive or curse-related texts, and many bowls with bitumen marks are largely apotropaic or curative. If my hypothesis is correct and the double-bowl form was conceived as an analogy to the double-jar burial,

33. Sally M. Freedman, *If a City Is Set on a Height: The Akkadian Omen Series Šumma Ālu ina Mēlê Šakin* (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Museum, 1998), 255, Tablet 17:20.

34. JoAnn Scurlock, *Magico-medical Means of Treating Ghost-induced Illnesses in Ancient Mesopotamia* (Leiden: Brill-Styx, 2006), 50–51; 534–35 (ll. 1–2, 4, 36–38).

35. Erica C. D. Hunter, "Incantation Bowls: A Mesopotamian Phenomenon?" *Orientalia* 65 (1996): 220–33 (226–27).

it would seem that the magical practitioners sought to entomb evil entities in general, both supernatural and earthly. Thus, they may have intended to bury the "evil *dev* and the evil satan"[36] in addition to human adversaries like Ona daughter of Gayat or Mar Zutra son of Ukmay.[37]

I do not claim that all the producers of the double-bowls were conscious of the analogy relating them to burials. They may or may not have been, and there is no way of knowing how many understood what originally lay behind these ritual artifacts. Information on the double-bowls (and on incantation bowls in general) derives exclusively from the objects themselves. It is thus difficult to reconstruct how they were conceived by those who employed them. Nevertheless, it is possible to attempt a reconstruction of the initial reasoning that led to their production.

Several attempts have been made to unravel the origin of the incantation bowls and the rationale underlying their use.[38] Some have tried to relate their late-antique texts to ancient Near Eastern antecedents. A few remarkable connections have been established, yet for the most part scholars do not trace a direct derivation between the two.[39] Nevertheless, if one focuses on *form* rather than textual content, an interesting connection may be glimpsed.

36. Montgomery, *Aramaic Incantation Texts*, Bowl 3, l. 2: דיוא בישא וסטנא בישא.

37. YBC 2393 (Levene, *Jewish Aramaic Curse Texts*, 133); CAMIB 039A, 040A, 041A (Levene, *Jewish Aramaic Curse Texts*, 117–22).

38. Most recently, David Frankfurter, "Scorpion/Demon: On the Origin of the Mesopotamian Apotropaic Bowl," *JNES* 74 (2015): 9–18.

39. For a summary, discussion, and further references, see Markham J. Geller, "Tablets and Magic Bowls," in *Officina Magica: Essays on the Practice of Magic in Antiquity*, ed. Sh. Shaked (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 53–72.