The Materiality of Greek and Roman Curse Tablets

Technological Advances



Edited by
Sofía Torallas Tovar and
Raquel Martín Hernández

with contributions by
Jan N. Bremmer,
Loretta Rossetti,
and Arie Shaus

THE ORIENTAL INSTITUTE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

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Detail of a lead curse tablet written in Latin from Bath (Aquae Sulis), England. Second to third century CE. Photograph by Mike Peel (www.mikepeel.net) / CC-BY-SA-4.0 (via Wikimedia Commons).

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Abbreviations

AIJ	Victor Hoffiller and Balduin Saria, *Antike Inschriften aus Jugoslawien.* Vol. 1, *Noricum und Pannonia Superior.* Amsterdam: Hakkert, 1970
3D	three-dimensional
CMYK	cyan-magenta-yellow-key (color mode)
fig(s).	figure(s)
H-RTI	handheld reflectance transformation imaging
ICOM-CC	International Council of Museums–Committee for Conservation
IL	iron and lead
n.	(foot)note
ppb	parts per billion
ppm	parts per million
RGB	red-green-blue (color mode)
RTI	reflectance transformation imaging
sing.	singular
TM	Trismegistos (database; https://www.trismegistos.org)
UPZ	Ulrich Wilcken, *Urkunden der Ptolemäerzeit (ältere Funde).* 2 vols. Berlin: De Gruyter, 1927

All references to papyri use the *Checklist of Editions of Greek, Latin, Demotic, and Coptic Papyri, Ostraca, and Tablets* at https://papyri.info/docs/checklist. We have given the Trismegistos number for all cited documents for further information.

Introduction: On the Advantages of Material Studies in Magic

Sofía Torallas Tovar and Raquel Martín Hernández

This volume is one of the publications resulting from Curses in Context, a project funded by the Neubauer Collegium for Culture and Society at the University of Chicago.[1] This project assembled scholars to deliberate over the local, chronological, and material contexts of curse tablets in the ancient Mediterranean world.

Curse tablets are small, inscribed metal sheets—usually but not always composed of lead—that are intended to manipulate the actions of other people or animals without their consent. Such tablets have survived from antiquity primarily because of their durable media and because they were often deposited in inaccessible places such as graves, chthonic sanctuaries, and underground bodies of water, including wells, cisterns, and springs. Moreover, the texts that the tablets preserve often give ample insight into the private anxieties, thoughts, and actions of the people who wrote or commissioned them, as well as the names, professions, and social situations of the people whom they curse. Some, for example, are "binding curses," called *katadesmoi* in Greek, which seem to represent a simple form of name magic. These curses aim to restrain rivals in various agonistic venues, such as law courts, contests, or competitions, and do so by manipulating or piercing a series of inscribed names. In many of these binding curses, there is apparently no need for divine help; the performance of the rite is interpreted as an automatic ritual action through which the author's objectives will be fulfilled. Other tablets preserve complex texts that appeal to divinities to intercede for the benefit of the ritual operator or the operator's client. These texts address either gods—normally chthonic gods such as Demeter or Hermes—or the demons of the dead—usually those of erotic purpose—and the tone of these sorts of petitions may be more or less coercive. Other tablets, however, are inscribed with traditional prayers, albeit prayers addressed to chthonic deities asking them to do the binding. Another popular genre of curse tablet that was deposited publicly in sanctuaries asked the god residing in a given sanctuary to bring thieves or slanderers to justice.

Curse tablets have an enduring legacy in the ancient Mediterranean basin, beginning with the earliest Greek examples in the classical period in both Sicily and Athens and surviving via permeation first throughout the Greek-speaking world and later to every corner

1 The principal researchers of this project are Christopher Faraone and Sofía Torallas Tovar, with the collaboration of Richard Gordon and Celia Sánchez Natalías. The project was funded for 2018–21. Four conferences were organized in the framework of this project, and five volumes of proceedings are in production. For further information, visit https://voices.uchicago.edu/cursesincontext/ and https://neubauercollegium.uchicago.edu/research/curses-in-context/.