

INCANTATION BOWLS FROM BABYLON AND BORSIPPA IN THE BRITISH MUSEUM*

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The origins of the British Museum collection of incantation bowls are inextricably connected with the upsurge of interest in Mesopotamian antiquities that arose during the mid-nineteenth century. The first accessions took place as early as 1841, following the purchase of B.M. 91739 and B.M. 91712 from Claude Scott Stewart¹. Austen Henry Layard published the latter, a superbly decorated specimen, written in the Syriac Estrangelo script in his epic tome, *Discoveries in the Ruins of Nineveh and Babylon*, which presented incantation bowls to the European public for the first time². Discussing incantation bowls, Layard noted that “[t]wo from the collection of the late Mr. Stewart had been deposited in the British Museum”³.

In 1851 the first incantation bowls from Babylon, B.M. 91766 and B.M. 91710, were registered by the British Museum⁴. Layard published these two bowls, which may have been discovered during his excavations at Amran, where he mentions “five cups or bowls of earthenware, and fragments of others, covered on the inner surface with letters written in a kind of ink”⁵. B.M. 91766 commenced with מִזְמְנָה קְמִיעָה דִּנְן מִן שָׁמַיָא [mzmnh qmy’h dnn mn šmy’] “designated is this amulet from heaven”⁶. In doing so, the copyist combined two common introductory formulæ לְאַסְתָּתָא מוֹמֵן הֵנָּה כְּסָא/קְמִיעָה [mzmn hn’ k’s’/qmy’ l’swt’] “this bowl/amulet is designated for the salvation of ... ” and אֲסְתָּתָא מִן שָׁמַיָא [‘swt’ mn šmy’] “salvation from heaven”⁷.

B.M. 91710 is specifically termed גִּישָׁא [gyt’] “a bill of divorce” against demons, including Bagdana who is named as מַלְכִּיהוּן דְּשִׁדְדִי וְדִדְדִי וְשִׁלְשָׁא רַבָּה [mlkyhwn dšydy wddywy wšlyt’ rbh dlylyth] “the king of the demons and of devils and great ruler of

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¹ The accession dates for both incantation bowls being 1841-7-26, 90.

² A. H. Layard, *Discoveries in the Ruins of Nineveh and Babylon* (London: 1853), 521-2, for the transcription of the Syriac Estrangelo script, English translation and a hand-copy of the incantation text. He also includes on p. 526 a small line drawing of several incantation bowls, including B.M. 91712 (no. 6), which is captioned, “Inscribed Earthen Bowls from Babylon”.

³ *Ibid.*, 509.

⁴ B.M.91710 and B.M. 91766 were accessioned on 1851-9-3, 2 and 1851-9-3, 3.

⁵ Layard, *loc. cit.*. The two bowls were published by Layard as Text I and Text V on pp. 512-3 and 519-21 respectively.

⁶ See *Plate I*: Aramaic incantation bowl (B.M. 91766) from Babylon.

⁷ T. Harviainen, “Pagan incantations in Aramaic Magic Bowls” in Geller, *op. cit.*, 54 *sqq.* for a study of the initial formulae of Aramaic, Mandaic and Syriac incantation texts.

liliths”⁸. It was written for clients, presumably husband-wife, who bore Iranian names: BHRNDWK daughter of NYWNDWK and MHDD son of YŠPNDRMYD⁹. The incantation text was widely known in Sassanid Mesopotamia and is partially duplicated by five other extant Aramaic incantation bowls, including three from Nippur¹⁰. It also crossed linguistic boundaries, as shown by the three parallel texts that were written in Mandaic¹¹. Both the Aramaic and Mandaic versions refer, in their closing stages, to the “signet-ring” of Solomon, which was, of course, famed for its control over demons.

More incantation bowls from Babylon were acquired by the British Museum acquired in 1851 when eight specimens were purchased from Col. Henry Rawlinson. One was written in Mandaic¹². The seven remaining incantation bowls, all written in Aramaic, were found “in a tomb at Babylon”, but there are no further details about this unusual find-spot¹³. Layard published three of the “Rawlinson” texts: B.M. 91716, B.M. 91720 and B.M. 91726 in his aforementioned book. However he appears to have been mistaken about their provenance since he claimed that they were “obtained at Baghdad, where they are sometimes offered for sale by the Arabs; but it is not known from what sites they were brought”¹⁴.

The seven Aramaic incantation bowls were a very important acquisition since they were written for the client, MHPRWZ son of HNDW, whose names combine Semitic and Iranian elements¹⁵. MHPRWZ, incorporating an epithet that was sported by several Sasanian monarchs, points to the infiltration of Persian nomenclature amongst the Aramaic-speaking citizens of Babylon¹⁶. All seven bowls (henceforth called “Rawlinson”) have a common physical typology; being hemispherical with simple rims measuring 0.6 cm thick and shaved bases, that suggest their manufacture as a batch at the same workshop, probably in the city of Babylon itself. The palaeography of the incantations, in a typical Aramaic script, confirms that they were the product of the same copyist.

Four of the “Rawlinson” bowls, B.M. 91716, B.M. 91720, B.M. 91721 and B.M. 91727 were inscribed with an incantation that was very widely known in Sassanid Mesopotamia¹⁷. To date, fourteen parallel incantation bowls written with this text have

⁸ British Museum accession date is 1851-9-3, 2. See also S. Shaked, “Bagdana, king of the demons and other Iranian terms in Babylonian-Aramaic magic”, *Acta Iranica* 25, 2nd série xi (1985) 511 - 25.

⁹ BHRNDWK = “Daughter of BHRN”, NYWNDWK = “daughter of good/strong ones”, MHDD may be read “given by the moon” or, if DD is a Semitic element, “beloved by the moon”. See F. Justi, *Iranisches Namenbuch* (Marburg 1895) 75 for names commencing with the element DD.

¹⁰ Erica C.D. Hunter, “Combat and Conflict in Incantation Bowls: Studies on Two Aramaic Specimens from Nippur” in M.J. Geller, J.C. Greenfield and M.P. Weizman (eds.), *Studia Aramaica: New Sources and New Approaches* (*Journal of Semitic Studies* Supplement 4) (Oxford: 1995) 67 *sqq.* for discussion and collation of the duplicate texts.

¹¹ Specifically, M. Lidzbarski, *Ephemeris für semitische Epigraphik*, 2 vols. (Giessen: 1902), vol. I, Text V, to which B.M. 91769 and B.M. 103358 can be added.

¹² This bowl appears to have been mislaid, since its whereabouts are unknown today. It apparently came from a site called Teeb, that has remained unidentified.

¹³ British Museum, Trustees Minutes 1848-52, 362-3.

¹⁴ Layard, *op. cit.*, 509 and 509-514 for Texts II, III and IV.

¹⁵ B.M.91716, B.M.91719, B.M.91720, B.M.91726, B.M.91727 and B.M.91756.

¹⁶ Justi, *op. cit.*, 247 - 51 for listings of the name PRWZ.

¹⁷ B.M.91727 has been translated three times. In 1890 it was re-edited by Moïse Schwab, “Les coupes magiques et l’hydromancie dan l’antiquité orientale”, *Proceedings of the Society for Biblical Archaeology*, April 1890, 306-10 [Text B], secondly by Isak Jeruzalmi in his unpublished doctoral thesis, *Les coupes*

come to light and undoubtedly more discoveries will be made of this popular text¹⁸. The incantation, which J. B. Segal has termed ‘Refrain A’, commences with a distinctive call for the overthrow of the world and heavenly *viz*: בשום הפכה הפכה הפיכה שמויה הפיכי [bšwm hpkh hpkh hpykh šmyh hpykyh ...] “in the name of, the Overturning, overturning. Overturned be the heavens, overturned ...”. Despite being written for the same client, the “Rawlinson” texts and even their layout are not identical, but may be described as “variations on a theme”.

All four bowls cite the distinctive invocation הפיכיה hpykyh “overturned” that is directed to the earth and heavenly elements and which may express why incantation bowls were buried “downturned”¹⁹. The command הפיכיה begins the texts of B.M. 91720, B.M. 91721 and B.M. 91727 which are written in concentric spirals. In B.M. 91716 it only occurs mid-way through the text which has been arranged, quite atypically, in four wedges or segments. הפיכיה occurs in l. 39 of the third segment, that consists of ll. 29 - 43, which have been written from the rim to the centre of the incantation bowl. The placement of hpykyh undoubtedly highlighting the cardinal role of the “overturning” element in the incantation, indicates the scribe’s manipulation of the text, possibly to fulfill a ritual prerequisite.

To achieve their aim of “overturning” the earth and the heavenly elements, B.M. 91716, B.M. 91720, B.M. 91721 and B.M. 91727 call upon the auspices of a great angel who is named as בְּיָיִטְבָּ yṭb’, and to whom a further eleven names are appended²⁰. The listings commence with סבִּכְ ssbk²¹, although the process of orthographic corruption has garbled once intelligible epithets. Some sense can occasionally be salvaged with the final two names בְּיָיִטְבָּ kbyby bnwr’ being read as “scorched by fire”.

TABLE 2: Names of “the great angel”

BM 91716: ss krb’ ...b sydryh ḥdryh ...yh btqp’ ‘wqp’ ‘nsps kbyby bnwry’

BM 91720: sskbh sryh kkb’ swdryh ‘wznyh btqpt’ nwqp’ ‘nsps kbyby bnwr’

magiques araméennes de Mésopotamie (University of Paris: 1963) 52- 63 and finally by Charles Isbell, *Corpus of the Aramaic Incantation Bowls* (Missoula: 1975) 131-2 [Text 58].

¹⁸ Other parallel texts are (i) B.M. 91745, (ii) Iraq Museum 9726, (iii) Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Institute of Archaeology No. 1401 published by Joseph Naveh and Shaul Shaked, *Amulets and Magic Bowls: Aramaic Incantations from Late Antiquity* (Leiden: 1985) 134-45 [Bowl B] (iv) a specimen in a private collection published by Edwin Yamauchi, “Aramaic magic bowls”, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 85 (1965) 511 - 23 and (v) a specimen in a private collection published by Markham Geller, “Eight incantation bowls”, *Orientalia Lovaniensia Periodica* 17 (1986) 101 - 5. Six more examples of Refrain A have been identified and are included in the forthcoming volume by J.B. Segal, with a contribution by Erica C.D. Hunter, *Aramaic and Mandaic Incantation Bowls in the British Museum* (London: 2000). These incantation bowls are: B.M. 91713, B.M. 91718, B.M. 91721, B.M. 91764, B.M. 108819 and finally B.M. 117883.

¹⁹ Cyrus H. Gordon, “The Aramaic Incantation Bowls in Historic Perspective” in M. Brettler and M. Fishbane (eds.), *Minhah le-Nahum: biblical and other studies presented to Nahum M. Sarna in honour of his 70th birthday* (Sheffield: c1993) 142. The author wishes to thank Prof. Gordon for sending her an offprint of this article.

²⁰ The name is not present in B.M. 91716 and B.M. 91721 since their texts are deteriorated at this point.

²¹ Naveh and Shaked, *op. cit.*, 140 postulate that יִטְבִּי is a corruption of the term יִי רִבִּי ‘the great YY’ which in other incantation bowls written with Refrain A is sometimes written as יִרְבִּי, the Mandaean divinity Yorba. See E. Yamauchi, “Aramaic magic bowls”, *Journal American Oriental Society* 85 (1965) 519.

BM 91721²²: sskb'

BM 91727: sskb' syrh kbb' krbk' sydryh ḥdryh 'znyh btwqp' 'wqp' 'nsps kbyby
bnwry'

As well as differences in the sequence of names, the actual number of names which are cited varies. B.M. 91716 and B.M. 91720 have nine, B.M. 91727 has ten. Such discrepancies, suggesting that the practitioner was unconcerned to list the exact number, do not appear to have hindered the efficacy of the text, in the same way as bowls that were selected upon which to write incantations often have physical flaws.

After the acquisition of the "Rawlinson" collection in 1851, twenty-nine years elapsed until the British Museum acquired more incantation bowls. In 1880 two Aramaic specimens from Borsippa were received from Hormuzd Rassam, a Christian from Mesopotamia, who conducted excavations on behalf of the British Museum at Babylon, as well as at nearby Borsippa (Birs Nimrud)²³. The registration date, on the 12th of November, indicates that the two incantation bowls were found early in Rassam's two year season at Borsippa (July 1880 - July 1882)²⁴. No precise information is available about the find-spot of the two incantation bowls, although a discovery at the city mound of Borsippa would be more likely than at the Nabu Temple area which Rassam also investigated²⁵.

B.M. 127395 and B.M. 127396 are flat-based bowls with simple rims and convex walls, their physical typology pointing to their selection from the same pottery workshop. The decoration of these two incantation bowls is highly individualistic: the interior centre has a circle subdivided into four segments, each with a crescent. In a particularly distinctive decorative touch, scalloped underlining highlights listings of eight angels' names qn'y'l 'nngy'l brqy'l gbry'l ḥsdy'l zyy'l ḥnny'l 'try'l which occur in the texts²⁶. The palaeography confirms that the incantations were written by the same hand for the client 'B'N son of DDY whose name combines, in a pattern reminiscent of the 'Rawlinson' bowls, an Iranian appellation with a Semitic patronym²⁷.

The Aramaic text commences with a distinct clause: ql ql' šm'yt bšmy' "Hark. The voice which I heard in the heavens" which is reminiscent of phraseology which commonly opens Mandaic incantation bowls²⁸. In their aim lpns' wlsy'

²² B.M. 91721 commences with sskb' but the text has deteriorated at this point.

²³ The registration date for both incantation bowls was the twelfth of November, 1880. See J. Reade, "Hormuzd Rassam and his discoveries", *Iraq* LV (1993), pp. 39-62 for a vivid discussion of the life and career of this remarkable man.

²⁴ See J. Reade, "Rassam's excavations at Borsippa and Kutha, 1879 - 1882", *Iraq* XLVIII (1986), p. 112 for further details.

²⁵ *Idem.* Rassam's inventories report the findings of miscellaneous Neo-Babylonian, Achaemenid and Hellenistic objects, as well as a hoard of Parthian coins, but do not specifically mention incantation bowls.

²⁶ See *Plate II*: Aramaic incantation bowl (B.M. 127396) from Borsippa.

²⁷ 'B'N may be 'B "water" with the patronymic suffix ān. Cf. J. Montgomery, *Aramaic Incantation texts from Nippur* (Philadelphia: 1913) Text 5:1 [Abanduk]. DDY "friend" was a very popular Semitic appellation and occurs in many Aramaic and Mandaic incantation bowls, including Montgomery, *op. cit.*, Text 15.2.

²⁸ For the occurrence of ql ql' šm'yt wq'l ḥlšy' dmytbry' "Hark, the Voice I have heard, the voice of the weak that are broken" see B.M. 91714 l. 2; B.M. 91736 l.4; B.M. 91728 l.1;

“to provide and help” the client, the two incantation bowls, in a rare divulgence of socio-economic detail call upon כל עינא בישהא kl ‘yn’ byšt’ “every evil eye” to desist from לביתיה ולמנותיה lbytyh wlhñwtyh “his house and his shop”, indicating that ‘B’N son of DDY was a merchant or trader in Borsippa. Moreover, the opening word of the incantation, לכינפא lkynp’ “for the edge” sheds light onto praxis, in giving instructions for the bowl’s placement at the corners of a room or a courtyard.

Two other incantation bowls in the British Museum that are also connected with Rassam’s activities at Babylon or Borsippa could have been surface finds or even bought from locals. B.M. 117873, a fragmentary specimen in a “pseudo-script” together with three fragments: B.M. 117876 and B.M. 117869 – 70 were registered on twenty-seventh of March, 1881. The fragments all came from a single large ledge-rim bowl that was written for a client called חניש hnyš who seems to have been Jewish²⁹. The text is badly deteriorated, but the legible excerpts include Hebrew quotations from Isaiah XL.12 and Genesis XLIX.22. The circumstances of their registration do not clarify their exact find-spots, but these specimens were the last incantation bowls to be acquired by the British Museum to come from Babylon and Borsippa.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The acquisition of incantation bowls by the British Museum was marginal in the wider scope of archaeological activities in Mesopotamia. Between 1851-1881 the British Museum received thirteen incantation bowls from Babylon or Borsippa. Nine Aramaic incantation bowls came from Babylon and two from Borsippa. Two fragmentary bowls, one in Aramaic and the other in “pseudo-script” may have come from either city. This small group represents less than 10% of the total collection of 142 incantation bowls held by the British Museum but, because their provenance has been recorded, these incantation bowls from Babylon and Borsippa are extremely valuable, not the least for the glimpses which they supply about their communities during Late Antiquity.

A Mandaic counterpart to B.M. 91710, and parallel Aramaic texts from Nippur, confirm the transmission of incantations between different locations and communities in Mesopotamia. More evidence of the inter-change between the two major language groups emerges from the inclusion of common Mandaic incantation formulae in B.M. 127396 and B.M. 127395. These two Aramaic bowls also reproduce the nomenclature that is found in the seven “Rawlinson” incantation bowls where the clients sport an Iranian name and Semitic patronym. The prevalence of this pattern in the British Museum’s small collection of incantation bowls from Babylon and Borsippa suggests a trend towards Iranicization

B.M. 91740 l.3 - all of which are written in Mandaic. The phrase also occurs midway in another Mandaic text, B.M. 135438 (l.17) and a figure drawing on the outside wall of this bowl is captioned קאלא דאזין דמוחא דקאל h’zyn dmwt’ dq’l q’l’ šwmy’ “This is the portrait of ‘Hark, a Voice’”. For further examples of this phrase see, E. Yamauchi, *Mandaic Incantation Texts* (New Haven: 1967) Texts 7 l.3-4, 8 l.1-2, 9 l. 1-3, 18 l.4-5, 19 l.3-4, 26 l.4-5. Also Iraq Museum 60494 which was published by Erica C.D. Hunter, “Who are the Demons? The iconography of incantation bowls”, *Studi Epigrafici e Linguistici* 15 (1998). The only other known usage of this phrase in an Aramaic incantation text occurs in Montgomery, *op. cit.*, Text 13.9.

²⁹ The patronym cannot be read due to the deterioration of the text at this point.

amongst the Aramaic communities. Possibly this was a response to the Sassanid dynasty at Seleucia-Ctesiphon.



Fig. 1: Aramaic incantation bowl (B.M. 91766) from Babylon.

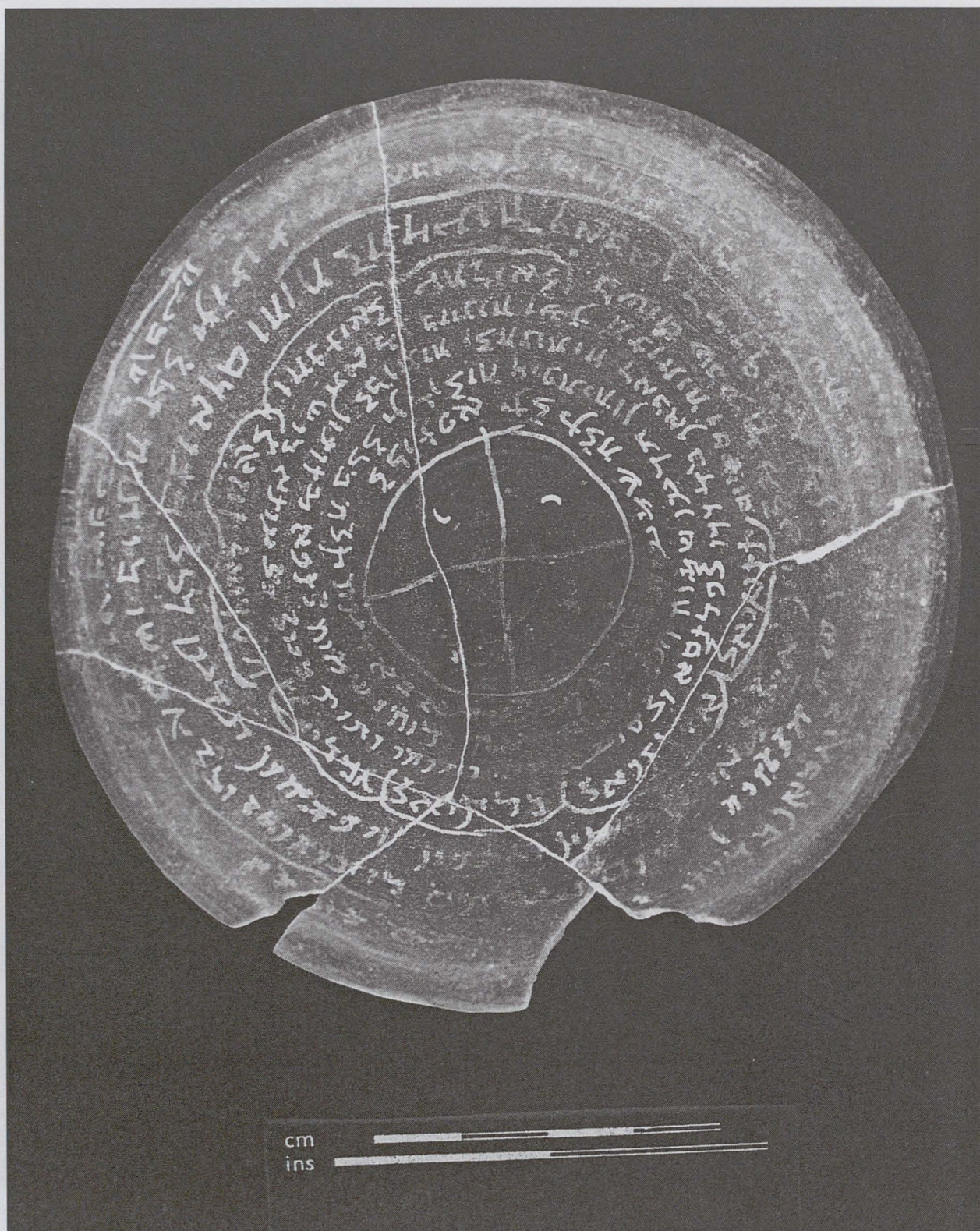


Fig. 2: Aramaic incantation bowl (B.M. 127396) from Borsippa.