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**Syriac Charms in Near Eastern Context:  
Tracing the Origin of Formulas**

Syriac charms are known to the scholarly world since the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> c. when George Percy Badger, Anglican missionary and orientalist, after his three-year travel to Mesopotamia and Kurdistan, published a book dedicated to the Assyrian Church of the East (Badger 1852). However, the study of these texts began much later, with the publication of the Syriac amulet from the collection of the Semitic Museum at the Harvard University (Hazard 1893). It would be unfair to say that these texts are neglected by scholars, but there are many issues which remain to be explored. One of the main problems connected with the study of Syriac charms is that they are known mostly to orientalists and, as other Near Eastern magic texts, are rarely analyzed in the comparative and typological perspective. One of the aims of the present paper, which is in its methodology comparative, though restricted to the Near Eastern context, is to introduce these texts to the community of scholars dealing mostly with European charms.

At the moment there are not less than forty manuscripts with Syriac charms in libraries and private collections around the world, but published texts constitute but a very small part of this corpus<sup>1</sup>. There are two different types of these manuscripts. The more widespread type is a book, usually of a small format, containing several dozens of charms of different type. These booklets were apparently copied and kept by priests of the Assyrian Church of the East, and they could be used as compendiums of charms for various purposes. Some of these charms could be recited or copied from this book on certain specific occasions – illness, dangerous endeavor like travel or war etc. These booklets were also used by lay people as protective amulets, for example, being kept under a pillow<sup>2</sup>. Another type of manuscripts consists of amulets in the form of a scroll with a much lesser amount of text, usually not more than

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<sup>1</sup> The published material includes three books of charms (Gollancz 1912), three scroll amulets (Hazard 1893; Hunter 1993, 1999), and a small number of separate charms (Nau 1907; Hunter 1987, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> As told me by late Michael Sado, an owner of a collection of Syriac charms.

four or five charms. The scrolls were created for individual use: they were generally worn wrapped around the body under clothes. Syriac charm manuscripts date to the 18<sup>th</sup>–20<sup>th</sup> cc. Most of them were created and copied in Kurdistan, the original settlement area of Assyrians (Syriac-speaking Christians who belong to the Assyrian Church of the East).

The manuscripts in question are not the only type of recorded Syriac charms. There are much older specimens of verbal magic in Syriac which are written on clay bowls (Hamilton 1971) and on animal skins (Gignoux 1987). These texts belong to another tradition which was probably invented by Jews or Mandaean in antiquity and later apparently adopted by Syriac-speaking, or, more correctly, Syriac-writing people. This tradition is represented mainly by Aramaic magic bowls from Mesopotamia (ca. 5<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> cc. CE). There are certain similarities between this older tradition of magic bowls and skin and metal amulets from Mesopotamia-Syria cultural area (ca. 5<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> cc. CE) and the later tradition of manuscripts from Kurdistan (18<sup>th</sup>–20<sup>th</sup> cc.). It is also hard to imagine that Syriac charm manuscripts were not being created earlier than 18<sup>th</sup> c.<sup>3</sup>

The sources of the tradition of Syriac charms as registered in manuscripts are multiple. For obvious reasons they are not restricted only to cultures of Ancient Near East or medieval Middle East. Since this magical tradition had evolved within a Christian culture, it incorporated popular figures, motives and formulas from other Christian traditions, for example Byzantine. As characteristic probably of most magical traditions, it was open almost to any influence of the adjacent cultures. In this paper I will concentrate on the genealogy of two formulas which occur in Syriac charms and have Medieval and Ancient Near Eastern parallels.

1. *‘Gabriel on his [protected person’s] right and Michael on his left’* (Cod A §7; IOM Syr. 4, 11r: 14 – 11v: 1)

This formula usually occurs in charms entitled “Before the authorities” and is an integral part of a longer formula as exemplified by the following text: “Gabriel (being) on his right and Michael on his left, I Am That I Am, Al-

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<sup>3</sup> The absence of earlier manuscripts of Syriac charms in collections and libraries may be explained by the fact that this type of texts was certainly not an object of constant copying in monastic scriptoria and careful preservation in libraries, as it happened with the writings of Church Fathers or the Bible (Peshitta). The copying of charms by local priests was apparently tolerated by church authorities but not welcomed. As the existing corpus demonstrates, the copying of charms was only possible within the Assyrian Church of the East, among Syrian-speaking Christians.

mighty God, Adonai (being) above his head, the Cherubim in front of him, and the Seraphim behind him” (Cod A §7). This longer formula and the motives contained in it are widespread in Ancient Near Eastern magical texts (Krämer 1928) and European Christian magic (Топорков 2005:221–2).

According to Louis Ginzberg, the similar formula occurs several times in ancient Jewish sources. My main concern here is the spacial orientation of the angels. As it appears, the most common orientation of (arch)angels in respect to the center in Jewish sources is the following: Michael to the right, Gabriel to the left<sup>4</sup>. In addition to a number of ancient Jewish sources it is also found in the Ashkenazic (Franco-Germanic) Jewish prayerbooks (in the text of the bedtime prayer) in the form very similar to the Syriac text in question. The angels are positioned around the praying person: ‘May Michael be at my right hand, Gabriel at my left; in front of me, Uriel, behind me, Raphael; and above my head the Presence of God’ (Sacks 2009:300).

The shift in orientation of Michael and Gabriel, attested in Syriac charms manuscripts, may have happened for several reasons, but now I want to point out some Arabic sources which exhibit the same orientation of angels as the Syriac charms. One of such texts was discussed by famous arabist Ignaz Goldziher, who endeavored to demonstrate the presence of Jewish influence in Arabic magical texts (Goldziher 1894). He quotes from an Arabic legend about the fight of ‘Ali (the forth caliph) with the dragon, published by René Basset (Basset 1893). In one version of this legend ‘Ali overcomes the demonic forces with the help of incantation, which includes a number of quotations from Koran and the following formula: ‘I spell you by the Name of God, by Ehye Asher Ehye Adonay Tsvaot El Shadday, Gabriel is to my right, Michael – to my left, Israfil is behind me and Allah appears before me’ (Goldziher 1894:359). A. Kohut testifies that this orientation of angels in Arabic sources is not casual, as it is recorded e.g. in al-Baydawi’s (ob. ca. 1316–7) commentary to Sura II, 91 (Kohut 1866:30).

Taking into account that Syriac-speaking Christians were in a lasting contact with Arabic-speaking people, e.g. Kurds, it is no surprise that ancient Jewish protective formula could be borrowed by Syriac Christians from Arabic written or oral sources. The presence of Arabic influence on Syriac charms tradi-

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<sup>4</sup> E.g., ‘Four classes of ministering angels minister and utter praise before the Holy One, blessed be He: the first camp (led by) Michael on His right, the second camp (led by) Gabriel on His left, the third camp (led by) Uriel before Him, and the fourth camp (led by) Raphael behind Him; and the Shekhinah of the Holy One, blessed be He, is in the centre’ (Pirqe de Rabbi Eliezer 4; Friedlander 1916:22).

tion is undisputed since a number of manuscripts contain a charm built on Arabic formulas (Cod A §19; NYPL Syr. 2 f. 9r).

## 2. 'Mother who strangles children' (Cod B §7; Cod C §2, §25)

This formula usually appears in a typical text where a female demon reveals her names to a protective figure who is represented in Syriac charms by Mar 'Avdicho (Odisho)<sup>5</sup>: 'My first name (is) Geos<sup>6</sup>: second, Edilta: . . . eleventh, Zarduch, Lilita, Malvita, and the Strangling Mother of boys' (Gollancz 1912: lxix). The female demonic figure in this story, at least in the aspect of child-killing, is a representative of the well-known type of demons sometimes called 'a child-stealing witch' (Gaster 1900), but probably it is better to use a more general label 'child-harming' or 'child-killing' female demon. The concept of such a demonic figure is probably universal, but most of the material we have is from Mediterranean, Middle East and Europe. According to J. Spier, who follows in many respects the earlier work of A. Barb, it is exemplified by Mesopotamian Lilitu and Lamashtu, Jewish Lilith, Greek Gello and Byzantine Gylou (Spier 1993; Barb 1966). The specific story associated with this figure was analyzed in many studies and is known as the 'Sisinnios/Melitene type' according to the classification of R. Greenfield (Greenfield 1989).

As regards Syriac charms and their Near Eastern context, it is interesting to note the 'strangling' capacity of this personage. First of all, in Syriac charms manuscripts this feature of a female demon had been fossilised in a certain formula which appears almost invariably with the same wording as 'm' *hnwqt' dtly* 'mother who strangles children'. As most of the texts attest, this phrase is used in Syriac charms as one of the designations of a female demon who may have different names, including Lilita, Malwita, Zardukh and many other names. The tradition of Mesopotamian magic bowls, most closely related to Syriac charms linguistically and geographically, exhibits the same concept: 'Just as there was a lilith who strangled (*dhnq'*) human beings...' (Naveh&Shaked 1998:159); 'I adjure you, Haldas the lilith... who... strikes and kills and bewitches and throttles (*wh'ng'*) boys and girls' (Yamaouchi 1967:231)<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> The story is certainly belongs to 'the Michael type' of Gylou story (Greenfield 1989).

<sup>6</sup> One version has 'Gelos,' and it is tempting to compare this name to Gylou, a female demon, mentioned e.g. in a Byzantine text *peri daimonon* (Spier 1993:35).

<sup>7</sup> Lilith is written with lowercase letter because it is often understood in Mesopotamian bowls not as a personal name, but as a designation of a species of demons.

Probably the same idea is found in the incantation from Arslan Tash (Syria, ca. 7th c. BCE), whose dialect is believed to be Aramaic with some admixture of Phoenician: ‘Incantation against “T”, goddess, against SSM, son of PDRŠŠ’, god, and against the Breaker-of-the-lamb’s neck (*ḥnqt ’mr*)’ (Gibson 1982:83)<sup>8</sup>. One particular aspect of this comparison between Syriac *ḥnwqt ’dṭly* ‘(female) strangler of children’ and Arslan Tash *ḥnqt ’mr* ‘(female) strangler of lamb’ may be of special interest here. Syriac *ṭly* ‘is an old Aramaic term which is attested in Syriac and other Aramaic dialects. In Syriac and Mandaic it has the meaning ‘child, youth’, but in Jewish Babylonian Aramaic and in Targumic Aramaic, where it has the same meaning ‘child’, it also had retained one of the older meanings – ‘lamb’ (Sokoloff 2002:504)<sup>9</sup>. The possible semantic overtone in Syriac phrase *ḥnwqt ’dṭly* ‘(female) strangler of children/lambs(?)’ may point to the archaic nature of this phrase, but the question needs further study.

The Mesopotamian background of the phrase ‘(female) strangler of children’ is possible, taking into account commonly accepted Mesopotamian origin of the demon described in the Arslan Tash incantation. Indeed, the ‘strangling’ character of a female demon is seen e.g. in the Old Babylonian incantation against Lamashtu: *šé-ḥe-ru-tim ḥu-nu-qú ú-ḥa-an-na-aq* ‘She strangles little ones’ (YOS 11, 20.11; Cunningham 1997:109).

Among the texts discussed by J. Spier, there are two passages which deserve our attention in this connection. The first one is from The Testament of Solomon, chap. 13, where a female demon is saying: ‘I do not rest at night, but travel around all the world visiting women and, divining the hour [when they give birth], I search [for them] and strangle their newborn infants’ (Spier 1993:34). This passage was put by J. Spier historically into the Byzantine period, but for me it is important that this Greek document ‘incorporates early demonological beliefs and Jewish legends’ (Ibid.). Another passage is a quotation from *peri daimonon*, ‘a thirteenth- or fourteenth-century text formerly attributed to Michael Psellos’ (Ibid.). It demonstrates the survival of the concept of ‘strangling female demon’ in the later Byzantine literature. These are the words of the demon Gylou, who is met by archangel Michael: ‘I will strangle [their] children, or I will let them live for a while and then kill them...’ (Ibid.:35).

Now I may try to trace the history of the specific concept of ‘strangling female demon’, or ‘female demon, who strangles children’. As the above-

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<sup>8</sup> T. Gaster points to this parallel between Arslan Tash, Mesopotamian magic bowls and Syriac charms (Gaster 1947:186).

<sup>9</sup> I am grateful to Leonid Kogan who drew my attention to this term in Arslan Tash and to the etymological aspect of this parallel.

mentioned texts demonstrate, the concept in question may have been born in Ancient Mesopotamia, not later than in the Old Babylonian period (1800–1600 BCE). It was borrowed by adjacent Aramaic-speaking people in Syria, as attested by the text from Arslan Tash (ca. 7<sup>th</sup> c. BCE), and by the creators of Aramaic magic bowls in Sassanian Mesopotamia (5<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> cc. CE). It is most natural to think that the ‘strangling female demon’ was inherited by the Syriac charm tradition from the tradition of Aramaic magic bowls together with many other figures, motives and formulas common to these two traditions. The borrowing of a concept from Byzantine magic is possible in principle, but less probable in this particular case.

The genealogy of the two formulas used in Syriac charms which I tried to trace above demonstrates two types of borrowing. The formula ‘Gabriel on his right and Michael on his left’ was apparently borrowed from Arabic texts by way of a loan translation. The Arabic formula in the legend about ‘Ali fighting with dragon which includes the phrase ‘Ehye Asher Ehye Adonay Tsvaot El Shadday’ was also taken from an unknown Jewish source, most probably in this exact wording. In this and other similar cases we are dealing with direct verbal borrowing, sometimes through a loan translation (calque). In the case of the Syriac formula ‘mother who strangles children’ the mechanism of borrowing is different: the object of borrowing represents an idea of a certain demonic *modus operandi*, or a concept which may be expressed by different morphological models and syntactic constructions.

## Abbreviations

Cod A – Codex A, published in Gollancz 1912: xxv-lx, 1–35

Cod B – Codex B, published in Gollancz 1912: lxi-lxxii, 36–76

Cod C – Codex C, published in Gollancz 1912: lxxiii-lxxxvii, 77–92

IOM – Institute of Oriental Manuscripts, St. Petersburg

NYPL – New York Public Library

YOS 11 Van Dijk, J., Goetze, A., Hussey, M.I. *Early Mesopotamian Incantations and Rituals* (Yale Oriental Series, Babylonian Texts, XI). New Haven and London, 1985

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