

‘Strange Fits of Passion’ – Narrational ecologies *In the House of Ephra and Bahmanduch*

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Abstract

This article discusses the ceramic art installation *In the House of Ephra and Bahmanduch*, a triptych of spaces cloistering three works: *Sub Rosa*, *Lilith by the Red Sea Carpet* and *Flock*. Together, these spaces form an interdisciplinary exploration into connections between Aramaic incantation bowls, contemporary ceramic art practice and critical theory. Aramaic incantation bowls are clay vessels covered with magic spell texts from Late Antique Iraq, whose purpose is to protect the home and its occupants from demons. Over the course of time, *In the House of Ephra and Bahmanduch* has evolved into a series of immersive room-scapes manifesting the imagined psycho-space of the Babylonian homes in which magic bowl praxis was evident. Collectively, the installation explores the idea that the bowl texts buried in the floor and spoken into the air permeate the space and become embodied within the building’s fabric. The work broadens out heritages of meaning carried by clay as an art medium, revealing wider narrational landscapes implicit in the bowl texts and praxis.

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Lilith by the Red Sea Carpet, 2018–19. Unfired porcelain, fired clay elements, water reeds, roses, herbs, spices. *Hyphen Exposition*, Ambika P3, University of Westminster, 22–27 March 2019, image credit: Sylvain Deleu.

This article discusses a three-part ceramic art installation which reconsiders Aramaic incantation bowls from fifth- to seventh-century Iraq.¹ Comprising a spatial triptych of rooms, my work *In the House of Ephra and Bahmanduch* re-imagines the decorative fabric of Babylonian domestic interiors in which these bowls were unearthed. Aramaic incantation bowls are clay vessels covered with magic spell texts from Late Antique Iraq, usually found buried upside-down in the floors and courtyards of ordinary Babylonian homes. Made

individually for specific, often named, clients, the bowls' purpose is to protect the home and its occupants from demons,² for which they invoke a plethora of supernatural beings from across cultures to assist in this endeavour. Two were made for troubled clients Ephra bar Saborduch and Bahmanduch bat Sama. The Aramaic bowls allure by their decipherable-indecipherable texts, which present an archive of emergent biographical documents, punched through with lacunae and brimming with physical and psychological unease. *In the House of Ephra and Bahmanduch* broadens out the heritage of meanings carried by clay as an art medium, to reveal wider narrational landscapes implicit in the bowl texts and praxis.

The texts indicate 'scapes' at cities where they were found, such as Nippur and Nimrud: occupants inhabit a physical clay-scape of agential clay objects of power, buried within unfired mud-brick houses that dissolve in rain only to be repeatedly rebuilt. A meta-scape of gods and demons spawns a psycho-scape of demon fears. A sexual-scape in which the Lilith³ demon murderously and adulterously infiltrates the marital home, terrorises. In response, a vegetable-scape of strange praxis surrounding the burning of herbs and the application of poultices proliferates. Physical and metaphysical landscapes internalise within the home, body and mind in an ontology in which reality, imagination and emotion are difficult to distinguish.

The Aramaic bowls implicate highly personal biographical detail within these molecular, cosmic, spiritual and supernatural worlds, the last two of which are largely imaginatively rather than empirically known. Art is uniquely placed to explore and embrace things which are felt, imaginatively known but largely unprovable. *In the House of Ephra and Bahmanduch* can only ever present the Nippur of my own imagination and dreams, and while enfolding empirical linguistic and archaeological scholarship, can never present an empirical, objective Nippur. Imaginative immersive works open up vistas (literal and mental) in which others can dream and imagine. Bachelard explores the idea of imagination surpassing reality, of image as an excess of the latter, asserting that images can surpass reality rather than just illuminate it (1958: 112). My research asserts the crucial value to human beings of such imaginative knowledge.

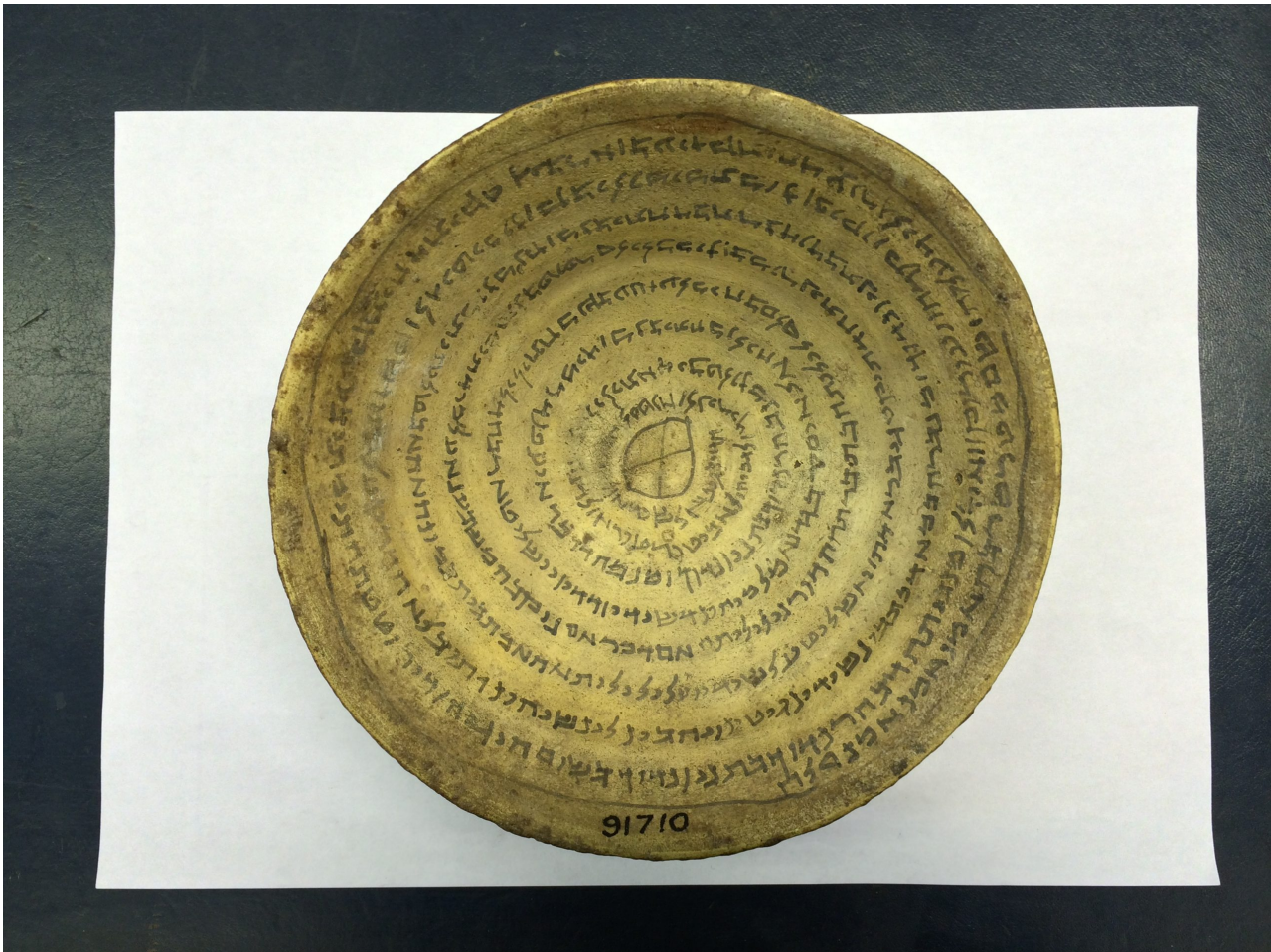


Figure 2: Aramaic Bowl 91710, c.500–700 CE, showing typical spiral text arrangement beginning at interior centre, British Museum

In the House of Ephra and Bahmanduch invites the viewer to experience a triptych of three spaces, each cloistering one of three ceramic installations: *Sub Rosa*, *Lilith by the Red Sea Carpet* and *Flock*. The three interconnected spaces materially investigate ideas emerging from my study of these objects and readings of bowl spell texts. They reflect the three elements of a room, walls, floor and ceiling, the triptych form emphasising the quasi-religious⁴ nature of bowl spell texts and praxis. The title takes its name from Montgomery (1913: 117, 178) bowls AIT 1 and 13, which were written for the clients Ephra bar Saborduch and Bahmanduch bat Sama, and unearthed in the city of Nippur, Babylonia, by the University of Pennsylvania Expedition between 1888 and 1889 (1913: 13). The first text is written for Ephra to protect him against the Lilith demons that haunt his and Bahmanduch’s home. Lilith is the most frequently mentioned demon in the bowl texts. Among the long list of dreadful things the Liliths are capable of doing, they are able to ‘trample and scourge and mutilate and break and confuse and hobble and dissolve (the body) like water’. They ‘appear to mankind, to men in the likeness of women and to women in the likeness of men, and with mankind they lie by night and by day’ (Montgomery 1913: 118). The second text constitutes both a love amulet and a charm against barrenness in which angels are invoked to help the childless Bahmanduch and compel her husband to love her.

In the House of Ephra and Bahmanduch began life as an exploration into connections between Aramaic incantation bowls, contemporary ceramic art practice and critical theory, emerging as a series of immersive

room-scapes manifesting the psycho-space of the homes in which magic bowl praxis was evident. The bowls’ common use occurred in a culture that embraced the idea that garments and buildings could take on human sickness,⁵ and that afforded language and voice real efficacious power.⁶ The work explores the idea that the bowl texts buried in the floor, and probably spoken into the air, together with the emotions and thoughts that brought them forth, permeate the space, and become embodied within the building’s fabric. The personified home manifests the psychology and metaphysical thinking of its occupants, conceiving a Wordsworthian or Brontëan material pathetic fallacy⁷ of interior spaces. But really *In the House of Ephra and Bahmanduch* inverts this idea: instead of the natural world offering a reflection of externalised human emotion, these landscapes and ecologies are internalised, intrinsic, bound within the fabric of spaces, material and thinking, taken within the very bodies, structures and objects of house and people.

SUB ROSA



Figure 3: Sub Rosa (detail), *Between Here and Then* at Project Space, University of Westminster, July 2017

The first immersive space, *Sub Rosa*, was fully realised in the exhibition *Between Here and Then* at London Gallery West in July 2017. *Sub Rosa* is a large circular ceiling piece comprising 75 bone china ceiling roses. Together the roses span three metres, suspended in an upturned bowl formation echoing the upside-down placement of Aramaic bowls in Babylonian dirt floors. A large bone china rose, hand-carved and realistic,

holds centre stage. *Sub Rosa*'s circular form delineates a space to physically enter, one in which viewers find themselves central to a work suspended precariously above them. As the ceiling roses circle outwards, cracks and distortions appear in their forms. The dome itself begins to come unravelled, enfolding an existentiality of rupture and disturbance evident in the disturbing narratives of Aramaic bowls and their misspelled, misquoted and pseudo-script texts.⁸

Sub Rosa's title alludes to the motif of the rose, used evocatively and medicinally in Middle Eastern and western cultures. The rose is variously a symbol of purity, intimacy, secrecy and passion, and as such recalls narratives surrounding Lilith. The title of the work draws the viewer beneath the installation, the circular form delineating a space for the viewer to enter and become literally and experientially 'sub rosa'.

Plasterwork ceilings have a long association with notions of secrecy beginning as far back as the Ancient Greek myth of Eros,⁹ who gave a rose to Harpocrates (the God of silence) as a bribe to prevent any unpleasant revelations about the behaviour of Cupid's mother Venus. The white rose came to symbolise secrecy and silence, and during Roman times it became customary to paint or suspend a rose in the ceiling above a meeting space to denote secrecy and confidentiality – nothing said 'sub rosa' was to be repeated elsewhere. Today, the term 'ceiling rose' itself is commonly used to indicate a decorative ceiling feature that covers or 'hides' an electrical installation from view. This position of being 'sub rosa', under the influence of the rose's sensual power or hiding an intimate secret, seems to have affected quite a number of Aramaic bowl clients, with texts written to make someone fall in love with a specific person or compel an errant husband to leave 'Lilith' and return to his wife. In a curious linguistic coincidence, bowl texts refer to themselves by the word *raz*, translated as 'secret', 'mystery' or 'spell', the Aramaic word audibly close to the English word 'rose'.¹⁰



Figure 4: Native Dogrose, Hampstead Heath, London



Figure 5: Central 'realistic' rose, 2017. Bone china, H 30cm W 45cm D 45cm. *Projections In Space* residency at University of Westminster, June 2019

Sub Rosa alludes in multiple ways to the Aramaic bowls: one of the ceiling rose designs features concentric circles, and the installation is suspended in a spiral format, visually echoing the circular layout of the majority of bowl texts. Aramaic bowl demon illustrations are usually found encircled in the bowls' interior centre, and in *Sub Rosa*, viewers who venture in find themselves in place of the demon or *jinn*, inside a circle, underneath an upturned bowl.



Figure 6: *Sub Rosa, Between Here and Then* at Project Space, University of Westminster, July 2017, image credit: Nedim Nazerali.

The ceiling rose designs in *Sub Rosa* encompass different historical periods, including Tudor, Victorian, Edwardian, Georgian, Art Deco, Arts and Crafts and Modern periods, as well as motifs that date back to the Ancient Greeks, alluding to the non-linear layering of time, the perception of all time as cosmic concentric circles, and to Nippur's disrupted archaeological record (a point I will expand on later). These designs also carry their own individual narratives and symbols derived from the natural world, including the Greek acanthus leaf, the Palmyra rose, the Egg and Dart motif representing the continuous cycle of life, a native English briar rose, and an abundance of fruit reminiscent of the Garden of Eden. *Sub Rosa* embraces these symbols from the natural world but keeps at its heart the motif of the rose.





Figures 7–9: *Sub Rosa*, details of ceiling rose designs. From top: Egg and Dart design, acanthus leaf designs and concentric circle design. Briar rose design. Tudor rose design. Bone china. *Between Here and Then* at Project Space, University of Westminster, July 2017, image credits: Nedim Nazerali

The materiality of a work is integral to its semantic field. Bone china’s innovative component, investing the material with its superlative whiteness (and a dark secret at its heart), is 42 per cent animal bone. Living beings distilled back to basic elemental material are present in the work, infusing *Sub Rosa* metaphorically with the absent/presence of lives once lived, a material vehicle for the real but absent voices that we hear so tantalisingly in the bowl texts. The room-scape holds within it a silent-noise, the screaming presence of actual bodies, within these overlaid ecologies of life, of bone, of rose.

In this way, *Sub Rosa* materially alludes to microscopic molecular things we feel but cannot fully grasp. Aramaic is a language in which tri-consonantal word roots are subjected to polysyllabic growth. These roots retain their traces as prefixes, suffixes and vowels are added. The word root, or *shoresh*, carries some aspect of its core meaning with it as it expands outwards into more complex forms. Mikhail Bakhtin writes of the competing centripetal and centrifugal forces at work within both language and society. For Bakhtin, language is at once trying to cohere into an intelligible ‘abstract grammatical system of normative forms’ (Bakhtin 1981: 288), and to pull apart into infinite possibilities of meaning that alter with each usage of any particular word. The Aramaic *shoresh* system embraces these microscopic/macroscopic ideas: words have tiny molecular parts that carry with them allusions to other words they inhabit, spaces they have been before or might travel to, similar to Bakhtin’s idea of the word carrying with it the memory of where it has already been (Bakhtin 1973: 167). Words occupy a particular time-space, but also carry many diverse meanings and continually acquire new ones, cohere, fix for an instant, only to expand into new meanings

again and again. Aramaic’s shoresh rhizomatic word root system ensures that the Aramaic texts are both highly evocative and ultimately elusive. In *Sub Rosa*, clay functions similarly to this, has the same dialogic modus within its molecular parts: like the *shoresh* word roots carrying the memory and meaning of other words they have been inside, these bone china materials carry the memory of real breathing bodies they once resided in. These materials speak of absent presences evoked by the narratives and language of the bowl texts, but also of the difficulty of grasping ever-moving meanings and the literal liveliness of words, meanings and materials.

LILITH BY THE RED SEA CARPET



Figure 10: *Lilith by the Red Sea Carpet*, 2018–19. Unfired porcelain, fired clay elements, water reeds, roses, herbs, spices. Hyphen Exposition, at Ambika P3, University of Westminster, 22–27 March 2019

The second triptych space, *Lilith by the Red Sea Carpet*, is a rectangular floor piece constructed from unfired Ming porcelain, with a central nest-like medallion of tangled water reeds, roses, herbs, spices and ceramic elements. An indoor carpet-garden, it almost entirely covers the floor space, inviting the viewer to experience the multisensorial work closely by circumnavigating the narrow passage around it. Immediately after installation, *Lilith Carpet* has a smooth creamy surface, but as the unfired porcelain dries, it cracks to reveal the faint trace of a carpet pattern formed by its making processes. *Lilith Carpet* explores disquieting narratives surrounding Lilith. Her evocative tale holds centre stage in the magical thinking surrounding Aramaic bowls, and here in *Lilith Carpet*. A descendent of the *lilitu* in ancient Mesopotamian cuneiform texts,

Lilith is mentioned in Jewish folkloric and mystical texts such as the *Alphabet of Ben Sira* (c. 700–1000 CE) and the *Zohar*¹¹ as well as in Isaiah 34:14. Lilith mythology narrates her disobedience to Adam and consequent banishment from the Garden of Eden to live on the desert shores of the Red Sea (a probable mistranslation from the Biblical Hebrew 'Sea of Reeds') where she gives birth to 400 demons a day, killing over a hundred of them. Lilith survives into medieval Jewish folklore, evolving into a siren-like seductress, a dangerous embodiment of dark feminine powers. Able to enter human homes through mirrors, she returns from isolation to take up residence in cellars and attics, establishing parallel families through adulterous relationships, and wreaking vengeance on wives through the terrible scourge of infant mortality, childhood illness, miscarriage and maternal death.

Lilith Carpet was performatively realised through the eight-day duration of the *Hyphen Exposition*, held at Ambika P3, University of Westminster, London, in March 2019,¹² presenting myself as artist carrying out the live action of making. Piece by piece, a raw clay carpet was laid out across a concrete floor, with wild plants, roses, herbs and spices gradually added. Highlighting Lilith's liminality as a dweller of attics,¹³ cellars and desert wasteland, Aramaic bowl interment in the floors of domestic spaces and museum bowl collection storage in basement 'housing', *Lilith Carpet* was peripherally positioned in a cellar-like windowless adjunct to the main gallery space. Lilith, with her destructive reproductive intent and chaos of trampled reeds, took up residence alongside a jumble of pipes on an oil-stained floor.

In *Lilith Carpet*, two mythological Lilith spaces, the Red Sea reed bed and the attic/cellar, are overlaid. The white rectangular expanse of Ming porcelain laid out on the floor is strewn with fresh herbs, spices and porcelain flowers, and an oval decorative medallion of reeds and red stem roses nestles at its centre, emphasising the work's geometric elements and formalising its presence as 'carpet'. In the central medallion, a thick outer tangle of water reeds and stems, their placement haphazard and tangled, indicates a nest of sorts among the wreckage, signifying Lilith's reproductive intent. Within this chaotic reed bed is a large central rose carved in grey unfired clay, surrounded by shiny, red-glazed ceramic eggs. Lilith dwells in the carpet's central decorative motif, becoming part of its actual fabric, but the view is partially obscured; viewers must lean in closely for a glimpse. The installation engenders a place of contrast and contradiction, a reed-bed/rose-bed, simultaneously wasteland and nest, liminal desert space and home, both decorative and sinister. Wild plants contrast with industrial space, registering Lilith's passion and desolation. The languages of clay and the natural world are overlaid in an atopistic juxtaposition.



Figure 11: Detail of *Lilith by the Red Sea Carpet*, peering in towards the central carpet medallion, image credit: Sylvain Deleu

The plant/clay carpet is wild, a carpet growing its own motifs, sprouting its own source material. Strewed with swathes of wild thyme, rosehips, cinnamon bark, star anise and hand-formed porcelain roses, its powerful aroma is ambiguous, evoking variously an Ayurvedic¹⁴ place of wellbeing, rest and recovery, Lilith's desert 'safe space', and a place of seduction. This multisensorial aspect invites the viewer to respond sensually through smell and tactility while also alluding to the plant imagery that infuses the Aramaic bowl texts. A love charm on Aramaic bowl AIT 28 in the Penn Museum details instructions for the use of herbs:

...take hrk and hot herbs which they call sunwort *mtln* and peppers... sprinkled upon... She shall sprinkle them upon this Anur... b[ar] P[arkoi]... take pieces from his heart and the charm... (Montgomery 1913: 213; original emphasis)

The text indicates the scattering of hot herbs on a simulacrum, possibly while the beloved's name is formally pronounced. References to frankincense, wort, bitter herbs and myrtle pepper many of the texts.

In Aramaic bowl illustrations, Lilith is depicted as 'naked, with long loose hair, pointed breasts, no wings, strongly marked genitals and chained ankles' (Patai 1967: 225). From these illustrations we know precisely what she is imagined to look like, but in *Lilith by the Red Sea Carpet* she is nowhere to be seen; her presence is instead evoked, shiny, burnished and concretised in primordial grey by the triptych's central motif. The central grey rose is dystopian, a severe disruption to the work's outer-inner progression from an outer border of cold white porcelain, through warm brown reeds, spices, red roses and eggs, towards warm light shining at its centre, which is then dissolved in the cool concrete grey of the rose at its core. Together

these draw the viewer towards a central life-giving force, stopped short by this elemental deathly image. This central space also presents the viewer with the only image of 'home' in the triptych, one of chaotic wreckage, blood-red eggs, a home assembled inside someone else's home, a dangerous invasion – here the interloper in the nest is doing the breeding.

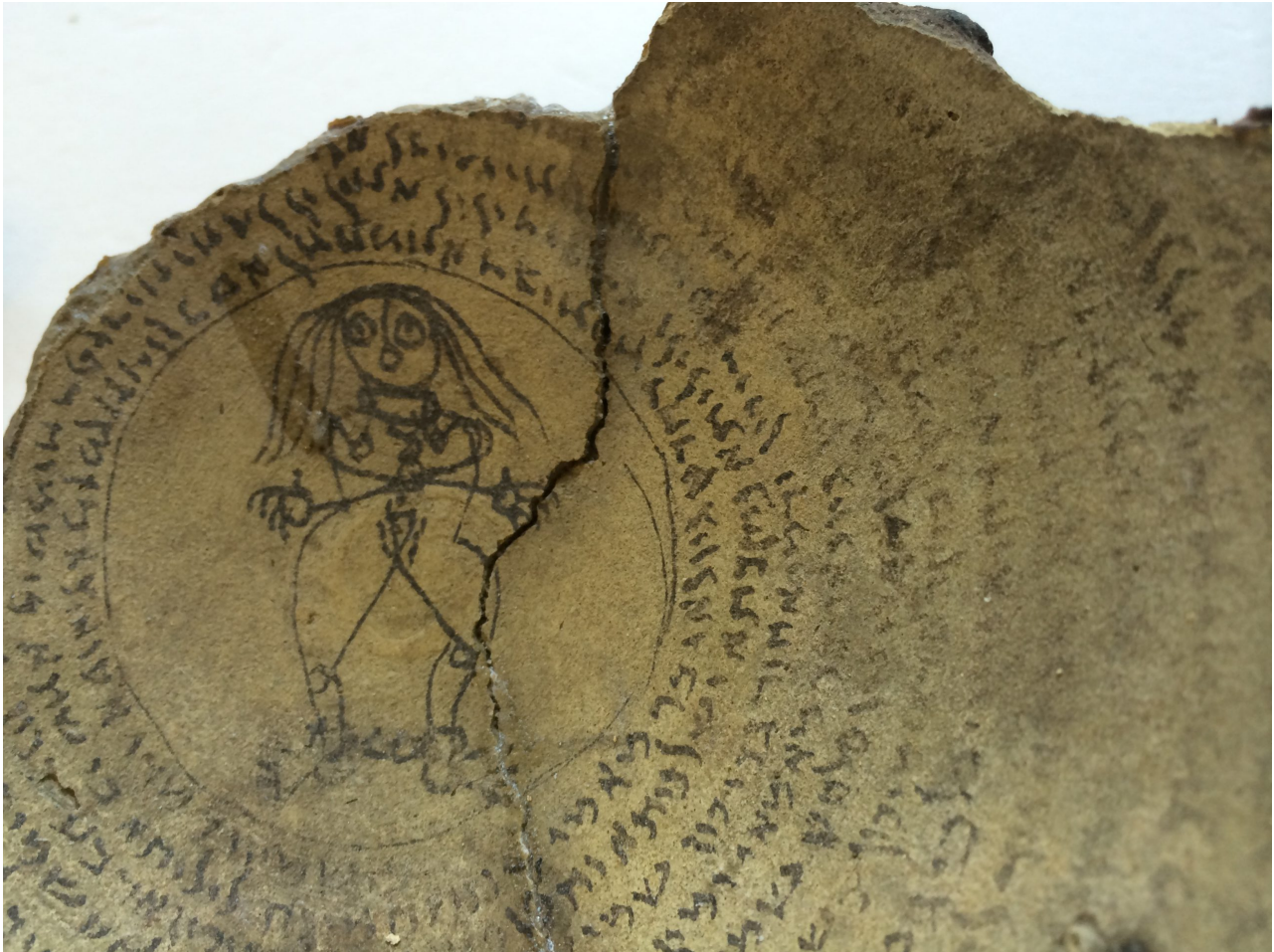


Figure 12: Image of Lilith on Aramaic bowl B9013, Nippur, Iraq, c.500–700 CE. University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology

Lilith Carpet was made from raw porcelain slabs cut straight from the bag and finished in a smooth white surface, undulating and cream-cheese-shiny, with a faintly lined texture evoking rows of woven carpet threads, desert sand, sea-bed, tide lines on sand. But this allusion to the Red Sea quickly vanished: the clay's sticky soft surface attracted insects, dirt and several sets of inquisitive footprints, and dried to a dull, cracked, ruptured matt. The porcelain, unable to support the life of its central living plant motifs, became a carpet-garden slowly extinguishing itself. The stem roses and thyme sprigs withered and died. Great cavernous cracks appeared, dry and parched, in the porcelain, in a work destined to slowly shut down.¹⁵ Over time, the cracks began to form the faint trace of their own carpet pattern, revealing the porcelain oval slabs laid onto the floor before they were worked together to form a smooth surface, the material reasserting itself to lay bare its making processes: a palimpsestic carpet, evolving and changing through time to reveal first one reading, then another.





Figures 13 & 14: Details of *Lilith by the Red Sea Carpet*, showing its initial smooth surface (top image) and its subsequent cracking

Clay has a conceptual status in *Lilith by the Red Sea Carpet*. According to Lilith mythology, man and his first

wife Lilith were both made from clay: Lilith refused to do man's bidding because they were both made from clay and therefore had equal status. Clay is the equaliser in the story, and in *Lilith by the Red Sea Carpet*, the material embodiment of Lilith's essential equality. The use of unfired clay potentially overlays these mythological creation narratives but also carries others: like the Nippur houses that dissolve in rain, it can be recycled and thus complete a circle of 'mud to mud' (Sherlock 2013). Any form can arise from it, be dissolved to sludge or dry out and crack. Unfired clay doesn't rest, but constantly interacts and enacts within its environment. In contrast, fired clay is permanent, irreversible. Clay contains within it these opposite states of ephemerality and permanence, liveliness and fixity. Unfired clay as material is liberated from firing processes, the limits imposed by kiln size, and building production techniques used to avoid cracking. The ultimate renewable art material, it is endlessly recyclable, its materiality deeply embedded with narratives of its previous use. Nippur homes were made of unfired mud brick and engaged in a continuous cycle of decay and rebuild. *Lilith Carpet's* use of unfired clay enfolds these impermanent, unfixed qualities of the Nippur homes, together with the carpet's impulse towards the nomadic as an object that you can roll up and take with you. Home is a temporary object that you may have to leave in an instant.

Lilith Carpet evolved over the course of the exhibition in a material enactment that revealed its own performative making processes; its physical interior structure unveiled itself in a palimpsestic revelation of its own essential signifying carpet pattern through time. The porcelain also interacted with its material surroundings, gathering up dirt, fluff and oil spots, cracking profoundly from the heat of underfloor pipes. Unfired clay is active, fragile and unfixed, falling apart with the slightest of touches. In water it loses form, returns to shapelessness, can dissolve or be washed away. It is a material with agency to enact its own action and movement.

The bird/nest metaphor dominates *Lilith Carpet*: Lilith leaves the Garden of Eden to reside in an anti-garden, an arid desert wasteland by the Red Sea. Isaiah 34:14 describes a desolate desert-scape inhabited by screech owls nesting and hatching their eggs in the shadow of Lilith. Today, this landscape is a fertile breeding ground for birds and lies along the second-largest bird migration route in the world,¹⁶ a space beautiful in its rugged remoteness. Here the image of Lilith takes on the bird beak, clawed feet and Medusa-tousled hair of her fellow desert dwellers, the world of the desert and the world of Lilith intruding upon each other, like that of house and occupant.

References to birds such as the bulbul, pelican, cockerel and white cockerel are plentiful in the bowl texts, but their meaning is often ambiguous. The bird can be a metaphor for God, as in this reference on British Museum bowl BM 91742 to Adonai Sebaot, one of the names for God: '...the bird on the wing that flies in the air of the firmament' (Segal 2000: 60–61). In other references, birds are evil and demon-like. Many of the Aramaic bowl demon illustrations manifest bird-like features, with large beaks, winged arms and clawed feet. In Aramaic bowl M102, line 9, birds provide a simile for demon behaviour:

May evil sorceries be drawn against them, and may they come to rest upon Ahatoi daughter of Ahati and Awirta daughter of Ahati, and may they sweep upon them like birds (Levene 2002: 32).

Bird can be both God and demon in these texts shrouded in ambivalence and ambiguity.



Figure 15: Demon illustration with bird-like features on Penn Museum bowl B16017

Lilith by the Red Sea Carpet's title foregrounds a series of mistranslations from Old Testament Hebrew: from 'Yam Suf – Sea of Reeds' to 'Yam Edom – Sea of Edom' (i.e. geographically located next to land settled by the Edomite people),¹⁷ and finally to 'Red Sea' (Edom to Adom – Red), occurring originally in the first Old Testament Greek translations and later through the English versions.¹⁸ This last mistranslation echoes strangely in the English exchange of 'reed' for 'red'. Through its title, *Lilith by the Red Sea Carpet* echoes other mistranslations, mistransliterations and slippages that occur frequently on the bowl texts,¹⁹ making their translation by contemporary scholars a matter of fierce dispute, while also highlighting my focus on plants, both those growing by the Red Sea and those mentioned in the bowl texts. The reeds growing by the Red Sea in abundance are *Phragmites australis*, the common reed growing along rivers and marshlands on most continents, botanically classified as both native to the UK and as a rhizome, and botanically emblematic of my interdisciplinary enjumbled practice.

In *Lilith Carpet*, clay performs both the turmoil of Lilith's visitation on house occupants and the existential situation of Lilith's desolation and revenge, her ultimate exclusion from the ideal landscapes of home and garden, through a molecular pathetic fallacy. Unfired porcelain enacts responsively with the material gallery space, sucking up dust, insects, oil and curious-careless footprints. The work is a materially interactive response to the imagining of a psychological ecology, a restless work of dialogue between the material and its space, the work and its viewers, myself, and the material and dialogues of the work.



Figure 16: *Phragmites australis* growing in Negev Desert wadi, close to the Red Sea



Figure 17: *Phragmites australis* growing on Hampstead Heath, London

FLOCK



Figure 18: Porcelain test pieces for Flock



Figure 19: Paper mock-up of Flock, detail

In *Flock*, the third room in the triptych – a work begun in 2019 and still in production at the time of writing – porcelain wallpaper pieces entirely cover the walls of the exhibition space. The pieces lift away from the surface on which they are installed, as if about to take flight or on the verge of implosion, hovering between cohesion and eruption. There is a sense of building momentum, that this problematic wallpaper is no longer able to maintain its material and conceptual cover up. The viewer is invited into a claustrophobic disquieting-quieting white space, to enter the vortex of a frozen moment of fragmentation. *Flock* is also seductive and tactile, appealing to the senses rather than the conceptual – visitors want to touch the wallpaper and reach forward surreptitiously to do so – and this evokes the sensuality of Lilith, indicated in the blowsy overblown roses of the *Aphrodite* wallpaper design. The rose whispers quietly at the core of both *Sub Rosa* and *Lilith by the Red Sea Carpet*, but in *Flock* it looms large.

Flock's title overlays wallpaper and ornithological readings, recalling the plentiful references to and ambiguous symbolism of birds in the bowl texts and their associated mythology, in which Lilith lives among the screech owls of the Red Sea. Bird and nest conflate, wallpaper-plumage envelops the viewer, the materiality of the house is live, the Lilith landscape has permeated the home. This echoes the equivalence of house, occupant and body that can be found in the bowl texts: bowl AIT 13 (Montgomery 1913: 178) details the loveless, childless relationship between Ephra and Bahmanduch and calls on Ephra to become

enamoured of ‘גוף ביתיה – the body of his home’ (my translation). The word ‘גוף – body’ denotes the physical body, so the metaphor establishes a clear equivalence between home and body. Nippur experiences are bound within this decorative fabric, an intrinsic part of the ‘liveliness’ of the home in which the psychology and physicality of its occupants become embodied in the material building fabric itself, more than just a lingering atmosphere.

Esther Leslie (2013) writes of the house as repository of memory, but also as autobiography, the house as self. Our relationship to home is symbiotic – our houses form us, and we form our houses: you build it, it builds you. Interior décor is an extension of the externalised projected self, with repeated redecoration of contemporary homes indicating the covalence of home and identity, both under constant construction, like our own narratives of self and our own continual biological cellular re-creation. Bachelard sees the house as ‘psychic state’ (1958: 72): ‘...the house image would appear to have become the topography of our intimate being’ (Bachelard 1958: xxxvi). He writes about the oneiric house of our dreams and the language of secrecy evidenced by locked drawers, small lidded boxes, furniture with secret compartments and false bottoms, a secret psychological life, like the *raz-spell-secret* of the Aramaic bowls. He quotes the poet Rilke writing of the house being scattered about inside himself in fragmentary form, the internalised notion of a fractured broken house (Bachelard 1958: 57). We project onto the house, and it is internalised within us.

Walls can contain real ‘stuff’. Davies and Houlbrook (2018: 76) write of dead cats deliberately concealed historically in British wallspaces, probably to ward off rats and mice, as well as items such as old worn shoes and corsets, the purpose of which is unclear though this practice ‘may have cemented the intimate relationship between home and dweller in the fabric of the house, sealing a sort of pact to look after one another’ (2018: 81). The Parthians, a major Iranian political and cultural power between 247 BCE and 224 CE, undertook vast building works at Nippur, during which they placed fired ceramic artefact shards within their unfired mud bricks (Gibson 1992), enabling them to build larger crack-resistant blocks. The Nippur homes, in which many of the Aramaic bowls were found, were built on top of this earlier archaeological layer of tumbled-down Parthian mud-brick walls containing fired clay shards within them. As well as giving rise to a highly evocative image of walls stuffed with the flotsam and jetsam of past lives, an architecture of jumble, palimpsest and emotion enfolding remnants of previous lives inside other lives, this practice acts as a metaphorical rupture in time itself because of its profound disruption to the archaeological record. In our own contemporary homes, layers of wallpaper and paint behave as a version of these layers and layers of peopled time, as intimate archaeological ‘skins’.²⁰ The Aramaic bowls hum with the silent clamour of absent-present voices of actual named people. *In the House of Ephra and Bahmanduch*’s title evokes the highly personal particularity of Ephra and Bahmanduch’s deeply distressing troubles. They are real people, and this is the only known record we have of their lives. But the triptych can also be viewed as a Nippur ‘Everyhouse’, embodying the thoughts, emotions, ecologies and cosmologies of a people and a place in which the Lilith narrative is so centrally embedded.

IN THE (CLAY) HOUSE OF EPHRA AND BAHMANDUCH: CLAY AS NARRATIONAL ECOLOGY

The Aramaic bowls offer a window into tiny domestic lives and the minutiae of individual acts that seek to challenge a huge abstract cosmic world order controlled by demons and gods. Domesticity and power are

not opposite poles but entangled simultaneously in a narrative that encompasses the very personal self, the tiny home stage and the gargantuan cosmic world entwined in clay, an entire cosmic universe controllable with one small domestic clay bowl. The bowls locate these metaphysical power interactions in the home and in clay, played out within the clay materiality of mud-brick house, earth floors, clay bowls and in woman, man and Lilith, who all have their mythological origins in clay. This is a story in which clay materiality is afforded absolute centrality. But this also is a narrative of ecologies and cosmologies intertwined, of vast desert landscapes, the reeds, the bird breeding grounds and migratory flyways of the Red Sea and the Southern Iraq marshlands, and of infinite star-spangled skies, all essentially enfolded within the language and imagery of the Aramaic bowls.

In the House of Ephra and Bahmanduch foregrounds Lilith as landscape overwhelmingly internalised as Lilith within the body-home, a poison-antidote embodied in the home which simultaneously is the body. The idea of occupant merging with architecture, brick as a narrative of self, whether triumphal or disintegratory, is embodied in the Aramaic bowl oeuvre: building, landscape and self are existentially and psychologically conflated. House is vulnerable body with doors, windows and thresholds as vulnerable points where dangerous things can get in (or out). Corners, attics and cellars are secretive spaces where dangerous things might lurk. These ideas establish a home/body/landscape anthropomorphic triumvirate in which clay is implicated many times over.

In the House of Ephra and Bahmanduch also seeks to be an ‘Everyhouse’ in a wider sense, to offer an experiential space in which to dream of our own homes, lives and galaxies. Artist Susan Hiller (cited in Lisson Gallery 2016: n.pag.) has described her work as ‘a kind of archaeological investigation, uncovering something to make a different kind of sense of it’. The analogy is particularly resonant here, since *In the House of Ephra and Bahmanduch* enfolds archaeology literally into its practice through foregrounding overlooked archaeological objects, often languishing in museum basements, to afford a different vista. The work lies at the juncture of private and public, engendering an intimate voyeuristic archaeology of these Nippur lives. Highly personal secrets buried in floors are unearthed, and in an art practice clamouring with the multitudinous voices of others and multiple identities of self, snippets of my own autobiography slip in. Like art theorist Joanne Morra,²¹ I want to draw back from confessional work to maintain a formalised distance, but ‘traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprint of the potter clings to the clay vessel’ (Benjamin 1992 [c1968]: 91). Autobiography creeps in, an accidental narrative stowaway, and I am seduced further and further within the research: the common reed’s botanical name is *Phragmites australis*, a nod to the place I was born and raised. The name Na’amah appears in the Zohar where she and Lilith are two of the four demon queens. The name ‘Na’amah’ is etymologically similar to Naomi,²² my middle name. Na’amah, a common Jewish name, is more widely a reference to the biblical daughter of Lamech, to whom secrets of spinning and weaving were revealed (Genesis 4:22). So here I am in the work – my first name means lily or rose, my middle name is Naomi like Na’ama, Lilith or weaver, and my grandfather, the only professional artist or craftsman in my recent family history, was a repairer of Turkish rugs.

ENDNOTES

1 Aramaic incantation bowls are an intrinsic part of the magic praxis of the period. Made from ordinary buff-coloured clay, several thousand have been unearthed at cities such as Babylon, Nippur and Nimrud, from

which around 700 texts have been translated. Each was made for a specific recipient, usually named, and features a formulaic spell for the wellbeing of clients and the banishment of demons, typically inscribed in a spiral format onto biscuit-fired kitchenware seconds. As such, these bowls represent an archive of personal biographies detailing individual problems and the demons responsible that require expulsion from the home.

2 A large inventory of fiends, angels and gods populate bowl texts, indicative of extensive cross-cultural exchange in the realms of magical practice. Montgomery (1913) believed that the magic bowls were heavily influenced by the Greco-Roman world. Naveh and Shaked evince syncretistic tendencies displayed in calling on such supernatural beings as 'the Mesopotamian and Syrian Belti, Nereg, Nanai, Shamish, Dilbat and Mot, the Iranian Anahid, Danahish, Bagdana' (1985: 37). Levene notes a mention of Jesus in bowl M163: '...And by the Name of Jesus...' (2002: 34) while Montgomery highlights the predominance of Lilith 'the ghostly paramour of men' (1913: 219), feared forerunner of Old Testament Eve but also frequently mentioned in Akkadian magical literature. Secunda (2015) observes that the demons have extended families, favourite haunts, identifying characteristics and nicknames, and in Lilith's case, can procreate with humans.

3 The earliest literary reference to Lilith is as a deity of Babylonian, Assyrian and Sumerian descent in the Epic of Gilgamesh (2400 BCE; Wolkstein and Kramer 1983). Her only Old Testament appearance is in Isaiah 34:14 (1997) as a dweller of waste places. The Jewish incarnation of Lilith derives from a commentary on the biblical creation story. Genesis details two versions of this, and while modern biblical scholarship considers such repetitions as evidence of 'seams', different texts being sewn together, Jewish tradition responded by producing *midrash*, or supplementary stories, to fill the gaps. The words 'Male and female created he them' (Genesis 1:27, 1997) differ from a later account of man's creation, thus providing such a seam from which to evolve the Lilith legend. Lilith appears in the *Alphabet of Ben Sira* (Sefaria n.d.), an anonymous work of Persian or Arabic origin, dating from between the seventh and eleventh century CE. Paralleling the Genesis creation account, it describes Adam's first wife Lilith, their equal status, her rebellion and pronouncement of the Ineffable Name of God, and subsequent banishment from Eden to the shore of the Red Sea where she procreated with demons, creating a multitude of offspring. God sent three angels, Senoy, Sansenoy and Semangeloff, to command her to return to Adam, but because of her refusal, a hundred of her offspring would be killed every day. In revenge, she declared that she would snatch the souls of infants, but she would do no harm if she encountered an amulet bearing the names of the three angels. Such amulets are still in use today in some orthodox Jewish communities. The Lilith legend saw her demonisation and evolution into a siren-like figure who, with her beauty, long flowing hair and sexual allure, is Montgomery's 'ghostly paramour of men' (1913: 76). Various known as *lil*, *limit*, *lilin*, etymologically related to Aramaic and Hebrew 'ליל – night', she was considered adulterous and able to procreate with men to produce demon offspring, as well as being responsible for the terrible scourge of infant mortality, childhood illness, miscarriage, haemorrhage and maternal death, and other women's problems such as barrenness, problems concerning menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth. Lilith survives into medieval Jewish folklore, where she can take up residence in cellars and attics, and into contemporary culture as a feminist icon.

4 The bowl texts interweave magical formulae with a wide range of religious textual sources, including the Holy Scriptures, the Apocrypha and Jewish liturgy. Mandaean, Syriac, Persian and Greek divine names and demons feature alongside Zoroastrian, Gnostic, Islamic, Christian and Jewish ideas and practices.

5 Leviticus 14: 33–57 (1997) details the phenomenon of the leprous house, a house incurring some sort of

infection that requires healing.

6 Segal (2000: 27) asserts that the use of sibilant clusters and references to 'whispering' indicate the bowl texts' vocalisation. Indeed, the prevalence of these, alongside the use of rhyme and references to hissing and whispering (BM 91707), indicate that voice was a fundamental element of bowl praxis. Texts such as Naveh and Shaked bowl 1:

...I say the secret ("raz" – secret/spell/mystery) of this house against all that there is in it..
(Naveh and Shaked 1985: 125).

support the likelihood that spells were vocalised. The texts also attest to a belief in the energy and life of speech:

...may his voice go into the spheres... (Shaked et al. 2013 202)

...I am traversing the water with my voice... (Levene 2003: 103)

And repeatedly assert the idea that voice has elemental and transcendental qualities.

7 Pathetic fallacy is the poetic practice of attributing emotion or responses to nature or inanimate objects, the expression of emotion so strong that it is transposed onto the objects surrounding it. The term was coined by John Ruskin (1856) in his chapter *Of The Pathetic Fallacy*, in which he scathingly highlighted the latter's rampant use and the inherent 'falseness' of its vision, arguing that 'it is only the second order of poets who delight in it'. Usage of the term survives today, but its meaning has become significantly less derogatory, no longer emphasising its falsehood.

8 Contemporaneous fakes written in a string of letters to mimic Aramaic, presumed to be written by an illiterate practitioner.

9 Eros (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary* 2019a; *World History Encyclopedia* 2019b) is the mythological Greek god of love, passion and physical desire who selects his targets and strikes at their hearts without warning, at times playful and harmless, at others bringing reckless passion and confusion; sometimes regarded as the child of Aphrodite.

10 As in Naveh and Shaked (1985; my italics) bowl 1: '...I say the secret ("raz" – secret/spell/mystery) of this house against all that there is in it..' (line 4).

11 Zohar (*New World Encyclopedia* 2019) is a mystical commentary on the Torah written primarily in medieval Aramaic and considered to be the greatest work of Jewish mysticism.

12 The exhibition brought together PhD researchers, alumni and staff from University of Westminster, showcasing works across photography, film, music, dance, performance art, sculpture and installation art.

13 In Grant Gibson's *Material Matters* (2019), Edmund de Waal asserts the poignancy of attics as spaces one doesn't normally see, spaces in which really important things get hidden away.

14 Ayurveda (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary* 2021) is a form of alternative medicine that is the traditional

system of medicine of India, and seeks to treat and integrate body, mind and spirit using a comprehensive holistic approach especially by emphasising diet, herbal remedies, exercise, meditation, breathing and physical therapy.

15 An Egyptian study (Shawky and El-Khouly 2017) found that the higher the clay content at Red Sea wadi sites, the less the ground supported plant growth and the fewer the number of plant species that could thrive. Table 7 of the report evidences this direct negative correlation between clay and plant species diversity in Red Sea wadi environments.

16 Thirty-seven species of soaring birds migrate through the Rift Valley/Red Sea flyway twice a year between the breeding grounds in Eurasia and their wintering areas in Africa. This is the second-most important flyway in the world, with 1.5 million soaring birds migrating each year (BirdLife International 2015).

17 The Old Testament describes Edom as a neighbouring enemy state of Judah, located southeast of the Dead Sea, spanning parts of contemporary Jordan and Israel. The Edomites by tradition are descended from red-headed Esau, and also lived in a land still famous for its red landscape (Hoffmeier 2005). Researchers from the University of California and Tel Aviv University on the Central Timna Valley Project have recently made a case for the existence of Edom.

18 The Coptic Bohairic Old Testament translates 'Yam Suf' as 'pyom n sa(i)ri' and it is suggested that this means 'sea of reeds or rushes', deriving from Old Egyptian. The 'Lake of Reeds' is also found in the *Book of the Dead* from the New Kingdom through the Greco-Roman period (Hoffmeier 2005: 204).

19 The Aramaic alphabet has a number of letters that are very similar in appearance, and given the quantity of variant scripts, the variable quality and handwritten nature of the material containing quotations and misquotations of referent texts, and the degradation of the bowls themselves, alternative readings of particular words are inevitable. Several are often proposed, adding a liveliness and unfixed quality to the texts.

20 I write this with the latex work and words of Swiss artist Heidi Bucher in mind, exhibited in *Heidi Bucher* at Parasol Unit Foundation for Contemporary Art, 19 September – 9 December 2018. In her work, Bucher seeks to expose hidden aspects of a building, peeling off skin after skin of a space to reveal resonances of the past that we would not normally see. Latex serves to highlight the works' 'skin-ness', suggesting the notion of house as body with a concealing protective skin.

21 In her presentation for *Intimacy Unguarded – Autobiography, Biography, Memoir*, a one-day symposium on 13 February 2014 at Central Saint Martins.

22 Ruth's mother-in-law in the biblical Book of Ruth.

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