



Mysticism in the Middle East: Mirror Plaques and Bowl Spells from Late Antiquity

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Abstract

This paper analyzes two artifacts from late antiquity: a mirror plaque from fifth century Israel and an Aramaic bowl spell from the sixth century Sasanian Empire, both of which presently belong to the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology at the University of Michigan. In the spirit of material culture, an attempt is made at understanding the people who constructed and used the objects. Both are found to have mystical purposes that possibly stemmed from religious unrest.

Physical artifacts tell a great deal about the people who left them. Archaeology, the study of history through artifacts and physical remains, seeks to understand the construction of an ancient object, how it was used, and what it was used for. The archaeological description is thus—borrowing programming terminology—*object-oriented*: it gives information about the object’s composition, function, and setting—both geographic and temporal. But, by augmenting the archaeological analysis with research in primary and secondary documents, it is possible to learn details about the people and culture to whom the object belonged.

That which is immaterial—an idea, belief, or feeling—can be imbued in material. Just as a painter’s canvas is a reflection of his inner thoughts, an ancient artifact can be seen as the reflection of ancient peoples. It is the goal of *material culture* to gain new insights on the intangible aspects of human existence by examining the objects people have left behind. “Unlike earlier modern interests in the physical realm of the ancients, which focused on unearthing, documenting, and understanding the basic function of man-made objects and structures, scholars of material culture shifted their attention to the wide range of human experiences and perceptions embedded in and associated with these tangible artifacts” (Eliav [1], p. 155). Following the lead of these scholars, this paper attempts to learn about the peoples of ancient times by analyzing two artifacts from late antiquity. An examination of each object is enhanced with historical context and scholarly research in an attempt to understand its basic construction and composition, primary purpose, and historical significance.

Object 1: Mirror Plaque

The first object of study is a *mirror plaque* that was unearthed by a private collector and is currently on loan to the Kelsey museum. This collector primarily did his research in Israel, and so it is safe to assume that the plaque was found there, though there is always uncertainty with objects that do not originate in controlled archaeological investigations [2]. Similar plaques were found in a tomb at Kfar Dikhrin, around 7.5 km northwest of Beth Guvrin in modern-day central Israel in the middle of the twentieth century (Rahmani [3]). Like the location, the date at which this plaque was excavated is also unknown. However, it can be very reasonably assumed that this plaque was made at around the same time as the plaques in [3], namely the fourth and

fifth centuries CE.

At this time, the region of Israel was under control of the Byzantine empire, the reign of which lasted from ca. 324 - 640 CE. Before the Byzantine era, the end of the Pax Romana in ca. 180 CE was marked by frequent Barbarian invasions, inflation and economic stability, and over 26 Roman emperors in only 50 years [4]. This crisis was one of the primary motivations that led people to abandon the old gods in search of new. The rise of Christianity after the Anarchy of the Third Century introduced a second major religion to the region—the first, of course, being Judaism. The Church of the Holy Sepulcher provided a sturdy foundation for the movement that would become the first official religion of the Roman empire; the famous Madaba map, conspicuously omitting the Temple Mount and centering Jerusalem about this church, symbolized the religious revolution. After the Byzantine era, the imposition of Islam in the seventh century CE brought a third major religion in the region of Israel/Palestine.



Figure 1: Pictures of the front and back of the mirror plaque, taken from [4]. The top of the object is truncated in the image on the right because of the picture. (I didn't break it.)

The mirror plaque, shown in Figure 1, is pentagonal in shape with an orientation defined by (1) the columns on either side and (2) the small hole pierced through the top. This hole offers clear indication that the plaque was meant to be hung. For this reason, and because this will be crucial to understanding the purpose, this hole shall be called, in agreement with Rahmani [3], the “suspension hole.” The dimensions of the plaque are roughly 15 cm in length from base to peak, 7 cm in width, and 1 cm in thickness, making it easily held by the average hand. The material is ceramic, and though it is intact and well-preserved, the artifact is particularly

fragile, likely to crumble or crack if not handled delicately and sure to break if dropped from a modest height. Red and black spots of paint are present in some recesses, particularly in the oddly-shaped indents near the two upper vertices and in the spiral flutes of the columns. Though speculative, it is reasonable to guess that the entire front face of the object was once painted.

The artifact's fragility suggests that it was not hand-carved, at least not while the clay was hardened. The most likely method of production is that of *mold-made ceramics*—a process of carving a negative of the design into two stone halves, pouring wet clay into the molds, and baking the combined sections in a kiln until hardened. A subtle feature of the artifact that also supports this conclusion is the thin outer edge adjacent to the columns on either side. (This is quite difficult to discern in the picture but easily evident upon examination. On the right side of the front face, a small section of this edge has chipped off about halfway up the column.) When objects are made with this technique, extra material seeps out of the mold when the halves are pressed together—the result is a thin “lip” or edge located somewhere on the perimeter of the object. For both of these reasons, it can be said with certainty that this is how the artifact was made.

The back of the object is flat and smooth; the detailed design on its front and its suspension hole are key to understanding its significance. The most notable features are the circular indents—one in the middle and one near the top—and the column-and-arch design framing the larger, middle circle. The purpose of these circles is rather mysterious, but the fact that the entire design is oriented about them indicates that they are central to the plaque's function or importance. Columns framing an overhead arch—an *arched facade*—is an architectural design that was very prominent during this time, whether it be a single arch version or several arches side by side [5]. In Roman mythology, “The Herculean Labours are presented under an arcade of six arches” (Edmund [5], p. 419), and in the Christian religion, “...five- and seven-arch versions are common among fourth-century Christians, the former exemplified by the lavish sarcophagus of Probus, decorated on all sides with a combination of forms, the latter well-suited to accommodate Christ and the Apostles” (Edmund [5], p. 420).

Even at this early stage of investigation, it seems obvious that the plaque did not have a

practical function (like, for example, a weapon or shovel would); its fragile nature and intricate design suggest that it was relatively important and valued as such. One interpretation is that these plaques were used as “receptacles for the Eucharist” (Rahmani [3], pp. 58-59), or, more plainly, bread dishes in Christian ceremonies. Here, the purpose of the circular recesses is to hold the bread, which the columnar arcade frames for emphasis. This hypothesis was formed after early studies by scholars such as Cre and Macalister, and was later defended by Moulton against contrary evidence (Rahmani [3], p. 59). While plausible, it fails to account for the suspension hole and the inherent secular nature of the architectural design.

The problem with assigning the artifact to a particular religion is that the arched facade emphatically does not belong to one religion. In fact, the design makes appearances in all three major religions of the period: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Figure 2 provides three examples. It could be the case that the object did in fact have a purpose for a specific religion—these examples do not rule out this possibility. However, the religious label is often over-simplifying and under-revealing. The architectural frame on this artifact is also found in secular buildings like palaces, baths, or fountains [4], and so it seems essential to examine and explore non-religious possibilities.

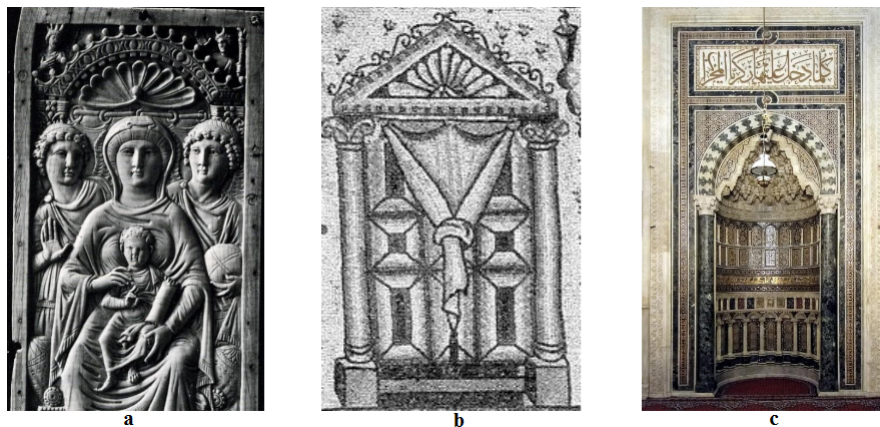


Figure 2: Three examples of the arched columnar construction, taken from [4]. (a) Byzantine icon on ivory, Virgin and Child, from Constantinople, 6th century CE. (b) Torah shrine on mosaic, from Synagogue B at Tiberias on the Galilee in Palestine, 5th century CE. (c) Early Islamic *mihrab* niche, from the Great Mosque at Damascus, 8th century CE.

As mentioned, a major clue to this objects’ significance is its circular indents. It was proven by the Hebrew University of Jerusalem that these recesses were spots for mirrors (Rahmini

[3], p. 59). This accounts for the vertical orientation and suspension hole, and it essentially invalidates the Eucharist interpretation; however, no clear purpose is immediately apparent, especially when one considers the size of the circles. Small mirrors, often around 5 cm in diameter, were no rarity in Roman times [3]. The diameter of the largest circle on the artifact is 4.5 cm, and the diameter of the smaller one is 2.5 cm. Evidently, these were not mirrors used for looking at oneself—or, at least, a significant portion of oneself. The key to understanding this object and the people who used it thus lies in understanding the function of these mirrors.

It is well-documented that superstition and divination were integral parts of Hellenistic culture [6]. Divination was divided into four classes related to the four elements—geomancy, aeromancy, pyromancy, and hydromancy. Some were quite exotic: “One needs a bowl, a lamp, a bench, and a young boy” (Luck [6], p. 313). The relevant method for this object is *catoptromancy*—divination by looking into a mirror—a subset of *scrying*, or crystal-gazing. This is a well-documented form of the many common practices of divination in ancient times: “At least two methods of scrying were used in antiquity. In one the translucent object was a mirror—not necessarily in the modern sense of the word, but a highly polished metal surface, a soldier’s shield for instance” (Luck [6], 312). The small mirror on this surface could very well be a particular instance of catoptromancy. This justifies the elaborate design and paint on the plaque, and it again corroborates the purpose of the suspension hole. The one thing that seems strange in this interpretation is the fact that these plaques were found in tombs, for the future of the dead is rather dull.

Goodenough interpreted the mirrors as symbols for eternal life and the plaque as a funerary object (Rahmani [3], pp. 58-59). This conclusion accounts for the well-known *columnar sarcophagi*, the same architectural design present on sarcophagi [5], but fails to account for the suspension hole. (Why hang an object in a tomb?) In his defense, Goodenough argued that the plaques were suspended during the life of an individual and later placed with them in the after-life [3]. This is certainly a plausible explanation, but it seems that the plaque possessed more of a function than simply being a “symbol,” however enticing the identical designs on plaque and sarcophagus alike may be. Like the previous one, this interpretation seems promising but

fails to account for one particular component of the plaque¹.

An explanation offered by Rahmani himself seems to tie all loose ends together. He claims that the artifact was apotropaic in nature, suspended in one's room or by one's bed to avert evil spirits by specular reflection in "some sort of auto-fascination." Claiming that this is a well-known motif to the classical world, he states, "We thus see in these mirror-plaques charms against the evil eye, which had served their owners in life and were placed into their tombs with some hope that they might here, too, prove effective against the perils of afterlife" (Rahmani [3], pp. 59-60). This gives purpose to the mirrors, explains the suspension hole, and accounts for the plaques being found in tombs. Of course, it is difficult to say whether this is the correct purpose—or even if there is a singular correct purpose—but it is, to me, the most plausible of the major three explanations provided here.

The major element in all three interpretations is mysticism—whether it be divination, eternal symbolism, or spiritual protection. The term *mysticism* is better than religious because of the secular (in the sense of not belonging wholly to one religion) nature of the plaque and its design. With the possible purposes expounded, the following question arises: Why not turn to the gods for protection, for comfort in the afterlife? Or, if this artifact is indeed a way of reaching the gods, why is it being done through this object? And why does it appear in this historical setting?

Though divination and religion may be dissimilar in modern context, it was not necessarily so in the past. "Essentially, ancient divination was a form of communication between gods and men. The oracles were sanctuaries where gods were thought to reside and be willing to talk to men and women under certain conditions, sometimes through an intermediary (the prophet), sometimes directly (in a dream)" (Luck [6], 315). Thus, all three explanations involve some direct appeal to the gods for personal protection. Religious turmoil was at its peak in this region in the third century when disdain with the old gods led many to turn toward Christianity. This turbulence may have motivated the origin of the plaques, as people were in search of answers and needed a direct means to communicate with their gods, whether old or new. The continued production could have simply been inertial, or it could have reflected peoples' continued discontent. The fact that the plaques were found in tombs shows the importance people placed

¹One might say, with a straight face, that this explanation is not *Goodenough*.

on them and thus indicates the prevalence of evil spirits and the efforts to be rid of them. This again suggests that people viewed the era as tumultuous and tough to live in. Historically, people have been seen to reject old leaders—whether they be political or religious—and seek new ones in times of peril. This artifact may signify such troubled times, reflecting the personal efforts of individuals to help themselves on a smaller scale while larger, more traditional figures have failed them.

Object 2: Aramaic Bowl Spell

The second object of study is clay bowl with an Aramaic inscription, shown in Figure 3. This analysis will be somewhat different than the previous since the inscription, upon translation, is seen to be a spell (which will also be called, for the sake of variety, an incantation, enchantment, or charm). Thus it is evident that the bowl is not meant for eating nor drinking, but rather is of a magical nature.

The object is made of clay with an Aramaic inscription that runs along the interior. It is medium-sized and easily held in two hands. The bowl is very well preserved with only minor chips and cracks along the outer rim and exterior. The inscription is easily readable, lacking any major smudges, gaps, or otherwise missing material. This artifact falls into a larger class



Figure 3: Pictures of two views of the bowl, taken from the Neareast 207 course website [4].

of similar objects, collectively referred to as *bowl spells*, that were found in Mesopotamia and Iran and date back to the sixth and seventh centuries CE [8]. They thus hail from the Sasanian Empire, the last Iranian empire before the rise of Islam, which ruled from ca. 224 - 651 CE and

was a leading world power along side the Byzantine Empire to the west.

These objects “constitute a peculiar phenomenon that is limited in place and time” (Shaked [7], p. 1), and it is *a priori* clear that their purpose is something magical. To further see this, it is useful to look at an English translation of a “typical” [7] bowl (not the one pictured here):

By the mercy of heaven, may there be sealing for D.d.H., and may children endure for her, and may her body endure for her, and let no tormentor that is in the world touch her, by the name of I-am-that-I-am Elisur Bagdana, the king of [demons and devs] and the great ruler of liliths I beswear you, the lilith Hablas, granddaughter of the lilith Zarnay, who resides on the threshold of the house of D.d.H. and appears [-] boys and girls I beswear that you should be struck in your pericardium by the lance of the mighty [Qitaros], who is ruler over demons, devs and liliths. Behold, [I dismiss] you from this D.d.H. and from her children, those that she has and those that she will have [Just as demons write] deeds of divorce to their wives and do not come back to them again. Take up your deed of divorce and accept you adjuration [-and go away] from the house and the dwelling of D.d.H and do not make yourself visible to her again [-] and do not come near her and do not injure the children that she has and those who will have, (this) D.d.H. and B.s.G, her husband. By the signet-ring on which is drawn and carved the Great Ineffable Name (Shaked [7], pp. 9-10).

In this incantation, a husband seeks mystical powers for his wife’s protection against “tormentors” in marriage, as well as good fortune in terms of divorce, childbirth, and health in general. Many bowl spells are of a similar structure and content to this one: indeed, “We may reasonably assume that the practice of writing texts on bowls could be described as a way of appealing to the higher powers, such as God and his angels, for help with pressing human needs, mainly health problems and sexual fears, both attributed largely to demons” (Shaked [7], p. 7). Similar to the first object, we again see people searching for mystical powers in material objects,

attempting to communicate with the gods for personal protection.

It may seem odd to inscribe incantations on the interior of a bowl, of all possible places. It is important to note that scholars generally agree spells were written on various other materials—including stone, papyrus, and small gems—but the prevalence of bowl spells is due to their preservation potential [7], [8]. That is, a ceramic bowl buried in the ground has a much higher probability of being preserved and excavated than a piece of papyrus. The orientation in which the bowls were unearthed also illuminates their design and purpose. “Many bowls were found placed in their original position upside down” (Naveh [8], p. 15), and several bowls were found placed together, forming a sphere [8]. It is thus surmised that the bowl shape was intended to trap demons within and keep them from escaping. On the more practical side of things, the shape was easily produced via wheel-made ceramics, and clay was both an abundant, inexpensive material that was much easier to write upon, when wet, than other popular inscription materials such as stone, leather, or metal [7].

In addition to their shape and orientation, the locations they were found in also gives insight to their uses. Bowl spells were commonly unearthed at grave-sites, which “may possibly indicate that some bowls were placed in a cemetery, and this association with the Other World added to their mysterious power” (Naveh [8], p. 16). As with the first object, associations with the afterlife are again seen, and it appears that these connections may have roots in religion. This is apparent from the frequent use of biblical verses on bowls [7]. Indeed, the producers of these bowls would compile a collection of “magic texts” and, depending on each client, would select certain refrains or stock spells that were most appropriate. However, “The magic texts were different from other religious texts in the sense that they were not meant to form a corpus or canon, and that they did not circulate widely nor were they recited publicly” (Shaked [7], p. 6). In this sense, the bowls were not a religion of their own, nor did they belong to a specific religion; rather, they were amalgamations of religious, spiritual, or otherwise magical phrases compiled on a person-to-person basis and meant to meet specific needs.

It is indeed true that these bowl spells were a peculiar and relatively short-lived phenomena. Their origins are not precisely known, but scholars have placed the range of dates from as early as the fourth century CE to as late as the eighth, though the majority are dated to the

five and sixth. While the reasons for initial production of the bowls is not entirely clear, the reason for ceasing production is: the Arab conquest of Mesopotamia in the seventh century and the imposition of Islam. “As Islam was opposed to magic, it seems to follow that the Muslim authorities would have forcibly stopped the fabrication of incantation bowls” (Shaked [7], p. 2). Though no formal decrees prohibiting the bowls or other magical items have been discovered, scholars generally agree that the spread of Islam and its opposition to magic are likely a primary reason the bowls died out [7].

Comparisons and Conclusions

Both the mirror plaque and bowl spell reveal personal attempts at communicating with the gods or some other higher powers. It is not appropriate to label either item as “religious,” in the traditional sense of the word, since the plaques belonged to several faiths and, although the corpus of bowl spell texts contained religious phrases, the bowls themselves did not constitute a uniform religion among the users. For this reason, the best classification for both objects is *mystical*, as the people using them were seeking some form of spiritual protection in addition to—or in spite of—the established religions.

Superstition is fundamental to human nature and so is a constant element of history. People who practice religion often seem to be more superstitious than others, and so it is not absurd to adhere to the divination interpretation of the mirror plaques while allowing the users to still be religious. As previously mentioned, divination in the ancient world could be considered a way to communicate directly with the gods; fortune-telling, in any of the myriad ancient forms, could therefore be seen as a turn toward religion, regardless of what one a particular owner of a mirror plaque subscribed to.

However, as the divination interpretation leaves the presence of mirror plaques in tombs a mystery, it seems that the primary, or most likely, function of the plaques was to ward off—or *reflect*—evil spirits, both in life and the afterlife. The rift from religion is also desirable because of the secular nature of the architecture on this plaque. But, it is important to note that this was not by any means a “standard model” for these artifacts. Indeed, plaques were found to have many different shapes and designs with different numbers of mirrors (Rahmani [3], pp. 57-58).

To exhibit this, two examples are shown in Figure 4. These shapes, ranging from fish and other zoomorphic designs to simple circles, are neither inherently nor obviously religious.



Figure 4: Two other examples of mirror plaques, taken from [3]. The top one is circular with one indent at its center and a suspension hole at the top. The bottom one is shaped like a fish with one circular recess at its center and a suspension hole at the mouth.

Unlike the mirror plaques, the bowl spells were essentially uniform in shape. But, they were found to have similar purposes of trapping spirits and granting personal protection in marriage, health, and the like. Both temporally and spatially, the cultures that these objects belonged to were not grossly distant. What are the similarities, if any, between these two cultures that could have prompted these comparable objects at around the same time period? Why not turn to religion for the purposes of these objects?

It has been noted that the people of the Byzantine empire had gone through religious upheaval and revolution with the rise of Christianity and the fall of Judaism, as symbolically depicted in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and the Madaba map. Historically, when times are tough, it is not uncommon for people to abandon their leaders, political or religious, and search for new ones. The mirror plaques may very well be a reflection of an inner attitude present in the Byzantine era: a distrust of the gods, a skepticism of established religion, a fear of evil or wicked happenings. Interestingly, similar historical context can be found in the culture that produced the bowl spells. “It is true that the Sasanian era was one in which there was much religious debate concerning received religious traditions, especially with regard to questions concerning the eschatological period and life after death...it seems possible to speculate that the prevailing religious unrest may have served as a breeding ground for a new style of magical practice, which took its shape in the language and in the textual expression of the

bowls (Shaked [7], p. 2). On a more fundamental level, both the mirror plaque and bowl spell are materializations of perseverance in difficult times, of hope in the face of despair, of belief in a better time. While this is not particular to either culture, it is particular to the human experience, and it is perhaps comforting to know that these different ancient cultures responded comparably when pressed with similar circumstances. Whether the means be magical or mystical, the essence contained in these objects is an ability to cope with a dreadful situation and, through hope and direct action, change it to a better one.

As likely as religious unrest is responsible for the origin of these objects, the imposition of a new religion in both cultures is assuredly the cause of cessation. The Islamic disapproval of magic likely put to rest these historically peculiar artifacts, but their excavation has proved to give great insights into the ancient world by investigating further past their basic physical aspects. For, analyses of this type are limited “to answering a (seemingly, but only ostensibly so) simple question: what was the physical world, or a facet of it, like? The ultimate product of such an inquiry resembles a type of reconstruction, an attempt to recreate, to draw a picture, of the tangible, manmade world of the ancients... These valuable works of scholarship provide little insight into what people thought about the physical artifacts that filled their world, or of how these artifacts created meaning for peoples lives and contributed to the social dynamics of the time. We learn little about the anxieties and hopes that they associated with the physical world, what stories they told about their manmade environment, and what these tales reveal about their inner lives; and more generally, how these objects functioned in the broader social and cultural milieu of the ancient world” (Eliav [9], pp. 22-23). Rather than form such a physical reconstruction of these two societies, a description of the ancients, of their thoughts and actions and hopes in the face of religious turmoil, has been made possible by looking further into the bowl and gazing through the mirror. For, although the people have passed, their meaning has been preserved in the artifacts they left behind.

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- The course material and website are used as general sources of information. Specific links are included below.
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- <https://www.lrc.lsa.umich.edu/eliav/kelsey/exercise01/object04/> (object 1)
- <https://www.lrc.lsa.umich.edu/eliav/kelsey/exercise01/object08/> (object 2)
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