

Mesopotamian Incantation Texts Between Orality and Textuality

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The subject of this talk is a corpus of texts composed within a comparatively narrow timeframe, during the late Sassanian and early Islamic period. These texts were inscribed upon terracotta bowls and buried in courtyards and under thresholds. Thus far, most attempts to interpret these texts have been narrowly philological, and the primary focus of these attempts has been their relationship to other written texts, particularly those from the canons of religious literature. The philological approach has thus far yielded impressive results towards the interpretation of these texts, but much about them still remains a mystery.

I will discuss a common feature of this genre—namely the illocutionary act—in order to illustrate its fundamentally performative nature. I submit that our interpretation of these texts can be much refined by approaching them not only as written texts, but also as transcriptions of ritual utterances, and therefore the actual speech of the magician. While the inscriptions on the bowls were obviously the final product of the ritual, and the texts are clearly products of the literate cultures of late antique Mesopotamia, they nonetheless bear all of the hallmarks of oral compositions. As such, no treatment of these texts can be considered comprehensive unless it attempts to address issues of their composition, transmission, and reception.