

An Incantation Bowl and Roman Bath House

Culture, Religion, and Daily Life in the Ancient World

The Kelsey Experience Jackier Prize Essay

Max Schwein

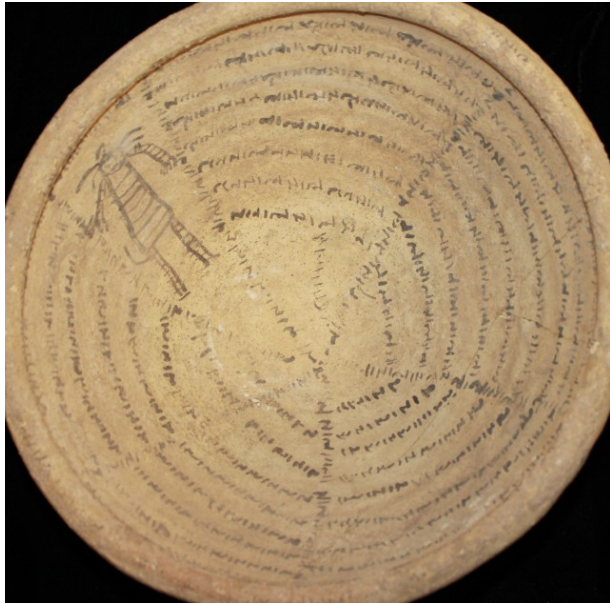
Student ID: 67827579

AAPTIS 277: The Land of Israel/Palestine Through the Ages

Section 17

GSI: Rebecca Cassidy

4/12/2014



In this essay, we will be examining two fascinating artifacts (or sets of artifacts) from the ancient world. When examined together, these artifacts, although very different, can shed light on the daily life, culture, and religion of people who inhabited the ancient world. Mainly, they can show how vast the Roman empire was and how much influence they had even beyond Europe. The Roman influence extended to the eastern Mediterranean region in modern day countries such as Israel/Palestine, Syria, and Iraq. The Romans had military and cultural influence in this region that lasted long after they were gone. Further, we can learn about the religion and daily life that surrounded those who used the items and which parts of Roman culture were absorbed into other societies in the ancient world. But before comparing the items and what they can reveal about the inhabitants of the ancient world, we will first examine each in great detail.

The first item we are examining is a Jewish Aramaic incantation bowl from the region of Mesopotamia, the area between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in modern day Iraq, that can be dated to around the 5th century C.E. During this time in the ancient world, incantation bowls like this commonly served religious objectives in culture. These bowls were made with a specific purpose for its user, and as we will see this bowl is no exception.

Physically, the particular bowl we are examining is relatively simple in form and was made on one axis, indicating that it was made from spinning clay on a potter's wheel. It also has multiple ridge lines, which would come from the bowl being spun in the potter's hands. As it was relatively easy and inexpensive, this was a common way for ancient

civilizations to make ceramic objects. The inscription on the bowl consists of both text and images. The writing is on both the interior and exterior of the bowl and there are figures drawn on both the inside and outside as well.

According to Joseph Nahveh, bowls like this one were found in the area of ancient Mesopotamia and modern day Iran, dating from the 4th to 6th or 7th centuries C.E. Nahveh goes on to say that these bowls were "inscribed with ink, usually on the concave side in spiral concentric circles," but also that exceptions to this general pattern were common (Nahveh 13). This explains the similar circular pattern but not exactly "spiral concentric" pattern of this particular bowl. The writing on this specific bowl was arranged in circular rings on the interior and exterior of the bowl. Additionally, there is vertical text emerging from a meeting point in the bottom center of the interior and continuing out to the exterior of the bowl. As you can see, there was not just one way to make an incantation bowl, reflecting both the personal nature and uniqueness of these objects. Ancient people made incantation bowls according to their needs and what they wanted the bowl to achieve.

As previously mentioned, incantation bowls, also referred to as "demon bowl[s] or devil trap bowl[s]" served different purposes for different people ("Incantation Bowls") . For instance, some bowls were placed upside down in ancient households in an attempt to catch spiritual demons that tried to enter. Others were placed in cemeteries to put the bowls closer to the underworld and therefore increase their effectiveness in catching demons coming to earth. Once caught by the bowl, the demons or evil spirits would be

trapped, rendering them incapable of harming their victims. Lastly, incantation bowls could be used to curse a specific enemy or victim. This could be done by placing the bowl near the victim's home in an attempt to make the curse effective (Nahveh 15-16). In any case, the writing and pictures on the bowls served a specific "magic" and religious purpose to either protect or curse certain individuals.

More specifically, the purpose and origin of this particular bowl can be traced based on the writing and pictures inscribed on it. A magic bowl dating to the 5th century C.E. was found in a Jewish diaspora settlement in Babylonia, an ancient civilization in Mesopotamia, showing Satrapes, the ancient Canaanite god of fertility and healing. Canaan refers to another ancient civilization that was active in the region around modern day Israel/Palestine during the Bronze Age. On the aforementioned bowl, Satrapes was depicted wearing armor, like most gods, but could be specifically identified because of the presence of a rod of Asclepius and a scorpion figure ("Satrapes"). This description is strikingly similar to the specific bowl we are examining. The figure on the inside is also wearing armor and is depicted as very powerful and god like, with his eyes being x's and not circles. Additionally, on the outside of the bowl, there is a scorpion like figure present. While the god on our bowl may or may not be Satrapes, the similarities with features of our bowl are undeniable. Because of the connection and similarity with this other bowl that was found in the Jewish diaspora settlement of Nippur in Babylonia, we can conclude that the text is written in Jewish Aramaic rather than other forms of Aramaic. In Nippur, these magic bowls were used to protect against demons and were found buried in almost every house that was

excavated there ("Incantation Bowls"). The text is likely a curse against demons or a magic spell to aid the god depicted on the bowl in protecting the residents of the household. In this society and many others from its time, this "magic" aspect of religion was extremely common.

The incantation bowl and the way it was used can reveal a lot about the ancient society that made it. Through it, we can learn about religion, culture, and daily life; further, after seeing our second object, we can see how the Romans impacted societies all over the ancient world. Before going into detail about that, let's see our second item.

The second item that we are examining is a collection of artifacts from an ancient Roman bath house. This collection of artifacts dates to around the 1st and 2nd centuries CE, at the height of the Roman expansion in Europe, the Middle East, and northern Africa. These baths were used throughout the Roman Period and became an integral part of Roman daily life. Elements of these baths and Greco-Roman culture can be seen in many places throughout the eastern Mediterranean region and even in the incantation bowl that was just discussed.

The collection of Roman bath house artifacts includes structural elements such as pillars as well as mosaics and other decorative pieces. In these items, we can see many elements of Greco-Roman architecture, such as elaborate pillars and symmetry. Typical Greco-Roman decorations seen here include images of various sea creatures and motifs of gods. These bath houses were built in the same way as other Roman

buildings, with marble or concrete forming the main structural material. After the structure was complete, the artists came in and finished it off by creating mosaics, sculptures, and paintings for decoration. Bath houses became some of the most elaborate buildings in the Roman world along with coliseums and theatres.

Specifically, the art in these artifacts encompasses a variety of creatures and gods. Wall paintings including sea lions and dolphins are found in these artifacts as well as in many other bath houses from the Roman period. Aquatic motifs were common in bath houses especially, and this makes sense because much of the bath house activities were centered around water. Further, the freedom and ease with which these figures were painted indicates that these may have been stock images that painters could rifle off quickly (Kelsey). This is plausible in the context of when these artifacts were made (1st-2nd centuries CE) since it was a time where bath houses were on the rise as a center of Roman society and daily life. In other mosaic and mural fragments, we can see images of swans, which were associated with the gods Apollo and Venus (Kelsey). This is an example of how the majority of the decorations in bath houses (and most other Roman buildings for that matter) had some sort of association with a god, ultimately showing how gods came into daily life even in places of leisure and recreation.

Structurally, Roman baths were a testament to the engineering capabilities of the ancient Romans. Although all baths were unique, they were generally arranged in a symmetrical fashion with similar functioning rooms, including the apodyterium (dressing room), palaestra (outdoor gymnasium), frigidarium (cold room), tepidarium (warm

room), calidarium (hot room), and laconium (dry room) (Connolly 238). Hot rooms were heated by the hypocaust system, regardless of whether they used steam or dry heat. In the hypocaust system, pillars raised the floor underneath and allowed the hot air to rise through it. The heat was applied either via hot springs or with a furnace. If hot springs were not available nearby, water had to be brought to the bath house and heated artificially since warm water was an integral part of the Roman bathing process. This water was imported by a system of arches and channels known as Roman aqueducts that provided a way of taking water from a distance and distributing it in cities. Once arrived, the water was heated by a furnace for use in the hot room. In order to prevent the floor from being too hot to walk on, it had to be thick. To accomplish this, it was covered by a layer of brick, followed by concrete or marble, and finally covered by a decorative mosaic. To adjust the air temperature, bathers could open and close pipes in the ceiling to let the air escape or keep it in (Kelsey). As you can see, there is a very high level of engineering sophistication here which was unparalleled in the ancient world.

As previously mentioned, all Roman bath houses had a general layout and similar collection of rooms, but all bath houses were unique. Likewise, bathers took many different approaches and journeys through different rooms of the bath house according to personal preference. A bather would typically start out in the apodyterium, which is the equivalent to a locker room in today's society. However, instead of locking their belongings, bathers paid a servant or slave to watch over them until they were done bathing. The apodyterium was also where some bathers would oil themselves with a

perfumed oil. From the apodyterium, a bather could take any route he wanted, but a typical path could be to proceed to the outdoor gymnasium, or palaestra, where the bather could participate in a variety of ball games and exercises (Connolly 247). After exercising, the bather would typically advance through the different temperature rooms.

A typical progression through the temperature rooms would be to start out in the tepidarium, or warm room. This room had no water or steam and served as a sort of warm-up and transition to the calidarium, or hot room. The calidarium contained steam heat as well as hot water pools for the bathers to use. This is also the room where the bather would scrape off the previously applied oil, or choose to have a slave do it for him. Some bath houses also had a laconium, or dry heat room. This was similar to the calidarium in temperature but instead of being moist, it contained dry heat that was supplied with a furnace. The laconium could be visited instead of the calidarium or in addition to it. From the calidarium or laconium, the bather would typically go back through the tepidarium or straight to the cold room, or frigidarium. In there, he would take a plunge into a pool of cold water, completing his journey through the bath house. (Connolly 247). Although there are variations to this path depending on personal preference and the specific bath house layout, most Roman bathers followed some sort of this general pattern through the building.

By the time these bath house artifacts were in use (1st-2nd centuries CE), bath houses were an integral part of urban Roman daily life. According to the Roman census, by the early 5th century there were 856 small baths in the area around Rome and 11 large,

imperial baths that were called *thermae*. In the census of 33 BC, however, there were only 170 small baths and no *thermae* (Connolly 238). This means that the idea of the bath house was starting to gain traction in the 1st and 2nd centuries CE, a period when our artifacts and many other bath houses were built.

As they became more popular in the Roman world, bath houses became a type of community center, where all classes gathered and bathed together. Since they were inexpensive to visit, even slaves could afford to bathe periodically. Public bath houses even became a site of business meetings and other social gatherings; they housed shops, restaurants, snack bars, and even libraries, among many other various services. In Roman society, people went to work in the morning, then to the bath houses in the afternoon, and finally home to dinner in the evening (Kelsey). The fact that a large portion of the day was set aside just for people to go to the bath houses shows how important they were to leisure in Roman society and how much of an impact they had on people's daily lives.

Further, since the Romans knew that bath houses were expensive to build and operate, private bath houses could be built and used as status symbols by affluent Romans (Kelsey). This way, these wealthy citizens could enjoy bathing without having to go to the public bath house and could design them according to how they preferred to bathe and what styles of decorations they enjoyed. They could staff them with their own slaves if they wanted, and they could either keep them to themselves or charge others

for the privilege of using their private facility. Either way, private bath houses were a symbol of wealth and status in Roman society.

Public bath houses also varied in their segregation (or lack thereof) of men and women. Some bath house remains indicate that there was a separate wing for male and female bathers and other remains suggest that men and women used the same facilities just at different times of the day. A few scholars even think that men and women bathed together (Clarke 105). Either way, we can see that in Roman society, women, although not treated as equally as men, were treated with some amount of respect in public. This is important because it shows how the Romans were like our modern society in many senses.

As previously noted, the two artifacts, the incantation bowl and the bath house pieces, come from not only different regions in the ancient world but different eras as well. The incantation bowl was a private object while the Roman baths were more often than not a public affair. The objects differ in their basic functions as well; the incantation bowl was for religious purposes and the Roman baths were used for leisure and recreation. With all of these differences, it is hard to believe that these two ancient artifacts do have certain similar characteristics and connections between them. However, these two objects are still inherently connected because of the civilizations and their cultures that made them.

To understand how the items are connected, we need to look at the broader context of ancient civilization when the items were made and used. When the artifacts from the Roman bath houses were in use, the Roman empire was flourishing and was at its height territorially. They had control of the entire Mediterranean region, including most of Europe, Northern Africa, the eastern shores of the Mediterranean (modern day Israel/Palestine and Syria) and even further into the Middle East by modern day Iraq. They had the strongest, best trained, and most efficient army ever to exist in the ancient world. Though relatively small with around 300,000 to 350,000 soldiers, they divided into legions of 5,000 to 6,500 soldiers and could take down armies six to eight times their size. To govern the vast amounts of territory they conquered, the Romans operated with a provincial system of governors rather than attempt to rule with one emperor based in Rome. Because the Romans brought stability and Roman law to many of the regions they had conquered, there was a period of relative peace throughout their empire (Eliav, "Early Romans").

However, by the time the incantation bowl was made, the Western Roman Empire had fallen and the region where they were made, Mesopotamia, was no longer under the control of the Romans but rather the Persians, an ancient Middle Eastern ethnic group. Also, other parts of the eastern Mediterranean region were now ruled by the Byzantine empire, often called the Eastern Roman Empire. The Byzantines survived the fall of the Western Roman Empire and were in a way a continuation of it; it is very important to remember that at their core, the Byzantines were still Romans. Though there was a change in the governing empire of much of the Middle East and eastern Mediterranean

region, there were still many elements of the Greco-Roman culture that survived in the region well beyond the time of the Romans. We can see these parts of the Greco-Roman culture in the incantation bowl from Mesopotamia that was used four to six centuries after bath house artifacts were made.

First of all, it is important to understand that the phenomenon of Roman bath houses never really extended much past the immediate vicinity of Rome. Though there were some baths and similar structures in the Roman provinces of northern Africa and in Asia Minor (modern day Turkey), imperial thermae were almost nonexistent in the eastern Mediterranean region. However, the provinces of the eastern Mediterranean did have related facilities like the gymnasia and theatres where recreation and leisure took place ("Thermae"). Though there were no grand imperial thermae in the eastern Mediterranean region that exactly mirrored those surrounding Rome, there were certainly elements of Greco-Roman leisure culture that were imported to the region during the Roman period that added to the local recreation activities that were present before the Romans. Here, we can see how the influence of Greco-Roman culture reached deep into the eastern Mediterranean region.

Further, the incantation bowl from Mesopotamia embodies the blending of the local cultures with the imported Greco-Roman cultures in the eastern Mediterranean region. In simply looking at the appearance of the incantation bowl, we can see Greco-Roman elements. The drawings appear to be a god and a scorpion-like figure, which is relatable to the amphibious figures like the salamander in the Roman bath house mosaics. Even

the Jewish settlement in Mesopotamia where the bowl was made was influenced by the Roman period in the region.

More important than the actual figures on the bowl is the bowl's purpose and use in daily life. As mentioned earlier, incantation bowls were commonly placed upside down and buried in households with the intention of protecting its residents from evil spirits and demons. This practice was popular in Mesopotamia where our bowl can be traced to. Notably, this notion of superstition and magical curses was a staple of Roman religion. Many Roman emperors adhered very strictly to superstition, such as Tiberius who was an "enthusiastic follower of astrology" (Aldrete 148). His devotion to astrology was so extreme that if he received a negative horoscope, he would cancel whatever activity or decree he had planned. The Greco-Roman notion of superstition was headlined by these emperors' dedication to these practices.

Beyond the emperors, superstitions and magic spells were important in the lives of ordinary Roman citizens as well. In the Roman religion, Romans tried to invoke magical powers to place curses on their enemies and bring them misfortune. The text of the curse was written out on a tablet and buried underground to be presented to the gods of the underworld (Aldrete 149). Using magic and curses was an important part of the Roman religion.

Further, the idea of cursing and superstition was so integrated into Roman daily life that it was even present in the leisure activity of visiting the bath house. Romans believed

that bathers jealous of a beautiful woman or handsome man could turn the "Evil Eye" on them and make them sick. To prevent this from happening, bathers often used magic amulets designed to deter the "Evil Eye". They also could use mosaics and paintings in the bath house that incited laughter, because one supposedly could not focus the "Evil Eye" while laughing (Clarke 107). By being present in bath houses, we can see how superstition and magic never left the mind of a typical Roman citizen. He was constantly keeping in mind both protecting himself from curses and simultaneously cursing his enemies, thus showing just how powerful religion was in the Roman empire.

This idea of using amulets and other objects to protect against curses was spread throughout the Roman empire and became an integrated part of local religion in many places. The idea of burying incantation bowls decorated with curses against demons, such as our Jewish-Aramaic incantation bowl from the Persian period in Mesopotamia, could very well have been adopted from the Romans and their religion or at least integrated with their own local superstitions. It is strikingly similar to the process of burying curses on tablets that was a common part of the Roman religion. In this way, we can see the vast influence the Romans had on the eastern Mediterranean region not only militarily, but culturally as well.

Additionally, through the incorporation of Roman superstitions into the local practice of using incantation bowls, we can see the religious diversity that characterized the ancient world. As previously mentioned, the bowl can be traced to a Jewish diaspora settlement, meaning you would expect the religious artifacts found there to be devoted

to the Jewish god, the God of Israel. However, that is clearly not the case with this artifact. In fact, the god depicted on the bowl may even be a Canaanite god like Satrapes, as mentioned earlier. By having a non Jewish or Roman god on the bowl accompanied with Jewish Aramaic text, it is apparent how the local culture and religion was combined with those imported from outsiders, creating a new unique local religion in a small community. This process of cultural fusion happened all over the ancient world and especially in the eastern Mediterranean region.

The process of fusing local and imported cultures and religions was spurred along by the prosperity and wealth of many provinces under the Romans. First of all, we can see that the Roman period was a time of prosperity in the eastern Mediterranean region. The fact that civilizations had the time and resources to dedicate to religion, superstition, and leisure activities indicates that many societies were relatively wealthy for the time period. Since they were protected by the Roman empire, people in the eastern Mediterranean region did not have to worry as much about outside threats and could focus on domestic pursuits, which made societies throughout the region very prosperous.

In addition to the general prosperity of societies, there was a dual identity that developed in the eastern Mediterranean region during the time of the Romans that lasted long after the Romans had left the region. We can see this happening in many cities in the region, such as Scythopolis, a diverse ancient city in northeastern Israel/Palestine. This dual identity of many citizens eventually contributes to the

aforementioned Greco-Roman elements that we can see in the incantation bowl. In the year 212 CE, when the Roman empire was still near its peak and a little later than our bath house artifacts were dated, the Roman emperor Caracalla issued an edict that all free people in the Roman empire would receive citizenship. This was designed to create a feeling of unity among the people in the vast Roman empire. In the eastern Mediterranean region, there was a diverse group of people that included Jews, Christians, and Samaritans; this edict led to individuals seeing themselves through a dual identity. People in this region spoke both Aramaic and Greek and saw themselves as both Jews (or Christians) and Greco-Roman (Eliav, "Late Romans"). This contributed to the combination of local cultural and religious practices with those of the Greco-Roman culture and led to the creation of unique artifacts such as the incantation bowl we are examining. Because of this cultural fusion, the text on the bowl is in Aramaic but the religious practice that it is affiliated with can be traced back to the Romans.

The recurring themes of diversity, the melding of local and imported cultures and religious practices, and the incredible influence of the Roman empire on much of the ancient world can all be seen through the two artifacts we have examined in great depth. The Roman bath houses came from the area surrounding Rome and were in use in the 1st and 2nd centuries CE while the incantation bowl came from Mesopotamia in the 4th to 6th centuries CE. Despite being over 2,000 miles and hundreds of years away, the two artifacts are incredibly connected. From the artwork and designs on them to the religious considerations behind them to the culture and daily life that

contextualizes them, the bath houses and incantation bowl shed light on what it was really like to be an inhabitant of the ancient world.

Works Cited

- Aldrete, Gregory S. "Religion in Ancient Rome." *Daily Life in the Roman City: Rome, Pompeii, and Ostia*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2004. 148-50. Print.
- Clarke, John R. "Baths and Bathing." *Roman Life: 100 B.C. to A.D. 200*. New York: Abrams, 2007. 104-13. Print.
- Connolly, Peter, and Hazel Dodge. "The Great Baths." *The Ancient City: Life in Classical Athens & Rome*. New York: Oxford UP, 2001. 238-47. Print.
- Eliav, Yaron. "Early Romans." *The Land of Israel/Palestine Through the Ages*. University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI. 11 Mar. 2014. Lecture.
- Eliav, Yaron. "Late Romans." *The Land of Israel/Palestine Through the Ages*. University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI. 18 Mar. 2014. Lecture.
- "Incantation Bowls." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc. 17 Nov. 2013. Web. 27 Feb. 2014.
- Kelsey Museum of Archaeology. "Roman Baths." University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI. Plaque.
- Naveh, Joseph, and Shaul Shaked. *Amulets and Magic Bowls: Aramaic Incantations of Late Antiquity*. Jerusalem: Magnes, Hebrew University, 1985. Print.
- "Satrapes." *Brill's New Pauly*. Brill Online, 2006. Web. 27 Feb. 2014.
- "Thermae." *Brill's New Pauly*. Brill Online, 2006. Web. 6 Apr. 2014.