

Narratives of Power A Typology of Syriac *Historiolae* with a Case Study of Charms Against the ‘Child-Stealing Witch’

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Abstract This article examines the *historiola* in Syriac magic across medieval and modern manuscripts. Section 2 proposes a working typology of Syriac *historiolae* and tests the applicability of David Frankfurter’s scheme to this material. Section 3 surveys narrative charms as a specific class of *historiolae* analyzing them thematically and structurally. Section 4 focuses on Syriac narrative charms that preserve a specific motif – the St. Sisinnius Legend. It serves as a case study, examining three Syriac narrative charms in which this motif is attested and revealing their connections to other magical traditions of the Middle East and the Mediterranean.

Keywords Syriac magic. *Historiola*. Encounter charm. St. Sisinnius Legend. Christian amulets.

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1 Introduction

Syriac magical texts first appear in Late Antiquity, inscribed on clay incantation bowls and on metal or leather amulets. The richest evidence still comes from manuscripts dated to the eighteenth-twentieth centuries. These survive in two main formats: (1) codices that usually contain several dozen recipes of different genres for a wide variety of purposes, and (2) amuletic scrolls, so-called ‘finished products’ that assemble several incantations selected to meet the needs of specific clients (Bohak 2019, 400-1).

Although early scholarship on modern Syriac magical manuscripts already argued for links with the late antique tradition,¹ the picture long remained fragmented by the absence of medieval evidence. However, recent finds from South Lebanon and from the vicinity of Turfan (China) show that some of the best-known Syriac charms in modern manuscripts were already in wide circulation by the thirteenth century, attested in amulets and presumably also in codices (Hunter 2018).

Even in this small and fragmentary medieval Syriac corpus, several well-known *historiolae* are attested. One striking case is a thirteenth-century amulet from Hadath Grotto, South Lebanon, that narrates the anchorite ‘Aḥdīšō’s encounter with the female demon called Teb’ā, who combines the traits of a *succubus* and a child-strangler (Abousamra 2013). She attempts to seduce the saint, but ultimately submits to him and discloses her secret names. As discussed below, in Section 4 of this article, this narrative motif can be traced back to at least Late Antiquity. Similarly, the Turfan fragment containing *The Charm of Cyprian* preserves an ‘autobiographical’ tale told by the powerful magician about his magical activities performed before and after he turned Christian (Hunter 2018). This

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1 Montgomery 1914; Al-Jeloo 2012; Moriggi 2016; Bhayro 2022; Abousamra 2022; Pearson 2022.

story is also known from much earlier Christian sources.² These examples show that several *historiolae* known from early modern Syriac magical manuscripts ultimately go back to Late Antiquity. They constitute a fruitful object of study, even independently of the specific compositions and manuscript contexts in which they are transmitted.

The published corpus of Syriac charms contains dozens of examples of embedded narratives (*historiolae* proper) and many more instances of allusions to well-known mythical precedents (clausal *historiolae*).³ The most extensive source so far – *The Book of Protection* published by Hermann Gollancz (1912) – edits three codices containing more than 100 recipes. Among these, at least 20 unique narrative *historiolae* can be identified. In what follows, I examine Syriac *historiolae* from several angles. Section 2 outlines a typology of *historiolae* and addresses the distinction between *historiolae* proper and clausal *historiolae*. Section 3 analyzes narrative charms, with particular attention to encounter charms. Section 4 focuses on encounter charms against the ‘child-stealing witch’ and includes an edition of a hitherto unpublished charm.

2 The Typology of Syriac *Historiolae*

In this part, I attempt to adapt Frankfurter’s (1995) typology to the Syriac material. My aim is not only to evaluate how Syriac examples fit the paradigm and where they challenge it, but also to refine the description of individual types by highlighting transitional cases and potentially problematic instances that complicate neat classification.

Despite a growing scholarly interest in modern Syriac magical manuscripts, they remain only marginally represented in comparative research. For this reason, in addition to the goals of clarity and exemplification, I have chosen to provide a substantial selection of examples, in the hope of making the richness and internal diversity of Syriac charms more visible for scholars of other magical traditions.

Following Frankfurter’s analysis, it is reasonable to approach *historiolae* in Syriac magic as falling into two broad types:⁴

2 For a recent account of Coptic magical texts related to Cyprian, their early Christian context and further references, see Dosoo, Preininger 2023, 369-97. See also Sowers 2017.

3 Our primary focus here is on works that edit whole codices: Gollancz 1912; Chamurlieva 2009; Nurullina 2012; Pearson 2022. Occasionally, other publications will be referred to as well.

4 Bozóký (2003, 39-40), in her typology of medieval European apotropaic charms, unites the two under the term “actualisation”: the linking of a present situation with a favorable event of the past, either through simple comparison or through brief narration.

1. *similia similibus* constructions, or ‘clausal *historiolae*’: formulaic appeals to biblical or parabiblical precedents, typically structured as analogies rather than full narratives;
2. ‘*historiolae* proper’: short stories recounting a mythic or hagiographic event, often with dramatic features such as dialogue and confrontation.

2.1 Clausal *Historiolae*

Frankfurter includes *similia similibus* constructions (or clausal *historiolae*) in his scheme because they retain a narrative link; an authoritative precedent is evoked in the form of *allusion* to the narrative. On the other hand, he questions their status as *historiolae*, since the narrative here merely licenses the directive: “the *historiola*, if we can still call it that, works as a guarantee or rationale” (Frankfurter 1995, 469).

Within the Syriac material examined here, a further distinction may be drawn between two subtypes: comparative formulas and invocative formulas.

Comparative formulas follow the basic pattern ‘as X, so Y’, where the allusion to a precedent is syntactically subordinate to the main directive (cf. Ohrt 1935-36, 1591-2 on *Vergleichsformen*). For example, in a charm *For Children not to Cry*, we read:⁵

as those seven brothers who slept the sleep (of) 377 years, so may A.,
the son of B., be at rest and sleep. (Gollancz 1912, liv [Cod. A § 50])

Likewise, a charm *Before the Authorities* invokes biblical precedents through parallel clauses:

As the beauty of Moses shone upon the children of Israel, so may
the beauty of the one who carrieth (these) writs shine forth before
kings, rulers, commanders, and chiefs. As the crown of Pharaoh
before Joseph, so may there bow down to him the rich and the poor.
(Gollancz 1912, xxix [Cod. A § 7])

Both examples illustrate that such *historiolae* serve primarily to invoke a precedent, syntactically tied to a directive utterance.

⁵ Throughout the article, italics are added to highlight the elements discussed in each section. Unless otherwise noted, translations follow the published editions. Translations from Gollancz (1912) are reproduced from the edition without modernization, with its archaic English retained.

Unlike comparative formulas, invocative formulas introduce the authoritative precedent not through comparative clauses, but via instrumental or invocative constructions, introduced with *b-* ‘by/through’ or, more rarely, *b-šem* ‘in the name of’. Although these lack the ‘as X, so Y’ structure, functionally they operate with the same logic. The precedent, often expressed by naming a figure and what he once did, authorizes the desired outcome, and the instrumental/invocative clause is syntactically subordinate to the directive utterance.

For example, the previously mentioned charm *Before the Authorities* reads:

By that power which was with Joseph in the land of Egypt, *may* the beauty of the one who beareth these writs shine before kings and rulers. (Gollancz 1912, xxix [Cod. A § 7])

A further example is found in *Binding the Arrows, Daggers, Swords and All Implements of War*, which invokes Elijah’s name, together with the precedential biblical narrative:

may they [i.e., the weapons – A.C.] be bound by me *through* Elijah, the prophet, son of Eliezer the priest, who bound the heavens for three years and six months, so that no rain came down upon the earth. (Gollancz 1912, xxx [Cod. A § 9])

Two examples of invocative structures introduced with *b-šem* can be given. *For the Riches (or Sustenance) of Man* reads:

in the name of those angels who came to the house of Abraham, and blessed him, and increased the riches of his house; *so*, by the command of God, in their name, *may* everything be blessed which is, and which will be unto him who beareth these writs. Amen! (Gollancz 1912, xxxv [Cod. A § 15])

Similarly, a charm *For Trade and Business* reads:

in the name of the seventy-seven angels who surrounded Cyprian and *hngrows*, the two sorcerers, *in the name* of that angel whose name is not revealed to humans, *may* favor and love enter the hearts of all people toward the one who carries this charm. (Kaz4, fol. 41r; ed. in Nurullina 2012, 76; Author’s transl.)

As these examples show, there is no structural or functional difference between the instrumental and invocative types of clausal *historiolae*. The latter construction, which appears much more rarely than the former, introduced with *b-* ‘by, through’, needs to be distinguished

from simple invocations of authoritative names. Although both structures may be introduced with *b-šem* ‘in the name of...’, they are not functionally identical.

In simple invocations, the name(s) invoked serve primarily to authorize or empower the petition, without reference to a concrete precedent. In contrast, invocative *historiolae* invoke a name or figure in association with a precise well-known mythical act performed by the figure in the past. Thus, unlike ordinary invocations, such structures retain a (compressed) *historiola*-like element.

The following example from the charm *For Pain in the Head* illustrates a simple invocation, where the text merely enumerates a long list of divine and angelic names without alluding to specific past acts that could function as a precedent:

by the name I Am That I Am, Almighty God, Adonai, Lord of Hosts, and *by the name* Gannus and Snoonous, men of fire, and *by the name* Gabriel and Michael, by the prayers of Mar Simon Peter, we bind and anathemize all evil aches from the head, and from the eyes [...] of the person who carries these formulae. Amen! (Gollancz 1912, xxxiii [Cod. A § 13])

Occasionally, even less common types of clausal *historiolae* can be identified. For instance, in the core of a Syriac love charm we find the structure: *hāw d-* ‘the One who...’ which is repeated several times until it is resolved in a demand: *hāw nšalheb* ‘let that One inflame...’:

Another [charm]: for a man who hates his wife or for a woman whose husband hates her. *The One who* inflamed Abraham with his love for Sarah, *the One who* inflamed Isaac with his love for Rebekah, *the One who* inflamed Jacob with his love for Rachel, *the One who* inflamed David with his love for the wife of Uriah, *let that One inflame* so-and-so son of so-and-so with love to so-and-so daughter of so-and-so. (Cherkashina, Lyavdansky 2022, 33 [CaH156, fol. 42r-v])

2.2 *Historiolae* Proper

Narrative *historiolae* (Frankfurter's '*historiolae* proper') are usually defined as abbreviated narratives incorporated into the text of charms. According to Frankfurter's more recent definition, a *historiola* "is a brief or protracted narrative recited (often in past tense) in the course of ritual (e.g., for healing, cursing, protecting, empowering), to bring into being a potency in the mythic narrative that can be applied to the situation at hand" (Frankfurter 2019, 611).⁶

Modern Syriac manuscripts offer multiple cases where a mythic precedent is related in only a few words. In this section, I focus on such short narrative *historiolae* and on their distinction from clausal *historiolae*, before moving on to the more elaborate forms (including encounter charms).

A well-known case can be found in Syriac charms against nose bleeding, studied by A. Barb (1948). In one recension, the efficacy is drawn from the story of Zechariah's killing; see Barb's discussion of the sources of this motif:⁷

Zechariah had his throat cut, and the fountain of waters was stopped. So may the blood of A., the son of B., be stopped. Amen! (Gollancz 1912, liv [Cod. A § 49])

The other Syriac version, also tied to Zechariah, uses the Cana narrative, where 'the waters dried up', as a precedent to authorizing the cessation of the client's nosebleed.

Zechariah came to Cana; the waters dried up, and the blood dried up. Thus may the blood of A., the son of B., dry up from the nostril, Amen, Amen! (Gollancz 1912, lxxxiii [Cod. C § 20])

Two further examples can be given:

Christ suffered, Christ was crucified, Christ died, Christ rose. May there be cut off and expelled from the body and soul of A., the son of B, the hot and cold fever. (Gollancz 1912, xlii [Cod. A § 28, *Binding the Fever*])⁸

Jannes and Jambres practiced the magical arts; but they were unable to stand against Moses the prophet. So may there be

⁶ Cf. Heim 1892, 491; Waller 2015; van der Vliet 2019; Sowers 2017; Johnston 2015.

⁷ In what follows I put short *historiolae* in italics.

⁸ For a much more ancient predecessor of this charm against fever in the Greek papyri, see Sanzo 2014, 66.

annulled divination and the bonds of magic from off A., the son of B. So be it. Amen! Amen! (Gollancz 1912, lv [Cod. A § 51, *For the Man Upon Whom Sorcery Had Been Practiced*])

As shown by Alexey Lyavdansky (2024), among short narrative *historiolae* are instances where the *historiola* acquires a poetic form, featuring rhyming and rhythmic structure. Below I give the transcription of each charm, together with its translation.⁹

*ʿAdam kalba qrak | wa-mšīḥa neskor pumak | šliba bet li w-lak | kad
ʿal maran l-orišlem | kipe mallel | w-kalbe la nḥaḥ.*

Adam called you ‘dog’ | let Christ shut your mouth | the Cross
is between you and me | When our Lord entered Jerusalem | the
stones spoke | but the dogs did not bark. (Lyavdansky 2024, 417
[*Binding of Dogs*])

*Maryam yeldat la-mšīḥa paroqan | w-la-kyane kulhon kulhon | šatteq
ʿennon marya šatteq ʿennon.*

Mary bore Christ our savior, | And each and every creatures | The
Lord silenced them, he silenced them. (Lyavdansky 2024, 417
[*Of Dogs*])

All of these cases briefly recount an episode from the realm of biblical or parabiblical mythology, establishing a mythic precedent or paradigm for the desired outcome in the present (Frankfurter 1995, 465-6). In both brevity and function, such short narrative *historiolae* stand close to the clausal *historiolae* discussed above. However, several features distinguish the two types [tab. 1].

Table 1 Features of short narrative *historiolae* and clausal *historiolae*

Feature	Short narrative <i>historiolae</i>	Clausal <i>historiolae</i>
Syntactic frame	Independent sentences (self-standing narrative unit)	Dependent clauses introduced with ‘as X...’ or ‘by X who/that...’
Position in the charm	Open the charm (stands before the request)	No fixed position in the charm; occurs before or within the request

⁹ Transcription and translation are cited according to the source: Lyavdansky 2024. The article offers more examples of short *historiolae*, including more charms against dogs that feature stories about Mary and Christ.

Feature	Short narrative <i>historiolae</i>	Clausal <i>historiolae</i>
Multiplicity	Single narrative unit	Often occur in chains (several comparative/invocative clauses in sequence)

The first distinctive feature has been treated above. The remaining two, position in the charm and multiplicity, require brief elaboration:

- Position in the charm. Clausal *historiolae* have no fixed position. Although preceded by the title, they do not have to appear at the beginning of the text; often they follow a narrative *historiola* (short or elaborate) or other formulas. By contrast, short narrative *historiolae* consistently open the charm, appearing immediately after the title.
- Multiplicity. Narrative *historiolae* (in Frankfurter's terms, *historiolae proper*) occur singly; to my knowledge, they never form sequences. This suggests that the difference between the two phenomena goes beyond structural or syntactic formality: even a one-sentence narrative *historiola* is recognized by the tradition as the narrative core of the charm – and a charm evidently cannot have more than one core. Clausal *historiolae*, on the other hand, regularly form chains.

An illustrative sequence of at least seven elements is found in a long charm called *The Holy Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Preaching of John*, a small relevant piece of which is cited here:¹⁰

By that Divine power which healed the mother-in-law of Simon Peter of the fever-horror, and cast the devil out of the governor, and by that Will and glorious command that commanded the fish and it spewed out Jonah, and drove Adam out of Paradise: (by that voice) that cried out on the Cross, by that Power that stopped the sun, and caused the moon to stand still, and by those who cry out night and day, 'Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord, God All-powerful, heaven and earth are full of his glory'. By the prayers, too, of Hezekiah, and by the prayers of my Lady, the blessed Mary, and of Mar John, the forerunner of Christ, may he who bears on his person these writs be helped and healed. Amen! (Gollancz 1912, lxii [Cod. B § 4])

¹⁰ In a form of clausal *historiola*, the fragment alludes to the following episodes: (1) the healing of Simon Peter's mother-in-law (Mk 1:29-31; Mt 8:14-15; Lk 4:38-9); (2) the exorcism of a devil from the governor (source unclear); (3) the fish spewing out Jonah (Jonah 2:10); (4) Adam being driven out of Paradise (Gen 3:23-4); (5) the voice crying out on the cross (Mk 15:34; Mt 27:46); (6) the sun and the moon stopping (Josh 10:12-13), as well as possibly (7) the vision of Isaiah (Is 6:3); (8) the prayers of Hezekiah (2 Kgs 20; Is 38:1-8).

In addition to these formal distinctions, the difference between clausal *historiolae* and *historiolae* proper is also semantic and pragmatic. Clausal *historiolae* function as *allusions*: they compress an authoritative episode into a clause and therefore presuppose a narrative that is already shared and recognizable to the community, most often scriptural, but sometimes hagiographical (e.g., Cyprian, the Seven Sleepers).¹¹

Historiolae proper, by contrast, do not necessarily rely on an already-known story. Featuring authoritative figures (Adam, Moses, Jesus, Mary), they may relate episodes of uncertain or non-canonical origin and thus display a greater capacity for generating new narratives tailored to current ritual needs. Scholarship has alternately interpreted such narratives as traces of otherwise lost traditions or as *ad hoc* compositions created for specific rites; I return to this question below in connection with encounter charms.

2.3 Transitional Forms

Before turning to the next category, elaborate narrative charms, I would like to draw attention to a small group of problematic cases that defy the binary scheme outlined above and can be considered transitional or hybrid forms.

On the one hand, the syntax of these transitional forms aligns them with clausal *historiolae*; they are often introduced through ‘as X, so Y’ constructions or by instrumental formulas (‘by X...’). On the other hand, in most other respects they behave like *historiolae* proper; they stand at the opening of the charm, occur alone rather than in a chain, and consist of several clauses that together evoke a short narrative. The examples below thus belong to a transitional zone between simple *similia*-based constructions and narrative *historiolae*.

Below I provide two examples, both belonging to charms designed to secure success in the hunt:

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. *In the same manner as* God commanded the just and righteous Noah, (saying): ‘Make unto thee an ark of wood, and gather therein all creeping things, all the winged fowl of heaven’, so may there be gathered the birds and winged creatures of the air in front of him who bears these

¹¹ See Korsvoll 2022, who argues that biblical and parabiblical narratives in magical texts should not be understood as deriving directly from scriptural authority, but rather as drawing on a broader *storied universe* of authoritative narratives shared across religious contexts.

writs. (Gollancz 1912, lxxxiv [Cod. C § 24, *Loosening the Chase*])¹²

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. As Simon (Peter) and Andrew and John threw the nets into the sea, raising the nets with a goodly and abundant catch of plenty of fish, so do I loosen the game of so-and-so, for his dog, and for his company. (Lyavdansky 2024, 419 [*Loosening of Game*])¹³

Notably, when different variants or manuscript witnesses of the first charm are taken into account, some lack the comparative construction and open instead as a typical *historiola* (Lyavdansky 2024), reinforcing the impression that these examples occupy a fluid, intermediary position.

2.4 The Place of *Historiolae* Among the Means of Ritual Power

Having outlined the internal typology of *historiolae* (narrative vs. clausal) and discussed transitional cases, it is now possible to situate *historiolae* within the broader repertoire of devices that convey, channel, or authorize ritual power in Syriac charms.

Following Frankfurter, the scheme [chart 1] situates the typology of Syriac *historiolae* within the broader family of ‘forms of religious speech’. Notably, it does not aim to provide an exhaustive catalogue of magical tools (e.g., *voces magicae*, the incantations themselves, divine names and epithets), but rather to distinguish *historiolae* from other seemingly similar devices, such as scriptural citations or images that likewise carry narrative content.¹⁴

¹² For a recent edition and discussion of this and similar charms, see Lyavdansky 2024.

¹³ Cf. Gollancz 1912, xxxiv [Cod. A § 14].

¹⁴ Alternatively, Joseph Sanzo treats scriptural citations (including Gospel incipits) within “a sub-class of ancient *historiolae*”, arguing that “the scriptures were thought to have ‘worked’ against illness and/or demons because of the precedent or paradigm established by specific prior actions of the divine. In other words, particular episodes from the scriptures provided assurance for protection and/or healing in the present context” (Sanzo 2014, 65-9).

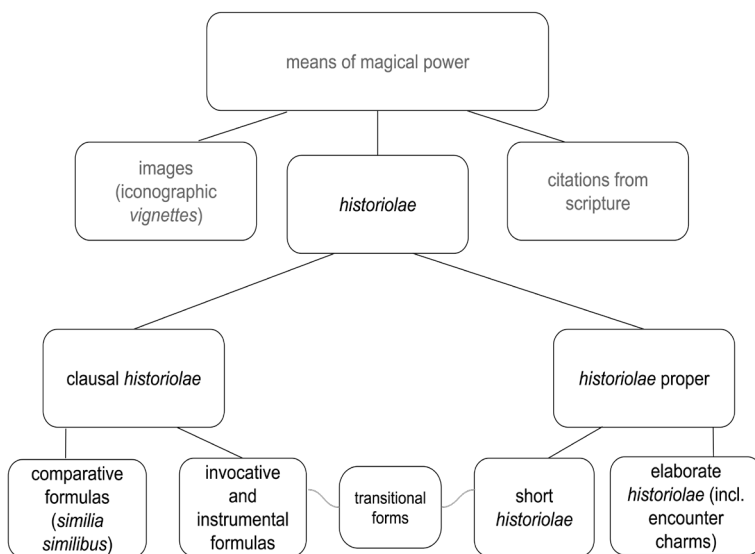


Chart 1 Typology of *historiolae*

3 Syriac Narrative Charms

After the shorter forms of *historiolae*, this section turns to charms that display more elaborate narratives. These charms differ in their structure and are designed to resolve different issues, such as healing a sickness, driving an evil force away from a human and/or protecting cattle from the Evil Eye or plague. The key elements of narrative charms are (a) characters; (b) the critical situation in which they interact, often in a dialogue; and (c) application of the precedent to the present (Ohrt 1935-36).

Most of the Syriac narrative charms can be attributed to encounter charms (*Begegnungssegen*) in Ohrt's (1935-36) definition. He identifies two subcategories within these: (A) encounter between a saint and an afflicted person *or* another saint (helper); (B) encounter between a saint and an evil spirit (cf. Ohrt 1936).¹⁵

¹⁵ Ohrt 1936 offers not only a typological discussion of *Begegnungssegen*, but also a brief historical and comparative study of the form. He traces encounter charms across Western Latin and Germanic, Greco-Egyptian, Byzantine Greek, Slavic, and Semitic traditions, arguing that Christian forms preserve and adapt earlier narrative patterns.

3.1 Encounter Charms Without Confrontation

In Syriac magic, encounter between a saint and another saint is, to my knowledge, credibly exemplified only by *The Charm of Lady Mary*. The *historiola* of the charm relates the encounter between Mary and Jesus, during which Mary asks for help and protection on behalf of the afflicted. The charm will be addressed in Section 4.

The other subcategory, encounter between a saint and an afflicted person, is likewise represented by a single charm, *Concerning the Wind That Seizes the Belly*, though its structure appears more complicated than what would be expected of this subcategory:

Our Lord and his disciples were walking on the road, and they heard the sound of crying out, and our Lord said: “What is this voice?” His disciples said to him: “It is that of so-and-so, son of so-and-so. Wind has gripped his belly and all his limbs, such that I thought teeth would be knocked from the mouth, and a child would fall from its mother”. (Jesus:) “Go into the garden of our Lord and pluck three shoots and tie three knots, one in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and another in the name of Mary and another in the name of Gabriel chief of the angels”. I am the one who blesses, O Lord, heal him by your right hand.¹⁶

Several features deserve attention here. Technically speaking, no physical encounter takes place: the crisis is perceived and reported, and Jesus intervenes by providing instructions rather than by direct healing. Despite these deviations, the charm overall fits Ohrt’s rather flexible definition of an encounter charm, since his category of *Begegnungssegen* operates with a broad understanding of ‘encounter’.

However, the *historiola* in another Syriac healing charm departs from the encounter pattern even more clearly. The charm against lumbago recalls the story about the construction of the Temple, but here Solomon is building it by his own hands. When lifting a heavy stone, he hurts his back and cries out loudly. From this point, the textual witnesses fall into two subtypes [tab. 2].¹⁷

¹⁶ The translation is based on Zellmann-Rohrer 2022, 114, with minor changes due to a different interpretation of the text. Initially, the charm was edited by Gollancz (1912, xxxviii-xxxix [Cod. A § 20]).

¹⁷ The edition and analysis of these charms can be found in Cherkashina, forthcoming. Previous editions include Gollancz 1912, xxxi [Cod. A § 10]; Chamurlieva 2009, 91-2; Zellmann-Rohrer 2022, 112; Pearson 2022, 66-7.

Table 2 Subtypes (A) and (B) of the charm against lumbago

Subtype A	Subtype B
<i>Jesus asks his disciples who is crying.</i>	<i>An angel asks Solomon whether he has ever mistreated a widow or an orphan.</i>
<i>The disciples respond that it is Solomon, who received a stone from the Holy Spirit, bent to lift it, and hurt his back.</i>	<i>Solomon responds that he has never mistreated a widow or an orphan.</i>
<i>Jesus instructs the disciples to go to the Garden of Eden and cut there three branches.</i>	<i>The angel goes to the Garden of Eden and cuts there three branches.</i>

Both groups of witnesses then relate how the three branches are used to heal the client's pain. As Michael Zellmann-Rohrer (2022) notes,¹⁸ this charm realizes two motifs widely attested in Mediterranean magic: the suffering saint and the disturbed universe.

From a typological point of view, the charm lacks both the motif of traveling and a scene of encounter. Nevertheless, it preserves several basic elements shared with encounter charms: an exposition that presents a crisis experienced by a saint, a dialogue, and an application that is incorporated within the story by aligning Solomon's treatment with that of the client. In this respect, it is comparable to the charm *Concerning the Wind That Seizes the Belly*; in both texts, a holy figure intervenes by prescribing a remedy and the narrative is applied to the present.

As will be shown in the next section, encounter charms of the second type – those that narrate the encounter between a protagonist and an evil force – are driven by different motifs: encounter and confrontation between protagonist and antagonist, interrogation of the latter by the former, and defeat or magical binding of an antagonistic evil figure.

To sum up, Syriac narrative charms that do not turn on confrontation with an antagonistic evil figure are rare. Within the small group discussed here, only *The Charm of Lady Mary* clearly fits the saint-saint encounter subtype, while *Concerning the Wind That Seizes the Belly* and the lumbago charm featuring Solomon represent healing narratives that employ an elaborate *historiola* without any encounter episode. It is therefore difficult to justify attributing these two charms to encounter charms: beyond general narrative elements (characters, exposition, dialogue, application), they lack the encounter scene that underlies encounter charms in the strict sense.

¹⁸ See also van der Vliet 2019, 345-6.

3.2 Encounter with an Evil Force

Unlike the previous category, encounter charms of this type are well attested across Syriac magical codices. Although the total number of distinct texts known at present is not large, hardly exceeding ten, several charms occur with remarkable frequency, being found in nearly every codex and on numerous amulets. Among these is *The Charm of the Angel Gabriel Against the Evil Eye*, which is found in all three codices edited by Hermann Gollancz.¹⁹

The *historiola* of this charm recounts how the Evil Eye that came out of the rock encountered the archangel Gabriel. The angel addresses the Evil Eye as ‘doomed one’ (*baʿt ʿabdānā*), cf. the Syriac epithet of the Antichrist, *bar ʿabdānā* conventionally rendered in English Bible translations as ‘son of perdition’. I cite the text with certain long incantatory formulas omitted, but preserving the overall structure relevant to the analysis.

Against the Evil Eye. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Evil Eye came out of a hard stone and met the angel Gabriel. He asked it: “Where are you going, you doomed one?” It answers him: “I am going to harm men and women, boys and girls, the souls of cattle and the birds of heaven”. The angel Gabriel says to it: “You will not enter paradise and you will not see God” [...] “In His name I bind you, O Evil, Envious Eye, green eye, blue eye and black, eye-flame, the eye that strikes and knows no pity, the eye of the seven evil neighbors – all kinds of eyes – from the body and soul (of the bearer of these letters), from his house, from his sons and daughters, from everything that he has and that he will have, (from) the bearer of these writs”. In the name of *ʾahiyah ʾašarhiyah, ʾelšaddāy, ʾadōnāy*, the Lord *Šbāʾūt*.²⁰ I write and God, mercifully takes care, so be it, amen. (Kaz4, foll. 53r-54r; ed. in Nurullina 2012, 87-8; Author’s transl.)

On the basis of this charm, Chart 2 presents the main components of the encounter charm as they appear in this example. The scheme is not meant to suggest that every Syriac encounter charm contains all these elements in exactly the same order, but rather to provide a working model for describing the recurrent narrative and ritual structure of this type.

¹⁹ Gollancz 1912, xlvi–xlix [Cod. A § 23], lxx–lxxi [Cod. B § 9], lxxxii [Cod. C § 19].

²⁰ For the Jewish origins of this common magical formula, that made its way into Christian, as well as Muslim magic, see Bohak 2008, 305-7.

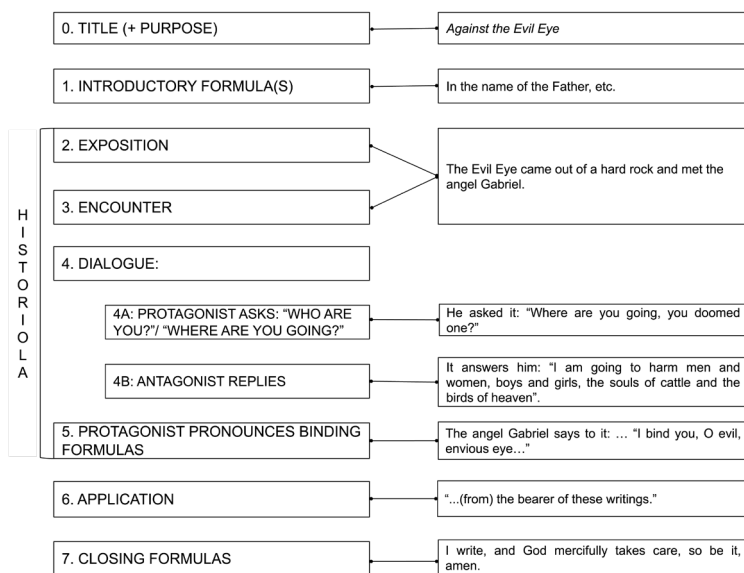


Chart 2 Structure of an encounter charm

Returning to a point raised in the section on clausal *historiolae* versus *historiola* proper, I suggested there that the difference is not only formal but also pragmatic. Whereas clausal *historiolae* function as compressed allusions and therefore tend to presuppose a recognizable narrative, *historiola* proper, including those embedded in encounter charms, do not always appear to depend on the audience's prior knowledge of a specific mythic narrative. Rather, the source of their authority may lie within the ritual itself.²¹ The narrated precedent of Syriac encounter charms is staged as a ritual scenario in which an authoritative protagonist confronts and overcomes an antagonistic force, and the application explicitly relocates that precedent to the client's here-and-now. In this respect, the template of the encounter charm in Chart 2 can be read not merely as a descriptive scheme but as a reusable structural pattern. While particular narrative details vary, the stable sequence of components (encounter, interrogation, self-disclosure, binding speech, and application) gives the charm its ritual force by presenting the hostile power as first identified, then questioned, and finally bound or expelled from the client.

²¹ For an analysis of an elaborate *historiola* attested in three Jewish Babylonian Aramaic incantation bowls, in which the narration becomes ritually effective through its inscription or recitation, see Shaked 2011, 199-201.

This perspective also bears on the question of origins, especially for *historiolae* that narrate a precedent not otherwise attested outside the magical text; do such episodes preserve a now-lost tradition or are they the product of ritual creativity, composed for a specific ritual purpose?²² Van der Vliet (1995, 401) explicitly raises the possibility of an *ad hoc* mythology, yet, in his Coptic material related to the narrative about the fall of Satan, he concludes that practitioners “invented very little”, explaining most apparent innovations as adaptations of motifs shaped by ritual micro-structure and rhetorical aims. In contrast, Frankfurter (2019, 611) is more open to the idea that *historiolae* treat the scriptural and inherited material creatively, with some narratives potentially “invented *ad hoc*” and nevertheless recited “as though canonical” (Frankfurter 1995, 463) precisely because he sees *historiolae* as ritual speech acts: their recitation creates and recognizes a mythic situation and mediate potency into the present performance through the recitation itself and the deployment of names and ritual objects (Frankfurter 2019, 612).

Returning to the template, in the example of our charm, the *protagonist* is the archangel Gabriel, whereas the *antagonist* is the Evil Eye. The exposition is typically extremely brief, yet other encounter charms, such as *The Charm of Mar ‘Aḏdišo’*, occasionally contain a more elaborate introduction:

The prayer, request, petition, and supplication of Mar ‘Abd-īshō’, the monk and hermit of God, who was among the dumb beasts on the Friday, which is the Passion (sc. day) of our Lord and Redeemer, at the time when the evil spirit, in the likeness of a hateful woman of dark appearance, was coming down from the Mount of Eden, and she appeared unto him, and called him by name, ‘Abd-īshō’. (Gollancz 1912, lxviii [Cod. B § 7, *The Anathema of Mar ‘Abd-īshō’, the Monk and Hermit*])

Here, the *historiola* of the saint’s confrontation with the ‘child-stealing witch’ is preceded by a customary introductory section characteristic of charms of the anathema genre. In the charms of this genre, a Christian saint speaks; each text opens with a brief *historiola* recalling the moment when the figure uttered the prayer that follows. The prayer itself then functions as the incantation, often framed as being pronounced immediately before the saint’s martyrdom (Hunter 1987; 1990; Cherkashina, forthcoming). This scheme is very common and underlies a number of widely circulating Syriac

22 This issue has been addressed from different angles in Frankfurter 1995, 463-4; van der Vliet 1995, 401; Versnel 2002, 122-6; Waller 2015, 267-74.

charms attributed to St. George,²³ Mār Tamsīs,²⁴ Rabbān Hurmīzd,²⁵ Daniel,²⁶ Mār Shallīṭā,²⁷ St. Paul (Nurullina 2012, 94-6), and Cyprian (Nurullina 2012, 48-53; Hunter 2018).

Returning to our representative encounter charm *Against the Evil Eye*, we see that, at the end of Gabriel's speech, there occurs an *application*, that is, the textual element that transfers the effect of the narrated precedent from the mythical realm into the present ritual moment and, more concretely, to the client.²⁸ Rather than standing as a separate unit, the application here is embedded in the binding formulae pronounced by the angel Gabriel. A similar pattern is found in other Syriac encounter charms; the application is commonly incorporated into the protagonist's direct speech, rather than formulated independently.

Most of the Syriac encounter charms – *Against the Evil Eye* (Jesus-version), *The Charm of Mar 'Aḏīšo'*, *The Charm of Simon Cephas*, *Binding of Scorpions and Snakes*, and *The Charm of King Solomon*²⁹ – follow this general template. The last (*The Charm of King Solomon*), however, departs from the pattern; it incorporates a narrative reminiscent of the opening chapters of the *Testament of Solomon*, so that the narrative segment is markedly longer and more complex than is typical for encounter charms.³⁰

Several more encounter charms incorporate some of the elements of the outlined structure, but deviate from the scheme in one way or another:

1. *Against the Pestilence of Small Cattle* (Nurullina 2012, 84-5, 178). Moses is tending his flock when it is struck by pestilence (*šhīn*). He utters a prayer that binds and expels the disease. The charm does not contain dialogue, and the antagonist is not personified.

23 Gollancz 1912, xxvi-xxvii [Cod. A § 5], lxx [Cod. B § 8], lxxiv [Cod. C § 2].

24 Gollancz 1912, xxxii [Cod. A § 12]; Hunter 2018.

25 Gollancz 1912, xlii [Cod. A § 27].

26 Gollancz 1912, xlvi [Cod. A § 35], lxxx [Cod. C § 14].

27 Gollancz 1912, lii [Cod. A § 46].

28 See also Frankfurter (1995, 462-3). This is defined as “the collapse of mythic/present time” by Blumell, Dosoo (2018, 222).

29 Editions: *The Charm of Mār 'Aḏīšo'* and *The Charm of Simon Cephas* see the next section in this article; *Binding of Scorpions and Snakes*: Nurullina 2012, 73-4, 157-60; Zellmann-Rohrer 2022, 121-2. The charm *Against the Evil Eye*, preserved in the same manuscript as our exemplary charm (Kaz4), features Jesus as the protagonist. Riding a donkey through the streets of Jerusalem, he meets the Evil Eye, asks where it is going, and, upon hearing the reply, pronounces the incantation (Nurullina 2012, 97-9). A brief analysis of the charm is also found in Cherkashina, forthcoming.

30 Edited in Russian in Cherkashina 2021, the English edition of the charm will appear in Cherkashina, forthcoming.

2. *Binding the Evil Apparition* (Gollancz 1912, xxxix-xl [Cod. A § 22]). Moses is tending sheep between seven mountains when he beholds three evil apparitions: a man, a lion, and an eagle. An incantation follows, banishing these figures. The charm contains no dialogue, and it is unclear whether the incantation is voiced by Moses or by an anonymous practitioner.
3. *[Ban for] the Fold of Cattle* (Gollancz 1912, lxxi [Cod. B § 10]). The charm opens with a dialogue:
“Seven accursed brothers, accursed sons, destructive ones, sons of men of destruction! Why do you creep along on your knees and move upon your hands?” and they replied: “We go on our hands, so that we may eat flesh, and we crawl along upon our hands, so that we may drink blood”.

A binding spell, spoken by an anonymous protagonist, follows. The *historiola*, however, lacks exposition and there is no narrative description of the encounter.

4 The Syriac Version of the St. Sisinnius Legend

This final section uses the St. Sisinnius Legend as a case study for the analysis of *historiolae* in the Syriac magical tradition. It first introduces the wider transmission of this narrative tradition and its two main types, and then examines three Syriac charms in which related motifs are preserved: *The Charm of Mār ‘Abdīšo’*, *The Charm of the Blessed Lady Mary*, and *The Charm of Simon Cephas*. Particular attention is paid to narrative structure, textual transmission, and the function of illustrations.

4.1 The St. Sisinnius Legend: Introduction

The St. Sisinnius Legend (hereafter SL) is an umbrella designation for a wide range of individual charms, hagiographic legends, prayers, and amulets that attest to a shared narrative pattern: a protagonist (or protagonists) confronts an evil being that targets pregnant women and young children. Versions of this legend are attested in Christian, Muslim, Jewish and pagan magical traditions of the Middle East, the Mediterranean, Europe and the Caucasus.³¹ In

³¹ The following key works provide comparative analysis of sources from different traditions: Gaster 1900; Greenfield 1989; Badalanova Geller 2015. See also the further references cited below in connection with individual traditions, which frequently draw on comparative material.

Byzantine magic, Sisinnius or the Archangel Michael opposes Gullou (Gaster 1900; Greenfield 1989; Chekha 2017). In Arabic magic, the narrative is associated with Solomon (Sulaymān), who confronts a demon called Qarīna, Tābi'ah, or 'Umm aṣ-Ṣibyān (Winkler 1931). In Jewish magic, the legend is attested through two key narratives: the Smamit story and the prophet Elijah's confrontation with Lilith.³² The deeper roots of the child-stealing demon or demons can be traced back to Mesopotamia, above all to the figure of Lamaštu, who primarily targets babies and young children and is the object of a rich tradition of rituals, amulets, and incantations (Scurlock 1991; Wiggermann 2000; Farber 2014). Some of these texts refer to her as having seven names (Wiggermann 2000, 242; Farber 2014, 144-5).

In 1900, Moses Gaster published a pioneering comparative study that traced the history of the 'child-stealing witch' motif from *The Testament of Solomon* to modern charms from Romania, South Russia, and Kurdistan (Gaster 1900). His survey examined a wide range of versions, including Greek, Romanian, Slavic, Hebrew, and Syriac texts. The Syriac example he used was *The Charm of Mār 'Aḇdīšo' Against Teb'ā*, based on Gollancz's earlier edition (1898).

More recently, the legend has been studied within the framework of a project entitled *St. Sisinnius' Legend in Folklore and Written Traditions of the Near East, Balkans, and Eastern Europe*, headed by Prof. Andrey Toporkov, Institute of World Literature, Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow (Toporkov 2019).

Gaster identified two primary plots in SL, attested over one and a half millennia. Following Greenfield (1989), they are usually referred to as the 'Michael-type' and the 'Sisinnius/Melitene-type'.

The Michael-type of text is typically an encounter charm, which describes a saint, often Michael, Elijah, or Sisinnius, who encounters a witch or demoness while he is traveling. He asks where she is going, and she replies that she intends to harm a woman in labor or a newborn child. The saint then demands that she reveal her secret names – often arranged in fixed numbers, such as 9, 12, or 40 – and then compels her to swear an oath that she will not harm anyone in any place where her names, or the names of the angels, are written or pronounced. To this type (among others) belong Jewish charms with the *historiola* of Elijah the Prophet confronting Lilith, Arabic charms featuring Sulaymān vs. Qarīna, Romanian charms against Avestitza, and the Syriac *Charm of Mār 'Aḇdīšo' Against Teb'ā* (Toporkov 2019).

The Sisinnius/Melitene-type of text narrates the story of a demoness who kills the children of a woman (called Melitene in the Greek tradition). The protagonist(s) – typically Sisinnius (or he and

32 Naveh, Shaked 1998, 104-8, 111-22; Ford 2016; Elitzur-Leiman 2016; Harari 2017, 136, 210-11; Lyavdansky 2017; Kaspina 2017.

his brothers) – pursue her, overtake her, and force her to bring the children back alive. At the end of the encounter, she reveals all her names and promises not to harm those who invoke them or who call upon the name(s) of the protagonist(s). Although charms that belong to this type do contain an episode of encounter between the protagonist and the antagonist, they usually incorporate a more complex narrative, only part of which is represented by this confrontation. To this type belong the late antique Jewish story of Smamit, found on incantation bowls, the Ethiopian legend of St. Sisinnius, and the *Syriac Charm of Simon Cephas Against Teb'ā*.

4.2 The St. Sisinnius Legend in Syriac Charms

The St. Sisinnius Legend is used in this section as a case study for the analysis of *historiolae* in the Syriac magical tradition. The legend functions here not as a single text, but as a narrative motif that connects the *historiolae* embedded in three different Syriac charms. The section first offers a brief introduction to the study of this legend across different magical traditions, and then turns to a sequential analysis of the three Syriac charms.

The aim is to show how this ancient and widely transmitted motif is realized in the form of a *historiola* in different Syriac texts. In doing so, the section also considers aspects of *historiolae* beyond their basic structure: the motifs they preserve, the ways in which they are incorporated into the broader composition of the charm, and the ways in which the textual narrative is supported visually through illustrations.

Three Syriac charms incorporate *historiolae* that contain the motifs outlined above: *The Charm of Mār 'Aḇdīšo'*, *The Charm of the Blessed Lady Mary*, and *The Charm of Simon Cephas*. In what follows, each charm is presented in the form of a catalogue entry which lists its textual witnesses, provides a brief description, and notes parallels and references. Unlike the first two charms, the third charm, which features Simon Cephas, has not previously been translated into English in one of its redactions. Therefore, its text and translation are reproduced at the end of this section.

4.2.1 *The Charm of Mār 'Aḇdīšo' Against Teb'ā*

Introduction This encounter charm is attested in most of the known Syriac codices and amulets. The earliest copy – discovered in Hadath Grotto, Lebanon – can be dated to the thirteenth century (Abousamra 2013). The charm belongs to the Michael-type of SL.

The two lists of secret names which the demoness reveals to the saint, containing 4 and 12 names respectively, include names

well known from Aramaic magical texts, such as *Lēlītā* ('Lilith') and *Malwītā* ('the accompanying demon'), alongside names of Greek (*Gullōs*, cf. Gr. Γελλώ), Arabic (*Teb'ā*, cf. Arb. *tābi'a*), Iranian (*Zardūk*, cf. MP *Zārdūxt*), and Sumerian (*Dōmos*, *Dyarbā*, cf. Sum. *dumu-zi* and *dili-bad*) origin.³³ Taken together with numerous parallels from Mediterranean cultures and beyond, this onomastic mixture suggests a long and layered history of transmission involving complex interactions with neighboring magical traditions.

The *historiola* of the charm may best be understood as the result of a blending of hagiographic and magical traditions. While the scene recalls well-known hagiographic narratives of the temptation of saints, the demoness's expressed intention to become the saint's wife may tentatively reflect a Christianized elaboration of the Jewish *geṭ*-motif known from Aramaic incantation bowls against demons. In this magical framework, the *geṭ* is effective precisely because sexual interaction between a human and a demon was considered possible and because such interaction was understood to entail "some sort of obligation akin to that which accompanies the marital status" (Levene 2003, 19; cf. Folmer 2016).

Titles *The Charm of Mār 'Aḥdīšo' Against Teb'ā; The Charm of Mār 'Aḥdīšo' Against Teb'ā of Women; The Charm of Mār 'Aḥdīšo' Against Teb'ā, the Killer of Women and Children.*

Manuscripts The charm appears *passim* in Syriac magical manuscripts. In view of its ubiquity, an exhaustive list of witnesses is not provided here; representative manuscripts can be consulted in the editions cited below.

Editions Hazard 1893; Gollancz 1898; Gollancz 1912 (Cod. B § 7, Cod. C § 25); Hunter 1999; Nurullina 2012, 53-6; Abousamra 2013; Abousamra, Schmidt 2014; Lyavdansky, Nurullina 2017; Talay, Rudolf, Kouriyhe 2020; Schmidt 2021; Pearson 2022, 59-64.

Function Protection of women and children against attacks by a demoness associated with miscarriages and infant death.

Agents Protagonist = Mār 'Aḥdīšo'; antagonist = Teb'ā.

Story On Good Friday at the ninth hour, the ascetic 'Aḥdīšo', who has spent forty years in the wilderness, is approached by a demonic woman who has come in order 'to become his wife'. He demands that

³³ Comparative and etymological analysis of the lists of the names across different Syriac manuscripts can be found in Lyavdansky, Nurullina 2017.

she reveal her identity. The demoness discloses two sets of names: a short list of 4 names, and an extended list of 12. She swears an oath never to enter any home or harm anyone who wears the amulet inscribed with these names. 'Aḥdišo' then binds her by pronouncing an incantation.

Iconography The images [figs 1-2] depict the confrontation of the saint with a demon using two basic variations; the saint is either on horseback, replicating the so-called 'holy rider',³⁴ or he is standing.



Figure 1
MS StPS1. Inscriptions:
"Aḥdišo" (upper margin);
"Th(is is) Lēlītā" (lower
margin). Photo by Alexey
Lyavdansky, © The Private
Collection of the late Mikhail
Sado



Figure 2
MS StPS5b, fol. 48r.
No inscriptions.
Photo by Alexey Lyavdansky,
© The Private Collection
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Further Bibliography Gaster 1900; Krämer 1924; Krämer 1928; Winkler 1931; Naveh, Shaked 1998; Hunter 1987; 1990.

³⁴ 'Aḥdišo' is portrayed this way in Hunter 1999; Schmidt 2021. As Ewa Balicka-Witakowska (2008, 789) notes, "Although, according to his *vita*, only St. George should have been portrayed as an equestrian, the ability to conquer ascribed to other protectors allowed them to be represented within the iconographical scheme normally reserved for equestrian saints". See the discussion below in relation to Lady Mary.

reflexes of the names of additional protagonists in the Jewish versions of the legend. More tentatively, *sssnwr* and *snqlws/sm'lws* in this charm likely represent permutations of *snsnwy* and *smnglwp* respectively. If this identification is correct, the latter name in particular would point to the Jewish Palestinian version of the legend, whereas the Babylonian sources have *s-n-g-r* rather than *s-n-g-l* at the base of this name (Lyavdansky 2017, 59). At the same time, the evidential value of this so-far isolated Syriac attestation is difficult to assess. These garbled forms of the protagonists of the Jewish version of the SL are currently found only in Lo5281. Nonetheless, they seem to point to influence from the Jewish tradition of the SL, although this indication remains tentative and awaits clarification from future discoveries.

Titles *The Anathema of My Lady, the Blessed Mary, which is of Avail for Sick Persons; The Charm of the Blessed Mary for Women Whose Children Do not Survive; The Charm of the Blessed Mary Against Any Pain and Sickness; The Charm of the Blessed Mary Against Any Demon and Satan.*

Manuscripts G. B (Gollancz Cod. B) § 6; CaH159; NY2941/4; Kaz4, foll. 30r-34v; StPS5b, foll. 58r-61v; LoA16; StPSnd1; AynCDM18, foll. 18r-24r; Mo417, fol. 21v; LoA15; Ye72a; Ye72b; BeZ; StPS1.

Editions Gollancz 1912 (Cod. B § 6); Nurullina 2012, 65-8; Assad 2015; Lyavdansky, Nurullina 2017; Talay, Rudolf, Kouriyhe 2020; Schmidt 2021.

Function Fertility and safe childbirth, demonic protection, healing of any sickness.

Agents Mary and Jesus.

Story Mary comes from the mount of Eden to meet Jesus, who has just entered Jerusalem and is being welcomed by the crowds. Jesus asks her, "Where are you going?" She replies that she has come to ask him one request. Jesus promises to grant it. Mary implores him to protect women and children from a shape-shifting demoness known by many names (Zardoḳ, Mīdoḳ, Lēlītā, etc.). This demoness deceives both men and women and strangles unborn and newborn children. Mary prays that the sick will be healed, the barren will conceive, and birthing mothers will deliver without pain. She also asks that anyone who wears or invokes the written charm be freed from all demonic and magical harm.

Iconography The iconography associated with this charm typically depicts either Jesus entering Jerusalem or Lady Mary with the young Jesus [figs 3-4].³⁷ The former is a well-known motif, attested in the Syriac manuscripts of the Gospels.³⁸ The latter image is apparently not directly related to the narrative of the charm, but still conveys power, since the parental relationship between Jesus and Mary forms the basis of her plea. The third type of image associated with this charm depicts Lady Mary on horseback; see Cod. B § 6 (Gollancz 1912, 60).



Figure 3
MS StPSnd1. Mary and Jesus.
No inscriptions.
Photo by Alexey Lyavdansky,
© The Private Collection
of the late Mikhail Sado

³⁷ For images depicting Mary with Jesus in a cradle, see also Schmidt 2021, 19, and Assad 2015, 46.

³⁸ See, for instance, MS Borg. sir. 169 in the Vatican library (fol. 64r), as well as Schapiro 1973, regarding the same motif in the manuscript of the *Diatessaron*.



Figure 4

MS NY2941/4, New York Public Library.
Inscriptions: "This is Jesus entering
Jerusalem" (upper left corner);
"This is a donkey" (center);
"These are the children of Israel in
whose hands there is hosanna" (lower
margin, between the figures).
Photo by Alexey Lyavdansky,
manuscript in the public domain

4.2.3 *The Charm of Simon Cephas Against Teb'ā*

Introduction This charm appears to be the rarest of the three charms in the Syriac tradition that incorporate motifs from SL. One of the redactions of the charm (A) blends the two types of SL narratives: the Sisinnius/Melitene-type - with the narrative of a woman whose children have died due to demonic intervention - and the Michael-type - with the encounter scene that relates how Simon Cephas interrogates the demon and learns her names. Although the text functions as a charm, its elaborate narrative structure strongly resembles a hagiographical legend, portraying St. Peter (Simon Cephas) performing a miracle and converting "the city of Asia" to Christianity.

Titles *The Charm of Simon Cephas for Women Whose Children Do not Survive Because of the Demon; The Charm of Simon Cephas for Women; The Charm of Simon Cephas Against Teb'ā of Women.*

Manuscripts NY2941/4; Kaz4, foll. 34v-37r; Ye72b; StPSnd1; StPS5b, foll. 62r-63r (preserved in part).

Editions Nurullina 2012, 68-70; Lyavdansky, Nurullina 2017; Schmidt 2021.

Function Fertility and safe childbirth, demonic protection.

Agents Protagonist = Simon Cephas (St. Peter); antagonist = Teb'ā; afflicted person = woman in labor (Story B: king's wife).

Story Two versions of the narrative are found across the four manuscripts that preserve the charm.

- Story A (Kaz4, NY2941/4, StPSnd1, StPS5b, edited below):
While traveling through the city of Asia, Simon Cephas encounters a woman in the midst of childbirth, surrounded by people with cymbals and drums. A demon appears, intending to kill the newborn. At the very moment the child is born, it dies. The mother sends word to Simon, who tells them the child will live if baptized. The mother agrees, and Simon resurrects the child through prayer. Simon then confronts the demon, asking for her name. The demon replies with a list. Simon binds the demon using divine names.
- Story B (Ye72b):
After Pentecost, Simon travels and reaches the city of Asia. There he meets the king and asks whom the people of the city worship. Finding out that they practice idolatry, Simon reproaches the king. The king's wife has by that time lost seven newborn children. When she gives birth again, musicians with different instruments gather to protect her from demonic attacks, but the newborn child dies. Simon offers to resurrect the child, if the king promises to believe in Christ. The king agrees. Simon prays and revives the child, converting the whole city. The saint asks the demon why he kills children. The demon confesses that he kills unborn children to prevent humans from praising God, admitting that his power extends until the child reaches seven years of age. Simon then banishes the demon, declaring that in any place where the names of Jesus and Simon Cephas are invoked, the demon will no longer have power.

Iconography The two images [figs 5-6] employ markedly different iconographic schemes. Figure 6 represents a common mode of depicting a saint's victory over a demon: Simon Cephas is shown mounted on a white horse, striking with a spear a standing black demon with long hair. The element in the upper right corner cannot be securely identified. Figure 5, by contrast, preserves a scene that appears to be very rare in Syriac magical manuscripts and includes four figures. From left to right, Simon Cephas is shown grasping the demon by the hair. The demon's body is represented in profile, while its face is shown frontally; its hands and feet terminate in what appear to be hooves. The demon reaches toward a child, whose smaller scale in comparison with the adult figures is achieved mainly by the absence of legs. To the right of the child stands his mother, whose outstretched right hand touches the child's head.



Figure 5 MS NY2941/4, New York Public Library. Inscriptions (from left to right): “This is Simon Cephas”; “This is the demon *prwn*”; “This is a child”; “This is the mother of the child”.
Photo by Alexey Lyavdansky, manuscript in the public domain



Figure 6
MS StPSnd1. Inscriptions:
"Teb'ā" (on the left); "Mār
Šem'on (Simon Cephas)"
(on both sides of the figure).
Photo by Alexey Lyavdansky,
© The Private Collection
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4.2.3.1 Text and Translation

This section edits and translates into English a previously unpublished redaction of the charm, preserved in four witnesses: Kaz4 (foll. 34v-37r), StPSnd1, StPS5b (foll. 62r-63r) and NY2941/4 (amulet). Like the amulet from the Matenadaran edited by Schmidt (2021), NY2941/4 contains all three charms related to the Syriac version of SL, selected to assist a female client with fertility and childbirth.

The narrative section of the charm presents a complex plot that can be divided into the following episodes:

1. Exposition. Simon travels and arrives in the city of Asia. He encounters a woman in labor, surrounded by a crowd attempting to ward off a demon by means of musical instruments. Simon does not initially intervene or interact with the woman. She gives birth to a boy, whom the demon kills.
2. First dialogue. Simon learns that the demon has killed the child. He offers to restore the boy to life on the condition that he be baptized. The woman replies that, if he does so, the entire city will convert to Christianity. Simon revives the child.
3. Second dialogue. After pronouncing the binding formulae, Simon interrogates the demon, asking for its name and its occupation. The demon reveals four names and an epithet. Simon then binds it again.

The *historiola* thus combines both narrative patterns associated with the two types of encounter charms discussed above: that with an afflicted person and that with an evil spirit. Each pattern is structured around its own dialogue. Notably, however, the interaction with the

child's mother takes the form of an explicit transaction between the saint and the bereaved woman.

A comparison with the other redaction of the charm, found in Ye72b, reveals several major discrepancies. First, the Ye72b redaction preserves a more fully developed exposition, which includes an additional dialogue between Simon and the king of Asia. From this conversation we learn that the city worships idols and that the demon has previously killed seven children of the same woman, who is identified as the king's wife. Simon reproaches the king for his idolatry; the episode as a whole results in a narrative that is more expansive and more similar to a hagiographical composition. Another noteworthy distinction is that, in the Ye72 redaction, the demon does not reveal any secret names. This absence, together with the details provided in the exposition, aligns the narrative more consistently with the Sisinnius/Melitene-type, in which the focus lies on the pursuit of the child-killing demon and the restoration of the killed children, rather than on the interrogation of the demon about its secret names. The Ye72b redaction may therefore be regarded as a comparatively 'pure' representative of the Sisinnius/Melitene-type.

By contrast, the text and translation presented below appear to be an abbreviated yet hybrid form of the SL narrative. While it preserves the Melitene-type structure of loss of children and restitution, it simultaneously incorporates an interrogation of the demon about its secret names, a feature characteristic of the Michael-type encounter charms.

Only one of the names in the redaction below corresponds to the tradition of demonic names attested in *The Charm of Mār 'Aḫdīšo'* and *The Charm of Lady Mary*, namely *Mḥa* 'altā, which is best understood as a distorted variant of the widely attested Aramaic demonic name *Mḥakkaltā*. Notably, *Bzom* (ܒܙܡ), another name of the demon, may reflect the influence of the Byzantine tradition, where *Βυζοῦ* and *Βηξοῦν* appear as variants of the more well-known name of the 'child-stealing witch', *Αβυζοῦ* 'Abyzouth'.

The text is based on Kaz4, with occasional significant readings from the other witnesses noted in the footnotes. Kaz4, StPSnd1, and StPS5b (preserved only in part) show almost no textual discrepancies, whereas the fourth witness, NY2941/4, diverges somewhat and contains a larger number of differences. Nevertheless, all four manuscripts transmit a very similar text, especially in the narrative section. Among the variants in NY2941/4, particularly noteworthy is an additional demon name, *ܦܪܘܢ* (*prwn*), for which NY2941/4 appears to be the only witness.

39 The epithet of Teb'ā is added on the margin of Kaz4, while NY2941/4 says only ܬܝܒܐ ܕܢܝܢܐ. StPSnd1 says ܬܝܒܐ ܕܢܝܢܐ 'of women'.

40 NY2941/4 says: **הַתְּפִלָּה וְהַבְּקָשָׁה וְהַחֲפָצָה שֶׁל מָר שִׁמְעוֹן כֶּפֶס**, 'The prayer, supplication and request of Mar Simon Cephas, who was walking...'.¹⁰

41 NY2941/4 adds: **בֶּן** 'son'.

42 NY2941/4 has ~~an~~ 'one' instead.

43 NY2941/4 has 𐤒𐤓𐤕 '(was) standing' instead.

44 NY2941/4 adds: **ḥṣḏḏ** 'to your God'.

45 NY2941/4 adds: 𐤁𐤏𐤃𐤁 'evil'.

46 Omitted in NY2941/4.

47 NY2941/4 reads: 'מִן הַגִּידִים מִן הַזְּרָעִים מִן הַבְּתָרָה מִן הַחֲסִים מִן הַנֶּפֶשׁ מִן הַחַיִּים' 'from the body and the soul, from the offspring and the womb and all limbs of the bearer of these writs'. StPSnd1 agrees with Kaz4, except that StPSnd1 lacks the crossed-out word מִן הַחֲסִים.

48 NY2941/4 adds: ܕܢܗܝܢ ܕܥܡܐ 'on the earth'.

49 NY2941/4 adds:  'and *prwn*'. Compare the captions to the image from this MS above.

50 The scribe inserted ههههه 'lines' above the line. NY2941/4 has: مع فلههههه مع وندكه with the female client's name following, which means 'from the body and the offspring of PN'.

51 NY2941/4 has a different rather peculiar formula: **بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ** 'on her name, as Rome (was sealed) by Peter and Paul, and as Byzantine (was sealed) by the cross, from now and unto ages of ages, truly, amen'.

Translation

The Charm of Simon Cephas against Teb'ā, the she-killer of women and children. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Once when Simon Cephas was traveling, passing through the city of Asia, he found a certain woman who was lying in pain. Around her stood many women, and (there were) men with cymbals, and she was seized by pain, because she was about to give birth. Behold, before her appeared a cursed demon, in order that, as soon as the child was born, he might kill him. Simon Cephas, then, was proclaiming and teaching the glory of baptism for the remission of sins. At that moment, the woman who lay in pain gave birth to a son, and while Simon was asking to see⁵² what the fate of the boy would be, she sent to him to say that the child had died. Simon Cephas said to them: "If you wish that the child should live, let him become a Christian". The mother of the child answered: "If the boy lives, the whole city will turn to the faith which you proclaim". Simon rushed to the child,⁵³ brought him back to life, and handed him to his mother, and she received him with great joy. Simon Cephas said to that demon: "I bind you and I adjure you by the name of 'ahiyah 'ašarhiyah, 'ešaddāy, 'adōnāy, the Lord Šbā'ūt, from the bodies and from all the limbs of the bearers of these writs, from their sons and daughters, so let it be, amen". Simon Cephas said to her: "What is your name, and what is your occupation?" That demon answered: "Know, O Simon, that I have many names by which I am called: Le'zta, Saggitā, Mba'alta, and Bzōm, the strangler of children". Simon said to that demon: "I bind you and I adjure you by the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, from the bodies and limbs of the bearers of these writs, from their sons and daughters, from now and unto ages of ages, amen". This charm is sealed and confirmed by the living sign of the victorious Cross, now and always, and unto ages of ages.

5 Conclusion

The phenomenon of *historiolae* within the corpus of Christian Syriac magical texts (preserved predominantly in codices and amulets from the eighteenth-twentieth centuries) is not new to academia. However, a working typology of Syriac *historiolae* found in this material which is relevant to existing theoretical models (in particular David Frankfurter's influential scheme) has been a desideratum up to

⁵² It remains unclear whether Simon was asking those present about the child's fate or praying to God to learn what had happened.

⁵³ Cf. Acts 20:10.

now. By distinguishing between clausal *historiolae*, brief narrative *historiolae*, and more elaborate narrative forms, including encounter charms, this article has sought to provide a framework for describing the diversity of Syriac charms that employ embedded narratives.

The majority of more elaborate narrative *historiolae* can be classified as encounter charms. A general structural scheme of the encounter charm, based on the charm *Against the Evil Eye*, identifies the component parts of such a charm.

The article concludes with a case study of Syriac charms connected to the St. Sisinnius Legend, including the first English translation of one redaction of *The Charm of Simon Cephas*.

Although most of the surviving Syriac magical manuscripts are relatively late, the tradition they preserve is demonstrably older. Nevertheless, Syriac magic has so far remained marginal within broader discussions of *historiolae*. The richness of the Syriac material, illustrated here by multiple examples, together with the typology proposed in this article, demonstrates that Syriac magical texts constitute an important body of evidence for future typological and comparative studies of *historiolae*.

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