I have been visiting the Vorderasiatische Museum’s (VA) collection of magic bowls in Berlin for some years.\(^2\) The texts that have particularly attracted my attention are a number of bowls that contain aggressive formulae which are now in preparation for publication as part of a volume on such texts within the greater corpus of magic bowls.\(^3\) Of the Berlin aggressive texts there are five that share a number of common characteristics that pertain to their literary content and peculiarities of physical form that go beyond the simple fact that they are all earthenware bowls. It is this sub-group of five texts that will be the focus of this paper. We shall see what we can learn about this group of bowls in terms of: purpose, praxis, physical form and structure of formulae. Through a comparison with other groups of bowls from Berlin and London I hope also to map some of the traditions found within them and trace evidence for trails of transmission.

The most obvious connection between all the bowls in this group of five from Berlin is the fact that all define themselves as being a *qyblʾ* (קדש)—in this particular group of texts meaning that they are a kind of counter-charm. Thus they are all intended to return adverse magical actions to their origin—in these cases identified specifically as individuals who are personally named. As such, these spells have an aggressive tone in that they clearly intend harm to be wreaked upon humans they identify by name who are perceived by the clients as adversaries—whom I shall refer to, in general, as “the antagonists.” A question which I will not go into in this chapter is whether we consider these “counter-charm” bowl texts as curses—since they constitute an attack on human individuals—or whether we still perceive them as...
apotropaic—as they define their raison d’être as being the aversion of an attack and a returning of it to its culpable human origin.

The bowls

The five Berlin *qyblʾ* bowls are:

- VA 2423 and VA 2416⁴ which are written by the same hand for the same client and against the same antagonist,
- VA 2434 and VA 2424 are also a pair that are written by one scribe for the same client and against the same antagonist, and
- VA 2484 which, like the other 4, describes itself as a *qyblʾ* and specifies the names of the client as well as the antagonist; for this last bowl there is none to make it a pair as with the others though, as we shall see, the evidence suggests there was originally an accompanying bowl.

Another group of bowls that describe themselves as *qyblʾ* bowls, and therefore relevant to this study, are three from the British Museum (BM): 039A, 040A and 041A.⁵ 039A and 041A share the names of both client and antagonist. 040A shares with these two only the name of the antagonist. Though I am not entirely certain, it seems to me that these three bowls were written by the same scribe.

In the table below is a synopsis of the opening formulae of the Berlin bowls. VA 2423 and VA 2416 are one of the pairs and are therefore beside each other. As can be seen in the table, VA 2416 has a repetition of the opening formula which is also presented in this synopsis. The beginning of the text of the partner of VA 2434—i.e., VA 2424—has faded, hence its absence from the table. It is, however, clear from the rest of the text visible on VA 2424 that this text is very close in content to VA 2434 in which most of its text is present, despite the fact that it is in a slightly different order. It is, therefore, possible that its beginning might have included a variation of the same formula.

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⁴ Published by Wohlstein (1893), pp. 11–27, late in the 19th century and re-edited by myself.
⁵ Segal (2000), pp. 79–85.