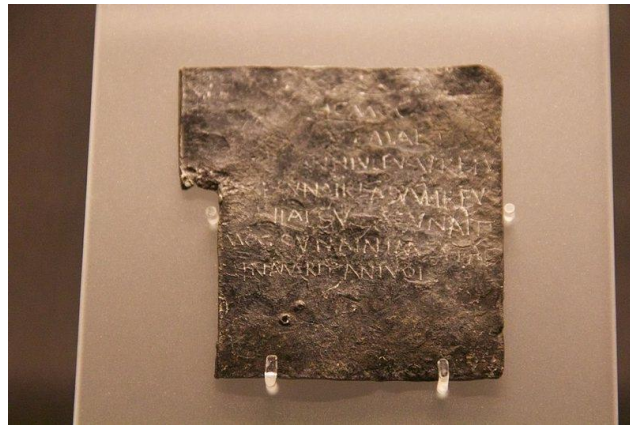


HPHP4018 – Working With Curse Tablets



A curse tablet from the baths at Roman Bath

Curse tablets (*defixiones* in Latin, κατάδεσμοι (*katadesmoi*) in Greek) were a fairly widespread phenomenon in the ancient world – occurring as far afield as Egypt to Roman Britain. Hundreds have been discovered in the archaeological record and the practice was also alluded to by a number of ancient authors. Often (but not exclusively) written on lead (due to its cheaper cost), a bronze stylus was used to etch on a message or curse. The message, written either by the individual themselves, or by a scribe. From the Roman Imperial and Late Antique periods these had become quite elaborate, with a range of gods and underworld spirits being invoked, alongside often unintelligible magic words, descriptions of any perceived wrongs, and what they person writing/commissioning the tablet wanted to happen to their target. Although not all such tablets were necessarily “curses”; some were intended as love spells or to alleviate suffering.

Many of these (but not all) were surreptitiously placed in graves, particularly of those who had died prematurely or by violence. This was because such individuals were thought to roam about in a restless or vengeful mood near the body. The dead seem to have had some form of mediatory role (some tablets indicate that respite was offered once the spirits had fulfilled the requested task). From the second century CE, we also start to see a number of figurines (made of lead, mud or wax) – sometimes bound – that were included alongside the curse tablets. Frequently the name of the target was written on the figurines, especially with love or sex spells. Sometimes hair or clothing has also been found in association with these tablets / writings; indeed, in the text *Dialogue of Courtesans*, by Lucian of Samosata, such material connected to the target was said to be useful for love spells.

For this session we will examine some examples of “curse” tablets (given below) and consider what they can tell us both about social life (i.e. the lives, activities and concerns of the living) and about conceptions of the afterlife and the underworld. A set of individual questions that accompany the examples are given. You should consider these, make notes and bring those along to the discussion session.

Examples of “curse” tablets

173 A “Sethian” circus-competition curse tablet from Rome EULAMŌN, restrain, OUSIRI OUSIRI APHI OUSIRI MNE PHRI,

Late iv A.D.

Wünsch 1898, no. 16;
DT 155 [text]; CT no.
13, side A

Greek

[lacuna] . . . and archangels, in the name of the underworld one, so that, just as I entrust to you this impious and lawless and accursed Cardelus, whom his mother Fulgentia bore, so may you bring him to a bed of punishment, to be punished with an evil death, and to die within five days. Quickly! Quickly!

Spell: You, Phrygian goddess, nymph goddess, Eidonea [i.e., ADŌNAI?] NEOI EKATOIKOUSE, I invoke you by your [lacuna] . . . so that you may help me and restrain and hold in check Cardelus and bring him to a bed of punishment, to be punished with an evil death, to come to an evil condition, him whom his mother Fulgentia bore. And you, holy EULAMON, and holy Characters, and holy assistants, those on the right and those on the left, and holy Symphonia [?]. These things have been written on this (EULAMŌN, restrain, OUSIRI OUSIRI API OUSIRI MNE PHRI) tablet made from a cold-water pipe, so that, just as I entrust to you this impious and accursed and ill-fated Cardelus, whom his mother Fulgentia bore, bound, tied up, and restrained, Cardelus whom his mother Fulgentia bore, so that you may so restrain him and bring him to a bed of punishment, to be punished and to die an evil death, Cardelus whom his mother Fulgentia bore, within five days, because I invoke you by the power that renews itself under the earth, the one that restrains the [zodiacal] circles and OIMENĒBENCHUCH BACHUCH BACHACHUCH BAZACHUCH BACHAZACHUCH BACHAXICHUCH BADĒTOPHŌTH PHTHŌSIRO. I invoke you, holy angels. [The text continues, repetitively, on side B.]

How comprehensible do you find this text? What do you think is going on here? What strikes you about the range of supernatural forces named in the tablet?

175 A sorcerer offers Augustine a binding curse for a poetry competition I recall that once, when I had decided to enter a competition for producing a poem for the theatre, some diviner

Ca. 400 A.D.

Augustine *Confessions*
4.2

Latin

[*haruspex*] sent to ask how much I would be willing to pay him for victory. But I despised and abominated those disgusting rites, and replied that I would not permit even a fly to be killed, even if the victory crown were to be made of everlasting gold. For he was planning to kill animals in his sacrificial rites, and seemed to intend to petition for the aid of demons with these offerings.

What impression can we get about the ubiquity of the practice? And its professionalization?

172	The advocate Curio supposedly has his tongue bound by Cicero's client	When I had rounded off the case for the defense on behalf of Cotta's Titinia in a very important private suit, he [Curio] was speaking against me on behalf of Servius Naevius. All of a sudden he forgot his entire case and said that this had been caused by Titinia's spells/poisons [<i>veneficia</i>] and incantations.
46 B.C.		
Cicero <i>Brutus</i> 217		
Latin		

How credible or not do you think a jury or a wider audience may have found Curio's claim?

179	Lead curse tablet against the gates of Rome	Restrain Artemidoros the doctor of the Third Praetorian Cohort. The brother of the dead Demetrios is his servant, who now wants to go out to his own fatherland. Therefore do not let him [i.e., do not let Artemidoros stop me], but restrain the Italian land, knock out the gates of the Romans. Restrain Artemidoros the son of Artemidoros the doctor. Eulamon, Laimeila, Omelieus, Axeieus, Areieus and Lathos and Thambos, restrain!
iii A.D.		
SEG 14: no. 615, Guarducci 1978, 251–4 (incorporating revisions from Jordan 1985c, no. 129)		

What is interesting about the invocation of Demetrios? Can we infer anything about the status of the person who had the curse tablet commissioned?

180	Thanks given for the deliverance of the government of Tuder from a slave's curse	In return for the salvation of the town and of the order of the town senate, to Jupiter best and greatest, the guardian and the preserver, because he, by his power, brought forth the names of the town senators which had been attached [<i>defixa</i>] to tombs by the unutterable crime of a most wicked public slave, and he liberated and freed the town and the citizens from the fear of dangers. Lucius Cancruius Primigenius, the freedman of Clemens, member of the board of six, both Augustan and Flavian, the first member of the order to be honored in this way, fulfilled his vow.
i A.D.		
CIL 11.2.4639		
Latin		

What does this inscription tell us about community or state responses to curse tablets? And about social tensions within a community?

186	A pewter prayer-for-justice tablet from Bath seeking restoration of a stolen bowl	The one who has stolen my bronze bowl is accursed. I give the person to the temple of Sulis, whether woman or man, whether slave or free, whether boy or girl, and may the man who did this pour his own blood into the very bowl. I give you that thief who stole the item itself, for the god to find, whether woman or man, whether slave or free, whether boy or girl.
iii A.D.		
Tab. Sulis no. 44		
Latin		

Can we interpret this as a form of revenge sacrifice?

204 Saint Hilarion exorcises a demon sent into a virgin by curse tablets buried under her threshold

iv–v A.D.

Jerome *Life of St. Hilarion the Hermit* 21, PL 23, 38–9

Latin

repeatedly touched her, joked with her, nodded at her, whispered to her, and did other things like this, the sort of things that tend to herald the destruction of virginity. But he got nowhere. So he journeyed to Memphis, so that, after disclosing his wound, he might return armed with magical techniques to use against the virgin. Accordingly, after a year of instruction by the priests of Asclepius, who do not cure souls but ruin them, he came back bursting for the fornication he had anticipated in his mind. He inscribed some verbal monstrosities and monstrous forms on plates of Cyprian bronze and buried them under the threshold of the girl's house. At once the virgin went mad. She cast off her veil, she swung her hair around, she gnashed her teeth, she shouted out the young man's name. The enormity of her love had transformed itself into frenzy. So her parents brought her to the monastery and handed her over to the old man. At once the demon howled and confessed, "I was the victim of force and kidnapped against my will. How well I used to deceive men with dreams in Memphis! O the tortures and torments I suffer! You compel me to come out, but I am held in bonds under the threshold. I cannot come out unless the young man that holds me dismisses me." Then the old man replied, "Great is your strength, if you are held fast by a little thread and metal plates. Tell me why you dared to enter the girl of God." "To save that virgin," came the reply. "You, save her, you betrayer of chastity? Why did you not rather enter into the man that was trying to send you?" "What?" he replied, "enter into him when he was already occupied by my love-demon colleague?" The saint would not let the symbols or the young man be hunted down before he had exorcised the virgin, lest the demon should be thought to have been detached and expelled by incantations, or he should himself be thought to have put faith in what the demon said. He affirmed that demons were deceitful and clever at pretence. When the virgin had been put back on the road to sanity he told her off for acting in such a way as to allow the demon to enter her.

In that same town of Gaza a young man fell desperately in love with a virgin of God who lived nearby. He

What does this literary anecdote tell us about Christian ecclesiastical responses to curse tablets and the dangers they pose?

197 Phila's (?) lead separation-curse tablet against Dionysophon, from Pella in Macedonia

iv B.C.

Voutiras 1998, 8

Greek

and maidens alike, but especially that of Thetima, and I deposit this spell with Macron and the demons. If I were ever to dig up, unroll, and read this tablet again, then may Dionysophon marry, but not before. May he take no woman other than me, and let me grow old beside Dionysophon, and no other woman. I am a suppliant woman before you. Take pity on <Phil-[?]>a, dear demons. . . . [lacuna] I have no friends or family and I am all alone. But guard this text for me, so that these things don't come to pass and so that the evil Thetima is destroyed in a fittingly evil fashion. . . . [lacuna] [M]ay I become fortunate and blessed.

I register [*katagraphô*] the rite and the marriage of Thetima and Dionysophon, and those of all other women, widows,

What kind of love triangle situation seems to be indicated by this curse tablet? How can such a curse appear to be "deactivated"?

**200 The sexual allure of Zois is restrained;
lead curse tablet from Boeotia**

Undated

Ziebarth 1934, no. 22
(DT 86)

A. I deposit Zois the Eretrian, the wife of Cabeiras, with Earth and Hermes, her eating, her drinking, her sleep, her laughter, her "intercourse," her lyre-playing, her "entrance," her pleasure, her little buttocks, her mind, her eyes . . .
B. <I deposit with> Hermes her wicked parading-around, her words, her deeds, her evil talk, and her . . .

Can we guess at why the commissioner of this curse tablet is annoyed with Zois?

**206 Ammonion pursues Theodotis; a lead tablet of both
separation and attraction from Egypt**

ii A.D.

Suppl. Mag. 38

Greek

I bind [*katadesmeuô*] you, Theodotis, daughter of Eus, to the snake's tail, the crocodile's mouth, the ram's horns, the asp's poison, the cat's whiskers, the god's appendage, so that you may never be able to have sex with another man, not be screwed or be buggered or give oral sex, nor do anything that brings you pleasure with another man, unless I alone, Ammonion, the son of Hermitaris, am the man. For I alone am LAMPSOURÊ OTHIKALAK AIPHNÔSABAÔ STÊSEÔN UELLAPHONTA SANKISTÊ CH-PHURIS egg. Accomplish this erotic binding-spell [*philtrokatadesmos*], this one that Isis used, so that Theodotis the daughter of Eus may no longer submit to penetration by a man other than me alone, Ammonion, the son of Hermitaris, dragged in slavery, driven crazy, taking to the air in search of Ammonion, the son of Hermitaris, and that she may apply her thigh to my thigh, her genitals to my genitals, for sex with me for the entire span of her life. These are the images: [A series of pictures and ten characters follow. The recognizable pictures depict a god with a scepter, a snake, a crocodile, and a couple kissing. A further picture may represent a penis entering a vagina.]

What can the reference to the various sexual practices tell us about Roman Imperial era attitudes towards "sexuality"? Is Ammonion simply looking to selfishly gratify his own pleasures or does he seem to be seeking something more?

**210 Heraeis pursues Sarapias; a lesbian papyrus attraction
curse from Egypt**

ii A.D.

PGM XXXII

Greek

I adjure you, Euangelos, by Anubis, Hermes, and the remaining powers of the underworld, to bring and bind [*katadêsai*] Sarapias, to whom Helen gave birth, to Heraeis, to whom Thermoutharin gave birth, now, now, quickly, quickly. Draw her by her soul and heart to Sarapias, to whom Helen gave birth with her own womb, MAEI OTE ELBOSATOK ALAUBETO OEIO AEN. Bring and bind the soul and heart of Sarapias, to whom Helen gave birth, to Heraeis, to whom Thermoutharin gave birth with her womb, now, now, quickly, quickly.

What is the social-historical value of this papyrus?