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Notes on Two Amulets (Tyszkiewicz and de Serres) Inscribed with Sumerian Incantations

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Abstract: This study supplements a previous paper that we published in this periodical: The Tyszkiewicz Amulet, a Chalcedony Pendant Inscribed with an Incantation on Thorn Bush: Notes on an Early Sumerian *Kultmittelbeschwörung*, AoF 46, 174–185. It compares the Tyszkiewicz amulet to another similar amulet formerly kept in the de Serres Collection and proposes that the two objects originate from the same workshop. Although the de Serres amulet bears a different incantation from the *Udug-ḥul* series, the two amulets are strikingly similar with regard to physical as well as textual aspects, the latter including the incorporation of certain ‘zi-litany’ sections.

Keywords: amulet, de Serres Collection, Kultmittelbeschwörung, Sumerian incantation, Tyszkiewicz Collection, *Udug-ḥul*

The present paper focuses on two amulets, called Tyszkiewicz (Fig. 1: 1) and de Serres (Fig. 1: 2) after their first collectors. The former was mentioned in an auction catalogue in 1898 and first published by the present authors in 2019, while the latter was published by W.G. Lambert in 1976, after which it appeared in further publications.¹ The Tyszkiewicz amulet turned up at the auction of the Tyszkiewicz Collection held in Paris on 8–10 June 1898. It was acquired by E.P. Warren (1860–1928), who sold it to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston in the same year.² As regards its origin, Fröehner (1898: 82 no. 242), the author of the auction catalogue, noted that the object was “trouvée à Tell Amran (Babylonie)”; however, there is no further evidence to confirm this. The de Serres amulet, the present whereabouts of which are unknown, appeared first in the collection of Jean Mariaud de Serres (Lambert 1976: 57). There is no information available concerning its possible provenance. We would like to draw attention to the striking similarities between the two amulets in terms of their material, dimensions, shape, and the form of their inscriptions. In the following, we provide copies, transliterations, translations, and descriptions of the two amulets, and discuss their inscriptions, date and possible function.

1 The amulet was published with two further objects: an Old Babylonian letter and a soft stone (clinochlore) amulet inscribed with an incantation Lambert (1976: 58, 60–61). The text of the amulet studied here was mentioned by Geller (1985: 97–98 footnotes 248 and 249), who discussed it as an Old or Middle Babylonian forerunner of the incantation series *Udug-ḥul* Tablet 4. The incantations inscribed on the amulet were recently discussed by Zomer (2018: 211 and 240), who suggested that the two sides of the amulet contain different incantations: the obverse an excerpted version of the series *Udug-ḥul*, the reverse an extract from the Zi-pa₃ incantations *Gattung* II. The characteristics of the amulet were described recently by Kotansky (2019: 516). The transliteration of its text can also be found on CDLI no. P363158.

2 For further details regarding the modern owners, see Bácskay/Niederreiter (2019: 175).

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Fig. 1: (1) Tyszkiewicz amulet (MFA 98.697, 30.3 × 19.0 × 8.0 mm. Based on Bácskay/Niederreiter 2019: 176 fig. 2) and (2) de Serres amulet (31 × 20 × 8.5 mm. Based on Lambert 1976: 60 fig. 2).

Tyszkiewicz amulet (MFA 98.697)

	Transliteration	Translation
obv.1.	en ₂ e ₂ -nu-ru	<i>Enuru</i> -spell:
2.	geškiši ₁₆ geš zi	Thorn bush, true tree,
3.	u ₂ sikil u ₂ kur ₂ [!] -ra	pure plant, plant of the mountain,
4.	im-ma nu-mu-ĝal ₂ -en	you did not appear on clay tablet(s),
5.	šudum-ma nu-mu-šid-en	you were not counted in list(s),
6.	diğir-re-ne nu-mu-da/-sa ₂ -en	you are not able to reach the gods,
7.	KIŠ.UNU-a a ₂ -ĝal ₂ / gedim-a-me-en	you are the commander of the ghost(s) in the Netherworld,
8.	geškiši ₁₆ geš zi	thorn bush, true tree!
9.	zi an-na he ₂ -pa ₃	Be adjured by Heaven!
10.	zi ^d inana <x> [?] buru ₅ (HU.ERIM)-a / he ₂ -pa ₃	Be adjured by Inana, the (... of the) small bird(s)!
rev. 11.	zi ^d ne ₃ -iri ₁₁ -gal / ^a alim id ₂ -da-ka / he ₂ -pa ₃	Be adjured by Nergal, the bison of the river!
12.	en-e mu-un-ši-/gi ₄ -in	The lord sent me here,
13.	ur ₂ -za mi-ni-kud-en	I cut you off at your roots.
14.	nun gal ^d en-ki-ke ₄ / mu-un-ši-gi ₄ -in	The great prince Enki sent me here,
15.	pa-za mi-ni-kud-en	I cut you off at your branches.
16.	^d en-ki-ke ₄ abzu eridug/ ^{ki} -ta	From the Abzu in Eridu, Enki
17.	a ₂ -zu mu-da-na-ağ ₂	has given me command on behalf of you.
18.	en ₂ e ₂ -nu-ru	<i>Enuru</i> -spell.

De Serres amulet

	Transliteration	Translation
obv.1.	en ₂ e ₂ -nu-ru	<i>Enuru</i> -spell:
2.	a an-ne ₂ ri-a	Seed begotten by Heaven,
3.	dumu ki-in-du tu-da	son whom the Netherworld bore,
4.	emed ^a sis-e a-e ₃ -a	reared by an evil wet-nurse,
5.	emed ^a sis-e ga zi gu ₇ -a	fostered on true milk by an evil wet-nurse.
6.	lu ₂ -u ₄ -ug [!] kalam-ma ri-a	Storm(-demon) begotten in the land,
7.	a dug ₃ -ga an-na / dumu ^d ereš- ^{ki} l-gal-ka	good seed of An, son of Ereshkigal,
8.	lu ₂ -ħuš an-ur ₂ -ra / šu-ke ₄	savage, who covers the horizon, ³
9.	lu ₂ -sumur ħul lu ₂ -ħul	furious (and) evil one, evil one.
10.	zi an-na zi ki he ₂ -/pa ₃	Be adjured by Heaven (and) be adjured by the Earth!
rev.11.	zi ^d ne ₃ -eri ₁₁ -g[al] / ^d en-1il ₂ kur-ra-ka ħ[e ₂]-/pa ₃	Be adjured by Nergal, supreme ruler of the Netherworld!
12.	zi ^d ereš-ki-gal ama / ^d nin-a-zu he ₂ -pa ₃	Be adjured by Ereshkigal, mother of Ninazu!
13.	zi ^d nam-tar lu ₂ -gu-/la he ₂ -pa ₃	Be adjured by Namtar, the great one!
14.	zi ^d ħuš-bi-sa ₆ -ga / dam nam-tar-re-ka he ₂ -pa ₃	Be adjured by Hushbisağ, wife of Namtar!
15.	lu ₂ zi an-kur ₂ -ra / sağ-še ₃ i ₃ -ri ₂ -ba	O demon, a life of treachery will beckon ahead, ⁴
16.	lu ₂ -ba en-na ba-/an-ta-re-na-aš	so long as you do not leave that man.

³ In line 8, šu for šu₂ 'to cover' was suggested to us by Krisztián Simkó. Lambert (1976: 61) also commented on another orthographically incorrect spelling or phonetic way of writing a for a₂ 'to rear' in line 4.

⁴ We interpreted here the term lu₂ as a reference to the demon (for a similar use of this term, see lines 6–9 of the same text). The meaning of the term an-kur₂-ra is based on lexical references (CAD M/2, 286 sub *mušaptu*); the single reference in the corpus of literary texts known to us can be found in the proverb collection ETCSL 6.1.22. The verb of the sentence is ba 'to give', but the sağ-še₃ remains a problem – literally meaning 'towards the head', it can have a chronological meaning, as in sağ-mu 'new year' (we owe the translation and interpretation of this line to Markham J. Geller and Szilvia Sövegjártó). An alternative interpretation of the verb (i₃-ri-ba is a rendering for i₃-ri-pa₃), suggesting the following translation: '(Concerning that) man, by a hostile oath(s) upon (his) head you are conjured!' (suggested to us by E. Zomer).

Material: Since the two objects have not been examined through mineralogical analysis, it is impossible to verify the materials used in their production. The Tyszkiewicz amulet is described as “agate blanche” by Fröhner (1898: 82 no. 242) and as “chalcedony” in the museum documentation.⁵ Lambert (1976: 58) notes that the de Serres amulet is made of a “hardstone,” which he specifies as “chalcedony”.

Dimensions: Based on the three relevant measurements, the two amulets are almost of the same size (in millimetres):

	height	width	thickness
– Tyszkiewicz amulet	30.3	19.0	8.0
– de Serres amulet	31	20	8.5

Shape: The Tyszkiewicz amulet is shaped like a cuneiform tablet with rounded edges and is pierced longitudinally through the centre. In the case of the de Serres amulet, there is no photographic documentation of the object; only two drawings presenting its two sides (obverse and reverse) are available to us. However, these drawings show that the object is shaped like the Tyszkiewicz amulet. According to Lambert (1976: 58)’s description, the de Serres amulet “is pierced down the centre, where it is thickest (8.5 mm maximum)”, which makes it evident that, similarly to the Tyszkiewicz amulet, it is pierced longitudinally through the centre.

Function: In terms of function, the perforation running along the vertical axis of the objects makes it clear that they were designed to be hung on a string as pendants. In the absence of an archaeological context, the exact manner in which the objects were displayed remains uncertain. Taking into account their relatively small size and weight, they were presumably worn as amulets. However, it is also possible that the pendants were suspended at a particular place for which the objects were destined.

Inscription’s format: As for the arrangement of the inscriptions and the disposition of the cuneiform signs, the two objects show similar characteristics. The inscription on both amulets is organized in cases separated by rulings; on the obverse of each amulet there are ten cases, while the reverse of the Tyszkiewicz amulet counts eight cases and that of the de Serres amulet six. Given that the width of both amulets is limited, each case contains one to three lines of text. The last lines of all the cases with more than one line are justified right, except for the signs justified middle in line 8 of the de Serres amulet. Although the number of cases differs, since the inscribed texts differ, each side on each of the two objects has 13 lines (26 in all per amulet). It is probable that the closing formula was omitted on the de Serres amulet due to a lack of space. In order to read the reverse, the objects⁶ have to be turned upside down, similar to the reading of cuneiform tablets. The elaborately engraved cuneiform signs show archaic forms on both objects, which characterize the high quality of these lapidary inscriptions.

Inscription’s content: Both amulets contain Sumerian incantations, and we can observe that they have a similar structure as both incorporate a section of a ‘zi-litany.’ The Tyszkiewicz amulet bears a *Kultmittelbeschwörung* on a thorn bush (Sum. *ḡeškiši*₁₆, Akk. *ašāgum*). A short passage of a ‘zi-litany’ was inserted into the text of the incantation (lines 9–11), so that the text can be interpreted as a variant (Bácskay/Niederreiter 2019: 179).⁷ As Lambert (1976: 60) already suggested, the de Serres amulet includes an incantation mentioning “short extracts from various incantations.” Lines 1–5 provide a forerunner of the incantation series *Udug-ḥul* Tablet 4.⁸ Lines 2–5 describe the birth and the feeding of a demon who was born from the marriage of Heaven and the Netherworld, cared for by an evil wet-nurse. This passage is followed by lines 6–9 describing the characteristics of the demon, which can be compared to a similar passage on *Udug-ḥul* Tablet 5 lines 1–3. Lines 10–14, mentioning a ‘zi-litany’, provide a section from the *Zi-pa₃* incantations *Gattung* II (Zomer 2018: 240 with footnote 1023). It

5 <https://collections.mfa.org/objects/186671/amulet?ctx=385b0ea6-95d3-4568-b442-9a7240fa131b&idx=0> (accessed 23–05–2022).

6 Lambert does not mention this aspect of the reading of the text.

7 The shorter version of this *Kultmittelbeschwörung* known from a cuneiform tablet that does not contain this inserted section (CUSAS 32, no. 4).

8 Lambert 1976: 61; Geller 1985: 98; Geller 2016: 10; Zomer 2018: 23 and 363 no. 119. For the edition of lines 1–5, see Geller (2016: 134 [ms. aa, lines 1–3]).

is important to note that the Zi-pa₃ incantations *Gattung* II can also be connected to the series *Udug-hul*.⁹ The exact meaning of the remaining part of our text (lines 15–16) remains obscure in the absence of parallels.¹⁰

Date: Due to the absence of archaeological data and the fact that the inscriptions were written with archaic lapidary signs, the dates of both amulets are based on orthography. In accordance with the philological evidence, we proposed that the Tyszkiewicz amulet most likely dates to the early Isin period (Bácskay/Niederreiter 2019: 177). Our argument was based on Wiggermann's suggestion that Nergal became the ruler of the Netherworld in the southern part of Mesopotamia from the Old Babylonian period on.¹¹ However, the possibility cannot be excluded that the Tyszkiewicz amulet dates to the Middle Babylonian period. Due to the use of archaic cuneiform signs, the exact date of the de Serres amulet also remained questionable for Lambert.¹² Geller discussed this amulet among the forerunner texts of the incantation series *Udug-hul*, suggesting that it originates from the Old or the Middle Babylonian period,¹³ while Zomer more recently dated this amulet to the Middle Babylonian or Middle Assyrian period.¹⁴ The Middle Babylonian dating is based solely on the amulet's connection to the Zi-pa₃ incantations *Gattung* II, the earliest extant tablet of which comes from this period.¹⁵ In sum, the two objects can be dated to the same period, but we cannot decide whether this was the Old Babylonian or the Middle Babylonian period.¹⁶

Conclusion: The collection and classification of Mesopotamian amulets inscribed with incantations needs to be further pursued in Assyriological research. Moreover, their potential role in magical rituals deserves further attention.¹⁷ In the corpus of relevant source material, the inscribed stone amulets shaped like a cuneiform tablet and featuring a longitudinal perforation can constitute a specific group. Aside from the two objects studied here, we know of four amulets similar in shape and function and inscribed with incantations, which, however, are made of soft stone.¹⁸ In contrast to them, our two amulets exhibit striking resemblances in terms of their almost identical dimensions, shape, and arrangement of the inscriptions. Furthermore, their material and the execution of their inscriptions attest to their very high quality and elaborate workmanship. In sum, it is most likely that these two amulets were made in the same workshop. The longitudinal cavity of the objects and the positioning of their inscriptions suggest that they were designed to be hung on a string as pendants rather than being worn on a necklace, like beads. They also have functional similarities, given that the Sumerian incantations inscribed on these objects belong to the realm of the incantation priests (*āšipūtu*).¹⁹

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9 Geller 2016: 6–7; Zomer 2018: 209.

10 Lambert (1976: 61) already emphasised that the text of the de Serres amulet contains plenty of mistakes and corrupted forms.

11 Wiggermann 1998–2001: 218–219. Cf. Bácskay/Niederreiter 2019: 177 footnote 16.

12 Lambert (1976: 61): “any date from the beginning of Third Dynasty of Ur to the end of the Second Millennium should be chosen”.

13 Geller (1985: 98): Old Babylonian or later; Geller (2016: 10): Middle Babylonian.

14 Zomer (2018: 241) suggests that the broken part of PBS 1/2 no. 115 col. i or col. ii dealing with the Middle Babylonian Zi-pa₃ incantations *Gattung* II could be parallel to the text preserved on the reverse of the de Serres amulet (Zomer 2018: 364 no. 120).

15 In his earlier work, Geller (1985: 98) hypothetically dated it to the Old Babylonian period.

16 Another argument, suggested to us by Claudia E. Suter, although not decisive either, might be the use of chalcedony, which grew in popularity from the second half of the 2nd millennium B.C. on and became predominant in Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian times. For the results of the mineralogical analysis made on cylinder seals kept in the British Museum, see Sax/Middleton (1992: 16–18); Moorey (1994: 76 and 84); Sax (2016: 161–163).

17 For a recent study about magical amulets in general, see Schwemer (2019).

18 Three objects are kept in the Yale Babylonian Collection (Bácskay/Niederreiter 2019: 177 footnotes 9 and 10), and one was formerly kept in the de Serres Collection (Lambert 1976: 62–63 fig. 3).

19 The apotropaic use of thorn bush also appears in an unusual magic ritual of the series *Udug-hul*, intended to expel the *Alū* demon (Tablet VIII, lines 37–38). For a recent overview of the magical activities of the incantation priests, see Zomer (2018: 60–61).

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