

# Forgotten Mandaic Magic Texts in the British Museum

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## **Shrnutí: Zapomenuté mandejské magické texty v Britském muzeu**

Autor v předkládané krátké studii analyzuje dva zatím neidentifikované a nepřeložené magické texty. Oba předměty jsou součástí sbírky Britského muzea a jsou sepsány v mandejském jazyce a písmu. První text sestává ze dvou listů magické knihy, jež kdysi sloužila jako předloha pro výrobu amuletů. Částečná transliterace jednoho z listů je dochována v muzejním katalogu z roku 1872, sestaveném Williamem Wrightem. Druhý předmět je již samotný amulet zhotovený pro konkrétní osobu. Ten byl shodou okolností otištěn v publikaci Ernesta Alfreda Thompсона Wallis Budge roku 1930. Autor tak měl možnost nahlédnout do původního znění těchto dokladů a provést jejich komparaci s texty již dříve publikovanými. Text z magické knihy nápadně připomíná zaříkání ze známé sbírky *Haršia Bišia* (DC 46). Text amuletu je pak zřejmě duplikát nepublikovaného amuletu *Šapta d-Mahsihpan Rba* (DC 37). Autor se snaží identifikovat autory obou textů a v závěru zhodnocuje důležitost práce s podobnými opomínanými mandejskými texty pro rekonstrukci mandejské historie.

Many Mandaic<sup>1</sup> texts preserved in the depositories of world museums and libraries still escape the notice of scholars. Some of these scholars have no access to these institutions and so have to rely on already finished publications or on catalogues published by the respective museums. Such catalogues containing Mandaic texts, or at least excerpts from these texts, have been compiled by leading orientalists with William Wright and Hermann Zotenberg compiling between them the two most essential and comprehensive catalogues containing Mandaic manuscripts.<sup>2</sup> Unlike Zotenberg's catalogue, Wright's catalogue contains several unrecognized and unpublished Mandaic texts. During my research, I found that the texts numbered X and XII in the catalogue are actually fragments of well known

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<sup>1</sup> I transliterate Mandaic in the Roman characters according to Drower, E. S. – Macuch, R., *A Mandaic Dictionary*, Oxford 1963, p. xii with a slight exception – I transliterate “ayin” as “e”. [Square brackets] indicate text which is damaged or in very bad condition. In (parentheses) are emendations of scribal errors or words supplemented for better understanding.

<sup>2</sup> Wright, W., *Catalogue of Syriac Manuscripts in The British Museum acquired since the year 1838*, London, 1872. Zotenberg, H., *Catalogues des manuscrits syriaques et sabéens (Mandaïtes) de La Bibliothèque nationale*, Paris 1874. For other

and already published Mandaean ritual scrolls. Text no. X belongs to *Alma Rišaia Rba* (The Great First World)<sup>3</sup> and no. XII to *Mašbuta d-Hibil Ziua* (The Baptism of Hibil Ziua).<sup>4</sup> I will be elaborating more on these fragments in a different study. In the present article I will be focusing on fragments no. XI and no. XIII of the same catalogue, which we can roughly characterize as the “magic” fragments.

## The remnant of a magic book

Item no. XI (Add. 23,602. B, foll. 23, 24) consists of two leaves 10 cm broad and 18 cm high, which belonged to a compendium of magical formulas for various occasions. Wright dates it to the 17th century.<sup>5</sup> This book of magic starts with a classical introduction with benedictions written for the sake of the scribe of this copy. His ritual *maluaša* name is Iahia (John) and his mother’s is Haua Simat (Eve “the treasure”). In the introduction, the Life or Mandaean saviour Manda d-Hiia (Knowledge of Life) is described as the healer of souls. This is a traditional idea attested from the *Qulasta* (“you are the healer above all healers”),<sup>6</sup> from the *Right Ginza* (“the healer, who heals the souls”)<sup>7</sup> and from the *Haršia Bišia* (“the healer, lord of healers, who heals my soul”).<sup>8</sup> A translation of the introduction reads as follows:

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works concerning Mandaic texts in catalogues see Smith, R. P., *Catalogi codicum manuscriptorum bibliothecae Bodleianae pars sexta, codices syriacos carshunicos, mandaeos, complectens*, Oxford 1864, p. 646–648, Tisserant, E., *Specimina Codicum Orientalium*, Bonn 1914, p. XXXI and p. 40, Euting, J., “Nachrichten über die mandäischen oder zabischen Manuscr. der kaiserl. Bibliothek zu Paris und der Bibliothek des British Museum zu London”, *ZDMG* 19 (1865) 120–136.

<sup>3</sup> Drower, E. S., *A Pair of Naṣōraean Commentaries: Two Priestly Documents*, Leiden 1963, p. 1–53.

<sup>4</sup> Drower, E. S., *The Haran Gawaita and the Baptism of Hibil-Ziwa*, Citta Del Vaticano 1953, p. 27–96.

<sup>5</sup> Wright, *Catalogue*, p. 1218.

<sup>6</sup> *anat asia d-elauia asauata* (DC 53, p. 52, line 13, the supplement of Drower, E. S., *The Canonical Prayerbook of the Mandaeans*, Leiden 1959).

<sup>7</sup> *asia d-masia nišmata* (Pettermann, J. H., *Thesaurus: sive liber magnus vulgo „Liber Adami“ appellatus; opus Mandaeorum summi ponderis*. Leipzig 1867, p. 62, line 16).

<sup>8</sup> *asia maraihun d-asauata d-masia nišimtai* (Drower, E. S., “A Mandæan Book of Black Magic”, in: *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 2 (1943) 150-151; 174). Also in a shorter version as *asia maraihun d-asauata* (Drower, *Mandæan Book*, p. 171).

In the name of the Great Life, healing and justification, sealing and readiness and great protection of firmness be for Iahia, son of Haua Simat, from Life and from K[nowledge] of Life, the healer, lord of he[aler]s. [He] is the healer, who heals the souls.<sup>9</sup>

It is obvious that the part preserved on the two leaves belong to a book or at least a section dealing with the amulets against fear and crying. Wright included in his catalogue several headings or receipts of these amulets. The first one reads: “For an infant, who cries and is terrified in sleep, until [...]s are tied to (his) neck he will be calm.”<sup>10</sup> The last transliterated one is different and more damaged: “This paragraph removes weeping from [...] (insert into) a walnut (with) three knots in [...] or hang on (his) neck and he will calm.”<sup>11</sup> Finally, there is only one whole text attested by Wright. It was composed for the purpose of driving away fear and crying and shows great affinity with text no. 18 from the version of *Haršia Bišia* of Lady Ethel Stefana Drower. Both texts use the same rhetoric and elements and have an identical structure, but they are not exact duplicates. I placed both texts in the table below to better facilitate comparison. Brief notes concerning their similarities (highlighted in the table in bold) and differences follow after it.

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<sup>9</sup> *bšumaihun d-hiia rbia asuta uzakuta hatamta uzarazta unařarta rabtia d-šrara nihiilia ldilia iahia br haua simat mn hiia umn m[anda] d-hiia asia maraihun d-as[auat]a [hu] asia d-masia nišmata* (Wright, *Catalogue*, p. 1218).

<sup>10</sup> *lianqa d-bakia umistarvad bšintia ualma [...]ia ruplia bšaura unaha* (Wright, *Catalogue*, p. 1218).

<sup>11</sup> *hazin baba pšaqa bkita mn [...] atia amiza tlata giřria b[...] uealiq bšaura unaha* (Wright, *Catalogue*, p. 1218). Due to many lacunas, the combination of words “*atia amiza*” is not clear. Perhaps it is a scribal error very similar to the one in the magic book *Haršia Bišia* translated by Lady Drower (Mandæan Book, p. 160, n. 10).

Add. 23,602. B, fol. 23<sup>12</sup>

Haršia Bišia (DC 46), text 18<sup>13</sup>

1. Write thi(s) paragraph for the one who has fear from appearances and is ter[r]ified in sleep and tie (it) on (his) neck and he will be calm:

2. Cry, **son** (of ...), **avaunt cry**, go cry. And **destroyed is cry and crushed is cry** and surrounded are cries. And **avaunt cry** and go cry and sickne[ss], go weeping from N., son of N.

3. In the name of **the angels of wrath**, who are [...]ing and subduing cries and bin[ding] **and bringing out weepings from N., [son of] N.**

4. **And healing will be (for) N., [son of] N. Life is victorious** over all w[orks].

Crying, **son** of crying, remove crying, **avaunt crying**, calm crying. **Destroyed are cries and crushed are cries** and dried are cries and brought out are cries.

If not, I call on the **angels of wrath** and (who) are bringing out weeping and bad sickness of crying **and bringing out weeping from N., son of N.** Iahu, iahu, iahu.<sup>14</sup>

**And healing will be for N., son of N.** from heavens. Crying. **Life is victorious.** Write this paragraph, insert into a walnut with three knots and tie (it) on the neck of the little (one).

1. Text no. 18 has its receipt at the end of the formula.

2. The first part of the formula contains the “real” name of the problem being fought (crying) in the same manner as the name of the client (N. son of N.) and three identical roots (ZHA, BṬL, KBŠ).

3. The middle segment mentions “the angels of wrath” – apparently good agents, who act on behalf of the afflicted client. Common root here is NPQ.

<sup>12</sup> *hazi baba kdub lman dahil mn hiziunia umis[t]aruad bšinta urup bšura unaha qita br zha qita puq qita utbaṭal qita utikbiš qita utikrik qitia uzha qita upuq qita uqirs[a] puq bkita mn plan br plani[ta] bšum mlakia d-rugza d-ma [...] umkabšin qitia umiab[ṭia] umapkia bkitia mn plan [br] planita uasuta tihuilia p[lan br] planita hiia zakin elkulhun e[ubadia]* (Wright, *Catalogue*, p. 1218).

<sup>13</sup> For several reasons I translate this text anew: *qitia br qitia brḥ d-qitia zha d-qitia unha d-qitia etabaṭal qitia umkabšin qitia umiabšin qitia umapqin qitia hinila qarina elauakun mlakia d-rugza umapqin bkita uqirsa biša d-qitia umapqin bkita mn plan br planita iahu iahu iahu uasuta tihuilia el plan br planita mn ešumia qitia hiia zakin hazin baba kdub bduq bamuza d-tlata giṭria urup bšuria d-zuṭa* (Drower, *Mandæan Book*”, p. 176).

<sup>14</sup> These three names of the Jewish God derived from the Tetragrammaton are omitted in Drower’s translation.

4. The final part of our magic texts includes the benediction, “healing will be for”, and the classical Mandaic declaration, “Life is victorious”.

As Drower writes, the versions of *Haršia Bišia* she worked with were in very bad condition and often misspelled.<sup>15</sup> For this reason we cannot be sure if the fragments of text no. XI are also a part of a former *Haršia Bišia* compilation.

## The fragments of an amulet

Text no. XIII. (Add. 23,602. B, foll. 26–28) was once a paper scroll 15 cm wide, now consisting of three fragments. It was, in all likelihood, formerly a personal amulet and is also dated to the 17th century.<sup>16</sup> Unfortunately, it was not transliterated in Wright’s catalogue. The only source of its content is to be found in the monograph of Sir Ernest Alfred Thompson Wallis, entitled *Amulets and superstitions*. On plate XVIII of this book, a part of the text no. XIII is reprinted.<sup>17</sup> We can, indeed, see that the name of the client is Iahia Bihram, son of Iasmin, as was stated by Wright. The facsimile of text no. XIII contains parts of two different formulae, with one receipt between them. Unfortunately, we cannot tell to which formula the receipt belongs.

... (get lost) from before Iahia Bihram, son of Iasmin, the exorcist.<sup>18</sup> Yes, dwell outside. Shrink and flee Iahia Bihram, son of Iasmin. If you will transgress this precept of Iahia Bihram,<sup>19</sup> son of Iasmin, they will bind you in this bondage with which he was bound and in this fetter with which he was fettered, by the eight mysteries of the names. And a shackle will be destined for you.

This is the command which shall be written on the sheet of tin or lead or on the sheet of brass or in the case of silver.

They will cast you and lift you and set you between the heavens and the earth.<sup>20</sup> And they will carry you (to) the place of darkness and you will die in it. And by eight mysteries you will be set on fire and it will devour you and all your progeny.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Drower, *Mandæan Book*, p. 149 and 159.

<sup>16</sup> Wright, *Catalogue*, p. 1219.

<sup>17</sup> Wallis Budge, E. A. T., *Amulets and Superstitions*. London, 1930, p. 243.

<sup>18</sup> Attested also in DC 37, line 80 (Drower – Macuch, *Mandaic Dictionary*, p. 365, word *pašura*).

<sup>19</sup> Attested also in DC 37, line 83: *eu tihṭibḥ bhazin nimusa* (Drower – Macuch, *Mandaic Dictionary*, p. 298, word *nimusa*).

<sup>20</sup> To suspend a witch between heaven and the earth was a common idea in some medieval Jewish texts (Trachtenberg, J., *Jewish Magic and Superstition: A Study in Folk Religion*, New York 1939, p. 13, n. 2).

<sup>21</sup> Attested also in DC 37: *tiklak lak ukulhun šurbatak* (Drower – Macuch, *Mandaic Dictionary*, p. 457, word *šurbta*).

This command will deceive all your progeny and the tribe of the house Sarnbu<sup>22</sup> and the clan of roof-daemons. Bound is the soul of mine, of Iahia Bihram, son of Iasmin, in the bondage of heavens and the earth and I am sealed with the great seal of the earth and with the great first seal which seals the heavens and the earth and holds the seven stars. Bound is then the soul of mine ...<sup>23</sup>

As we can see in the notes, some elements in the text are to be found in DC 37 – *Šapta d-Mahsihpan Rba*. This amulet scroll was written by Iahia Bihram in 1861 and bought in 1939 by Lady Drower from Shaikh Nejm.<sup>24</sup> The fragments of our text no. XIII. were possibly acquired by colonel John George Taylor during his twenty year stay in Basra, during which he kept the company of a Mandaean priest, Adam Iuhana (father of Iahia Bihram).<sup>25</sup> We do not know who the scribe of our text was, but we do know for certain that the text was written for the protection of Iahia Bihram.

At the time of Taylor's visit to Adam Iuhana, Iahia Bihram was just a boy so I do not presume that he is the scribe of text no. XIII. Could not he, at least, be its client? I think not. In the text, the name of the client's mother is Iasmin. The name of the mother of Iahia Bihram from the 19th century was Haua Simat, as we can tell from the beginning of DC 35.<sup>26</sup> The only known instance of an Iahia Bihram whose mother was named Iasmin was recently found (by Jorunn Jacobsen Buckley) in a copy of the *Book of John* that is owned by Lamea Abbas Amara (b. 1929), a famous Arab poet.<sup>27</sup> This pair,

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<sup>22</sup> A tribe of daemons. It also occurs in DC 37, line 94 and 393. (Drower – Maccuch, *Mandaic Dictionary*, p. 315, word *sarnbu*).

<sup>23</sup> ... *mn qudamḥ d-iahia bihram br iasmin gabra pašura hin mn lbar šriit qṭun unidub mn qudamḥ d-iahia bihram br iasmin eu tiḥṭibḥ bhazin nimusa d-iahia bihram br iasmin nisirunak bhazin asara d-estarbḥ ubhazin rgala d-etirglbḥ btmania razia d-šumia uarqa nibadulak hazin pugdama d-nikdibuna bṭasa d-enka uabara eu bṭasa d-planza ubgupta d-kašpa nirmunak unidalulak unitnolak binia šumia larqa unihumlak atra d-hšuka umitbḥ umn tmania razia tisrukḥak nura utiklak lak ulkulhin šurbatak hazin pugdama nikdublin lkulhin šurbatak ulširša d-bit sarunbu ulkiniana d-bnia engaria esira haza nišimtai dilia iahia bihram br iasmin basara d-šumia uarqa uhtimna bhatma rba d-arqa ubhatma rba qadmaia d-ehṭimbḥ ešumia uarqa uašar kukbia šubatun esira haza nišimtai ... (Wallis Budge, *Amulets and superstitions*, p. 243).*

<sup>24</sup> Buckley, J.J., *The Great Stem of Souls: Reconstructing Mandaean History*, New Jersey 2006, p. 157 and 358.

<sup>25</sup> Buckley, *Great Stem*, p. 105 and Buckley, J.J., "Glimpses of a Life: Yahia Bihram, Mandaean Priest", in: *History of Religions* 39/1 (1999) 32–49; 38.

<sup>26</sup> Drower, *Haran Gawaita*, p. 30.

<sup>27</sup> Buckley, *Great Stem*, p. 239.

however, dates to the 15th century, which is too early for our text.<sup>28</sup> We have to settle then for an unknown Iahia Bihram from the 18th century, the scribe of a *Ginza* from the year 1735. Parts of this version of *Ginza* are attested also in Wright's catalogue as no. I.<sup>29</sup> I believe this man could be the scribe and also the client of text no. XIII. However, we cannot be sure if we do not examine all the fragments of this text that are located in the British Museum.

This also brings us to the previous text, no. XI, which is the remains of a magic book. As we saw, its scribe was a certain Iahia, son of Haua Simat. There is a great probability that this man is, in fact, Iahia Bihram, son of Adam Iuhana and Haua Simat from the 19th century. Julius Heinrich Petermann (1801–1876), a German orientalist, was a witness of an exorcism performed by Iahia Bihram, by whom he was tutored for three months.<sup>30</sup> When Petermann was leaving Suq ash Shuyukh, he received a Mandaic amulet as a farewell gift from his tutor.<sup>31</sup> Iahia Bihram was indeed an experienced exorcist. In order to be sure that he was the scribe of the text no. XI, we must also examine it in its entirety.

## Final remarks

There are plenty of unpublished and untranslated Mandaic texts in various museums that have been preserved to this day. Let our study be a humble example of what can be achieved with only the aid of their catalogues – in our case, one from 1872. Nevertheless, it is still crucial to work directly with these fragments in their respective museums and collections since we certainly missed many details in our study.

We can now see how the Mandaic magic texts can gradually contribute to the uncovering of Mandaeen history, which is very difficult to recover. Since the authenticity of scribal colophons at the end of Mandaic texts is doubtful, there is a way to put together the mosaic of history with the help of various fragments and seemingly unimportant texts. As we saw, these are also vital to help us peek inside the relationships, beliefs and lives of the Mandaeans. The manner of handing down the literary materials and themes that we know from “the big compilations” (e.g. *Ginza* or *Qulasta*), which were traditionally copied, could then be clarified much more easily.

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<sup>28</sup> Buckley, *Great Stem*, p. 182.

<sup>29</sup> Wright, *Catalogue*, p. 1211–1212.

<sup>30</sup> Petermann, J. H., *Reisen im Orient*, vol. 2, Leipzig 1865, p. 127.

<sup>31</sup> Petermann, *Reisen im Orient*, p. 138.