

Binding Spells on Tablets and Papyri

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1 “Curse Tablets,” Categories and Collections

The subject of this chapter, binding spells, or *defixiones*—from the Latin *defigo* “I nail down” or “transfix”—are found inscribed on lead tablets and written on papyri, during the period from the sixth century BCE to the eighth century CE.¹ They are often referred to generally as “curses”; those scratched into lead are more specifically described as “curse tablets.” As David Jordan noted, in his magisterial first collection of these texts published in 1985, “*Defixiones*, more commonly known as curse tablets, are inscribed pieces of lead or lead alloy, usually in the form of small, thin sheets, intended to influence by supernatural means, the actions or welfare of persons or animals against their will.”² The primary form of influence sought in binding spells was to constrain or “bind” the victim—and what we can elicit from the ancient evidence about the techniques used, and contexts in which they were employed, is discussed further below.

But first, a note about changes in categorisation: over the last 20 years, led by the work of Henk Versnel among others, scholars have come to recognize that *defixiones*, or binding spells, are not the only type of texts within this broad category of “curse tablets.” As Roger Tomlin has observed, with specific reference to the curse tablets from Bath, there is another, which comprises “petitions for justice, not magical spells.”³ These “prayers for justice,” as they are now commonly called, are identified by a set of typical features, but their central attribute is that they are all texts that have been written by someone or on behalf of someone who has been wronged by a person or persons; the tablets

1 See J.G. Gager, *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 27 and 263. The times at which they appear in different media in different places is discussed further below.

2 SGD, 151. See D. Ogden, “Binding Spells: Curse Tablets and Voodoo Dolls,” in *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe Vol. II: Ancient Greece and Rome*, ed. B. Ankarloo and S. Clark (London: Athlone, 1999), 1–90, for discussion of the role of the supernatural.

3 R.S.O. Tomlin, “The Curse Tablets,” *The Temple of Sulis Minerva at Bath Vol. 2. The Finds from the Sacred Spring*, ed. B. Cunliffe (Oxford: Oxford University Committee for Archaeology, 1988), 62.

from Bath, for example, often concern the theft of property. Prayers for justice tend not only to ask the god for help, offering some kind of justification for the appeal, but also to involve the divinity more closely: for example, in the case of stolen goods, the prayer may dedicate the stolen item to the deity's charge, or deliver the wrongdoer to the gods, or transfer the case itself to the god's care.⁴ The earliest examples of this type date to the Hellenistic period (Versnel links them to the "strongly monarchical flavour ... characteristic of religious expression in Asia Minor"), and they flourish in the Imperial period.⁵

The relationship between binding curses and prayers for justice has been a matter of debate, with some scholars emphasizing the close relationships or similarities between the two types, and others drawing firmer boundaries.⁶ The divergence between the two groups is not always so clear in practice: there are a number of texts that share the characteristics of both binding spells and prayers for justice, and these have been called "border area curses." However, Versnel has recently argued that a much sharper distinction should be made between, on the one hand, traditional binding curses, from which developed some early "border area curses"—"more or less spontaneous, individual creations," showing a wide variety of expressions—and, on the other, later "true" or "pure" prayers for justice, which, he suggests, originated as "personal expressions in the context of temple-religion."⁷ This paper will focus on binding spells on lead and on papyri, but will mention prayers for justice and border-area curses where relevant; and, recognizing the difficulty of distinguishing binding spells from prayers for justice, this essay will use the term "curse tablets" where appropriate to indicate the undifferentiated corpus.

4 A full description of their characteristics can be found in H.S. Versnel, "Beyond Cursing: The Appeal to Justice in Judicial Prayers," in *Magika Hiera: Ancient Greek Magic and Religion*, ed. C. Faraone and D. Obbink (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 60–106, updated in Versnel, "Prayers for Justice, East and West: New Finds and Publications since 1990," in *Magical Practice in the Latin West: Papers from the International Conference held at the University of Zaragoza, 30th Sept.–1st Oct. 2005*, ed. R. Gordon and M. Simon, RGRW 168 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2010), 275–354. Some scholars argue that prayers for justice are a sub-category of *defixiones*; others that they are a separate category, with a realm of texts that overlap (the so-called "border area curses"); see Versnel, "Prayers for Justice, East and West" for an overview. Dreher 2009 rejects the category, arguing that it crosses existing categories rather than supplanting them; Versnel (2009) responds in the same volume. The categories that scholars use to describe curse tablets are discussed further below.

5 Versnel, "Prayers for Justice, East and West," 333–4.

6 See F. Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World*, trans. F. Philip (London; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 121–134, esp. 126; and 159–160; and Ogden, "Binding Spells: Curse Tablets and Voodoo Dolls," 38–44.

7 See n. 4; Quotation: Versnel, "Prayers for Justice, East and West," 275–354.

2 Corpora and Collections

Earlier collections of texts tend not to draw a distinction between binding spells and prayers for justice, often including what might now be called prayers for justice as a sub-category of “curse tablets,” or *defixiones*.⁸ To read the material in the ancient languages: the chief collections are, for the Greek material, R. Wünsch, *Defixionum Tabellae Atticae* (DTA), which contains 220 examples (all Attic Greek);⁹ A. Audollent, *Defixionum Tabellae* (DT), which contains 166 tablets (and 137 tablets in languages other than, or as well as, Greek); while D.R. Jordan “A Survey of Greek Defixiones Not Included in the Special Corpora” (SGD) lists another 189 published examples and reports the existence of a further 461 tablets which have not yet been published; Jordan’s latest survey, “New Greek Curse Tablets (1985–2000)” (NGCT) lists 122 more.¹⁰

Curse tablets in languages other than Greek start to appear in the second half of the fourth century BCE, with Latin curse tablets appearing in the second century BCE.¹¹ Audollent included 79 texts in Latin (and a further 31 in a mixture of Latin and Greek). Since then, further discoveries, including, for example, from the sites of Bath and Uley, the Sanctuary of Isis and Mater Magna at Mainz, and the fountain of Anna Perenna in Rome, have brought the total number of curses written in Latin up to (at last count) 579, according to A. Kropp, in *Magische Sprachverwendung in vulgarlateinischen Fluchtafeln*.¹²

8 Although it should be noted that one of the four categories distinguished by Audollent was *defixiones* written to recover stolen objects (DT p. lxxxix).

9 Jaime Curbera kindly tells me that a new edition of Wünsch’s collection of tablets is being prepared under the auspices of the *Inscriptiones Graecae* project, by editors Sergio Giannobile, David Jordan and Jaime Curbera.

10 See above, n. 1, for bibliographical data. Note that Jordan uses the term “curse tablets” rather than *defixiones* for this collection, since, as he noted, “curse tablets” could encompass those texts that were better described as prayers for justice (pp. 5–6).

11 A. Kropp, *Defixiones: Ein aktuelles Corpus lateinischer Fluchtafeln* (Speyer: Kartoffeldruck-Verlag Kai Broderson, 2008), 6; and see R. Gordon and M. Simón “Introduction” in *Magical Practice in the Latin West*, 16, n. 56. For work on bilingual curses see J.N. Adams, *Bilingualism and the Latin Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) and J. Curbera, M. Sierra Delage, and I. Velazquez, “A Bilingual Curse Tablet from Barchin del Hoyo (Cuenca, Spain),” *ZPE* 125 (1999): 279–83.

12 In 1996, Tomlin reported that Britain was the source of over 250 of the 500 or so Latin curse tablets then discovered (reported by R.S.O. Tomlin, *Oxford University Centre for the Study of Ancient Documents: Newsletter No. 2, Spring 1996* (Center for the Study of Ancient Documents, February 1996), <http://www.csad.ox.ac.uk/CSAD/Newsletters/Newsletter2/Newsletter2b.html>. Accessed: 06/19/2018. For Kropp’s figures, see p. 37 (but 578, on p. 247, see review M. Buora *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* 55, August, 2009). She excluded 41 from her final corpus, and her volume includes a CD-ROM containing the 537 texts referred

These texts demonstrate both local languages (for example, some Bath tablets may provide the first attestations of written British Celtic) and external influences as discussed in J. Adams, *An Anthology of Informal Latin 200 BC–AD 900*.¹³

While the Latin material may at first sight seem to be both smaller than its Greek counterpart, and in many ways derivative if not assimilated, there are, as Richard Gordon and Marco Simón point out, “legitimate questions about cultural difference” that remain.¹⁴ Their own volume, *Magical Practice in the Latin West*, based on a conference at the University of Zaragoza in 2005, provides an invaluable exploration of magical practice in the Latin-speaking West: it gives texts and detailed analysis of particular cases, as well as a general overview of the context of the field and guide to further scholarship.¹⁵ For more details on the material from Bath and Uley, begin with R.S.O. Tomlin, “The Curse Tablets,” in *The Temple of Sulis Minerva at Bath Vol. 2. The Finds from the Sacred Spring*, ed. B. Cunliffe (TSM).¹⁶ Two general surveys by Tomlin are also recommended: “Curse Tablets from Roman Britain,” in *XI Congresso Internazionale di Epigrafia Greca e Latina* and “Writing to the gods in Britain,” in A.E. Cooley (ed.), *Becoming Roman, Writing Latin? Literacy and Epigraphy in the Roman West*.¹⁷ The Centre for the Study of Ancient Documents at Oxford provides an overview of recent finds and related bibliography.¹⁸ For individual finds, see reports in the annual survey in *Britannia*; and Roger Tomlin himself

to; see *ibid.* p. 7 of the work for the lists of tablets omitted, and explanations. Kropp, *Defixiones* provides a corpus of 382 texts for analysis.

- 13 J.N. Adams, *An Anthology of Informal Latin 200 BC–AD 900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016). On the appearance of Celtic in *Tab. Sulis* 14 and 18 see Mullen 2007. (Mullen counsels caution: she concludes that the tablets may contain examples of Continental Celtic rather than British Celtic.) On external influences on local language in British curse tablets, see Adams, *An Anthology of Informal Latin 200 BC–AD 900*, nos. 35–37.

Particular dialects are also found: see SGD 91 for Sicilian dialect and CTBS 16 for a text in a local Latin dialect. K. McDonald, *Oscan in Southern Italy and Sicily: Evaluating Language Contact in a Fragmentary Corpus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 138–139 provides a table of the languages of curse tablets found in Italy from the sixth to first century BCE. Adams, *Bilingualism and the Latin Language*, 145 notes that it is probably “the potency of Italian regional magic” that reverses the usual adoption of Latin phraseology in Oscan curse tablets.

- 14 Gordon and Simón “Introduction,” in *Magical Practice in the Latin West*, 3.
 15 R. Gordon and M. Simón, eds., *Magical Practice in the Latin West*.
 16 See, n. 4.
 17 R.S.O. Tomlin, “Curse Tablets from Roman Britain,” in *XI Congresso Internazionale di Epigrafia Greca e Latina* (Rome: Quasar, 1999), 553–65 and Tomlin, “Writing to the Gods in Britain,” in *Becoming Roman, Writing Latin? Literacy and Epigraphy in the Roman West*, ed. A.E. Cooley (Portsmouth, RI: Journal of Roman Archaeology, 2002), 165–179.
 18 See <http://curses.csad.ox.ac.uk/>.

kindly draws attention to “A Roman inscribed tablet from Red Hill, Ratcliffe-on-Soar (Nottinghamshire),” *Antiquaries Journal* 84.¹⁹ He notes that two of the best discoveries of recent years have been published in “Paedagogium and Septizonium: Two Roman Lead Tablets from Leicester,” *ZPE* 167.²⁰ The finds from the joint temple of Isis and Mater Magna in Mainz are reported in *Fluchtafeln. Neue Funde und neue Deutungen zum antiken Schadenzauber*, ed. Kai Brodersen and Amina Kropp.²¹ What has been read of the tablets from the fountain of Anna Perenna can be found in Jurgen Blänsdorf “The Texts from the Fons Annae Perennae” in *Magical Practice in the Latin West*.²²

The texts written on papyri or parchment largely date to the second to fifth centuries CE (although some may be earlier) and were found in Egypt; they include binding spells in Demotic Egyptian and Coptic.²³ They comprise not only examples of “applied magic,” but also formularies, giving instructions for the creation of spells and performance of rituals. Karl Preisendanz catalogued those written in Greek (in the *Papyri Graecae Magicae* [PGM]),²⁴ but this material should now be considered alongside the texts written in Demotic Egyptian.²⁵ As noted by Andrew Wilburn, it is important to remember that their different catalogues and numbers may refer to texts that were composed in the same cultural context and, indeed, appear on the same papyrus rolls.²⁶

- 19 R.S.O. Tomlin, “A Roman Inscribed Tablet from Red Hill, Ratcliffe-on-Soar (Nottinghamshire),” *Antiquaries Journal* 84 (2004): 346–52. On this tablet see also now Adams, *An Anthology of Informal Latin 200 BC–AD 900*, no. 36.
- 20 R.S.O. Tomlin, “Paedagogium and Septizonium: Two Roman Lead Tablets from Leicester,” *ZPE* 167 (2009): 167–207.
- 21 Kai Brodersen and Amina Kropp, eds., *Fluchtafeln. Neue Funde und neue Deutungen zum antiken Schadenzauber* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Antike, 2004).
- 22 Jurgen Blänsdorf “The Texts from the Fons Annae Perennae” in *Magical Practice in the Latin West*.
- 23 H. Betz, *GMPT*, xli. These are the so-called “Anastasi Papyri,” named after the nineteenth-century diplomat who first bought them.
- 24 K. Preisendanz, *Papyri Graecae Magicae Die griechischen Zauberpapyri*, 2 vols. (Leipzig and Berlin: Teubner, 1928, 1931). A new edition of vol. II was produced by A. Henrichs (1974), and this contains the papyri originally planned for vol. III, (up to PGM LXXXI). See Betz, *GMPT*, xliv.
- 25 On the ways in which the Demotic Magical Papyri (*PDM*) were long overlooked in favour of the Greek corpus, see J.H. Johnson, “Introduction to the Demotic Magical Papyri” in *GMPT*, lv–lviii, lv and J. Dieleman, *Priests, Tongues and Rites: The London-Leiden Magical Manuscripts and Translation in Egyptian Ritual 100–300 CE* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2005), 16–19.
- 26 A. Wilburn, *Materia Magica: The Archaeology of Magic in Roman Egypt, Cyprus, and Spain* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 27. On the history of the discovery and publication of the PGM, see the introduction to Betz 1986, and Dieleman, *Priests, Tongues and Rites*, 16–19. On the cultural relationship between Greek and Demotic texts, see further below.

W.M. Brashear's "The Greek Magical Papyri: An Introduction and Survey; annotated Bibliography (1928–1994)" *ANRW* 18.5 provides a useful overview and extensive bibliography.²⁷ The Greek and Demotic texts have been usefully published in English translation edited by H.D. Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation* [*GMPT*]; M. Meyer and R. Smith, eds., *Ancient Christian Magic: Coptic Texts of Ritual Power* [*ACM*] collects Christian texts—spells, charms, amulets, etc.—dating from the first to the eleventh or twelfth centuries CE, with a useful chapter (6) of sexual spells, which the authors explicitly related to binding spells.²⁸ R.W. Daniel and F. Maltomini, *Supplementum Magicum*, vols 1 and II [*Suppl. Mag.*] are intended as a supplement to Preisendanz; they contain texts on papyri and lead, all from Egypt and in Greek (except I, 36, in Latin).²⁹

A number of these collections contain translations. Further published collections of translated texts, largely Greek, include, J.G. Gager, *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World* (*CTBS*), and E. Eidinow, *Oracles, Curses, and Risk among the Ancient Greeks* (*OCR*), which provides an appendix of a number of Greek texts, dating from the sixth to the first centuries BCE.³⁰ Online resources include the database *Thesaurus Defixionum Magdeburgensis*, an open access and updateable corpus of all known curse tablet texts, containing both binding spells and prayers for justice, from a range of media, including papyri, along with available translations.³¹

For succinct introductions to key themes and aspects of the study of the Greek texts, see the list of Suggested Readings at the conclusion of this chapter.

3 Meet the Family

Let us begin with a few examples that illustrate the range of items within the larger category of "curse tablets." The following texts were found thousands of miles apart; their dates of origin span something like 800 years:

27 W.M. Brashear, "The Greek Magical Papyri: An Introduction and Survey; annotated Bibliography (1928–1994)" *ANRW* 18.5 (1995): 3380–3684.

28 D. Frankfurter, "Introduction to Sexual Spells," in *Ancient Christian Magic*, 147–51, esp. 148.

29 R.W. Daniel and F. Maltomini, eds., *Supplementum Magicum*, 2 vols., *Papyrologica Coloniensia* vols. 16.1 and 16.2. (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1990–92).

30 E. Eidinow, *Oracles, Curses, and Risk among the Ancient Greeks* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

31 This project is based at the university of Magdeburg and directed by Prof. Dr. Martin Dreher; See http://www-e.uni-magdeburg.de/defigo/wordpress/?page_id=2.

- 1) The first example is from Sicily, and is one of the oldest binding spells so far found, dating to the end of the sixth, or beginning of the fifth, century BCE.³² It is inscribed on both sides of a lead tablet, which was buried near the cemetery at Buffa, near Selinus; below is the text from one side.³³

Side A: "The tongue of Eukles and that of Aristophanis and that of Angeilis and that of Alkiphron and that of Hagestratos. Of the advocates,³⁴ of Eukles and Aristophanis, their tongues. And the tongue of ..."

Side B: "and that of Oinotheos and that of ... the tongue."

- 2) Probably dating to the early fourth century BCE, this spell takes the form of a small (H. 0.065 by 0.11) oval box made of lead, along with a small figurine (H. 0.06), its arms bound behind its back; these were buried in a grave in the Kerameikos, Athens.³⁵ The text, scratched into the lid of the box, reads:

"Barburtides, Xophugos/Nikomachos, Oinokles/Mnesimachos/Chamaios, Teisonides/Charisandros/Demokles" followed by the phrase "and if there anyone else with them/as advocate or witness." The right leg of the doll is inscribed with the name "Mnesimachos."

- 3) The third example is the text from one side of an opisthographic lead tablet; it is also from Athens, although the exact location is unknown, and also dates to the fourth century BCE.³⁶

³² On the difficulties of dating these texts, see *OCR* 286 n.13.

³³ *SGD* 95 (*CTBS* for the text). Also: A. Brugnone, "Defixiones inedite da Selinunte," in *Studi di storia antica offerti dagli allievi a Eugenio Manni*, ed. Eugenio Manni (Rome: G. Bretschneider, 1976), 73–79, no. 2; K. Brodersen, ed., *Gebet und Fluch, Zeichen und Traum. Aspekte religiöser Kommunikation in der Antike*, Antike Kultur und Geschichte 1 (Münster: Lit, 2001), 62; and L. Bettarini, *Corpus delle defixiones di Selinunte* (Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, 2005), 81–86, no. 16.

³⁴ The Greek is *σύνδικοι*. See L. Rubinstein, *Litigation and Cooperation: Supporting Speakers in the Courts of Classical Athens* (Stuttgart: Stuttgart, 2000), 43–45, and 64–65 for translation and discussion of the role of this term.

³⁵ *SGD* 9 and *CTBS* no. 41; for text and translation see *OCR*, 407. See F. Costabile, "Defixiones dal Kerameikos di Atene—II maledizioni processuali," *Minima Epigraphica et Papyrologica* 3 (2000): 37–122 and J. Trumpf, "Fluchtafel und Rache puppe," *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts* 73 (1958): 94–102.

³⁶ *DT* 68, *CTBS* 22: This is a complex tablet and very difficult to translate, but it is included here to illustrate the range of styles found among these magical texts, and the potential they offered for individual expression. In describing the binding of Theodora, this text exhibits a bewitching word play using a number of similar adjectives with meanings

‘Just as this man lies here, powerless (ἀτελής), in the same way may everything of Theodora’s be ineffectual (ἀτέλεστα), both her words and deeds, those directed to Charias and those to other men. I bind Theodora in the presence of Hermes of the underworld and in the presence of the unmarried (ἀτελέστους) dead and in the presence of Tethys.³⁷ Powerless (ἀτέλεστα) the deeds directed at Charias and the other men and sex with Charias and Charias should forget sex; Charias should forget dear little Theodora,³⁸ the woman he loves.

- 4) The fourth example is one of five ritual texts from across Egypt, all possibly, and partially, modelled on a particular “recipe” from the *PGM*.³⁹ Written on a lead tablet, and dating to the second to third centuries CE, this text starts with a series of *voces magicae*, seeming nonsense words that were regarded as powerful, some of it written in an inverted triangle shape; the comprehensible text of the spell is 44 lines long, and begins:⁴⁰

relating to the idea of being incomplete or unsuccessful, that is, in the sense of not having completed one’s life’s purpose. I have chosen to translate them here as “powerless” or “ineffectual,” when used of the dead corpse, and of Theodora’s actions, respectively. When used alongside “the dead” the meaning may be more specific—referring to the lack of a particular religious initiation (Audollent, *Defixionum Tabellae*) or unmarried (Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World*, 150–1), but see S.I. Johnston, *Restless Dead: Encounters between the Living and the Dead in Ancient Greece* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 78, n. 127. For an overview of debate about the meaning of this term see *OCR*, 149 and 291, n. 53. Further reading, see B. Bravo, “Une tablette magique d’Olbia: les morts, les héros et les démons,” in *Poikilia. Études offertes à Jean-Pierre Vernant*, ed. A. Adler, *Recherches d’histoire et de sciences sociales* 26 (Paris: École des hautes études en sciences sociales, 1987), 205–6; F. Graf, “Fluch und Verwünschung,” in *Thesaurus cultus et rituum antiquorum*, ed. J.-C. Balty (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2005), 266–67, no. 89, and J.C.B. Petropoulos, “The Erotic Magical Papyri,” *Proceedings of the XVIII International Congress of Papyrology* 2 (Athens: 1988): 215–222, esp. 219–220.

- 37 The word translated here as “in the presence of” is πρὸς; there is some debate about the meaning of this word (see further below).
- 38 Alternatively, this phrase could be taken to refer to a child of Theodora.
- 39 The spells are *Suppl. Mag.* 1, nos. 46–51, based on *PGM* IV 296–433, see *CTBS* 27–28.
- 40 Sections J–K of the diplomatic transcription offered in *Suppl. Mag.* 1, no. 48. P. Mich. 757, inv. 6925; D.G. Martinez, ed. and comm., *Michigan Papyri XVI, A Greek Love Charm from Egypt (P.Mich. 757)* (Atlanta: Scholars’ Press, 1991), who dated it third-fourth centuries CE. On triangular formations in spells, see D. Frankfurter, “The Magic of Writing and the Writing of Magic: the Power of the Word in Egyptian and Greek traditions,” *Helios* 21 (1994): 199–200 (and below, Chapter 23), and R. Gordon, “Shaping the Text: Innovation and Authority in Graeco-Egyptian Malign Magic” in *Kykeon: Studies in honour of HS Versnel*, ed. H. Versnel, H.F.J. Horstmanshoff, H.W. Singor, F.T. van Straten, and J.H.M. Strubbe (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2002), 69–111; focused on amulets, but with an overview of the use of text shapes across different types of magical text.

I deposit this binding charm with you, chthonic gods, Plouton and Kore *Yesemmeigadon* and Koure Persephone *Ereschigal* and Adonis, also called *Barbaritha*, and chthonic Hermes Thoth, *Phokensepseu earektathou misonktaich* and mighty Anoubis *Pseriphtha*, who holds the keys of the gates to Hades and chthonic daemons, gods, men and women who suffered an untimely death, youths and maidens, year after year, month after month, day after day, night after night, hour after hour. I adjure you, all the daemons in this place, to assist this corpse-daemon. <Rouse yourself for me, corpse-daemon> whoever you are, whether male or female, and go into every place, into every quarter, into every house, and bind Kopria, whom her mother Taesis bore, of whom you have the hairs of the head, for Ailourion, whom his mother named Kopria bore, so that she not be fucked, nor be buggered, nor make pleasure for another youth or another man, except for Ailourion only, whom his mother named Koprion bore, and let her not even be able to eat, or to drink, or to get sleep ever, or to enjoy good health, or have rest in her soul or mind as she yearns for Ailourion ...

- 5) A fairly typical text from Uley in Gloucestershire:⁴¹

To the god Mercury (from) Docilinus ... Varianus and Peregrina and Sabinianus who have brought evil harm on my beast and are ... I ask you that you drive them to the greatest death, and do not allow them health or sleep unless they redeem from you what they have administered to me.

- 6) The death of Germanicus, who had been adopted as the son of Tiberius, and grandson of Augustus. Tacitus reports that:

It is a fact that explorations of the floor and walls revealed the remains of human bodies, spells, curse tablets, the name Germanicus inscribed on lead tablets, charred and blood-smeared ashes, and other implements of witchcraft by which it is believed that the living soul can be devoted to the infernal powers.⁴²

⁴¹ Uley 43; translation at <http://curses.csad.ox.ac.uk/>; see M.W.C. Hassall and R.S.O. Tomlin, "Roman Britain in 1988," *Britannia* 20 (1989): 329–31; see also Tomlin, "Curse tablets from Roman Britain," 554; J.N. Adams, "British Latin: The Text, Interpretation and Language of the Bath Curse Tablets," *Britannia* 23 (1992): 7–8; and Kropp, *Defixiones*, no.3. 22/16. The hand is very similar to that of a tablet found at Bath (*Tab. Sulis* 10).

⁴² Tacitus, *Annals*, 2.69.5.

At first sight, these texts may seem quite unrelated: text 1 comprises a simple list of names, others supply a more elaborate series of formulations. Texts 3 and 4 seem to assert control over a lover; text 2 targets victory in a law case. Texts five and six relate attempts to deter or even kill a political opponent. Moreover, to these initial texts, we could add numerous others with still further variations: for example, a binding spell from Bath, in the United Kingdom, that aims to punish whoever stole the writer's bathing costume and cloak;⁴³ or a spell to hamper a popular team of charioteers, buried under the starting-gates of a Roman circus in a North African town;⁴⁴ or perhaps a description by an early Christian writer of how a saint freed the victim of a binding spell from the torture of its supernatural grip.⁴⁵ Separated by times, places and cultures, these texts all belong to the category of "curse tablets," and provide a snapshot of the great variety of languages and contexts that it contains.

Examples 1–4 above are binding spell texts or *defixiones*. Later literary evidence gives some insight into the precise intention behind even the earlier binding spells: for example, the second-century CE doctor, Galen, describes the claims of ritual experts who targeted the speaking powers of their opponents in court with such spells.⁴⁶ The basic idea of binding seems to have been to disable, or render impotent, the target or some particular aspect of the target. The evidence suggests that it was considered possible to release this binding effect: some literary anecdotes describe how destroying the medium of the spell, be it a lead tablet or some other substance (see Text 6, above), may bring relief to its victim.⁴⁷ But a number of tablets also include information about the spell-writer's intention not to release the binding until they get what they want.⁴⁸ This kind of sentiment fits well within the picture of what

43 Tomlin, "The Curse Tablets," 122.

44 See F. Heintz, "Circus Curses and their Archaeological Contexts," *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 11 (1998): 337–342.

45 For example: Eusebius of Caesarea, *Oration on the 30th Anniversary of the Reign of Constantine* (Laus Constantini), chap. 13; Basil of Caesarea, *Epistles*, 188.8; Synesius of Cyrene, *Epistles*, 121; Jerome, *Life of Saint Hilarion the Hermit*, 21 (*Patrologia Latina* 23, cols 39–40); these all discussed in *CTBS*.

46 Galen, XII p. 251, trans. Kühn); a similar case from Delos is preserved in an inscription: *IG* XI. Pt. 4, 1299; I.U. Powell, *Collectanea Alexandrina* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925), 68–71, and H. Engelmann, *The Delian Aretalogy of Serapis* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1975), 53–54.

47 *PGM* IV. 2177 is a spell to break (the power of) other such spells. Earlier evidence is rarer, but Magnes, *PCG* Λυδοί 4 (fifth century BCE) may allude to experts in loosing magical spells.

48 See n. 8 above, and Text 5. Spells with information about loosing: *SGD* 18 and Phila's tablet from Pella in Macedonia (E. Voutiras, *Dionysophontos gamoi: Marital Life and Magic in Fourth Century Pella* (Amsterdam: J.C. Gieben, 1998).

Daniel Ogden has called the “magical arms race,” in which protection against the supernatural assault of an enemy could be sought only in finding stronger supernatural protection for oneself—either apotropaic amulets or aggressive counter-spells of one’s own.⁴⁹

The Latin term *defixio* might lead to expectations that these texts are examples of a practice of Roman origin or at least that the evidence is primarily Roman. In fact, as the examples above suggest, binding spells are first found in the Greek colonies of Sicily, dating to as early as the end of the sixth century BCE, and most of the 1600 curse tablets that have been discovered are written in Greek.⁵⁰ Although by the time of the *PGM*, binding-spells tend to be referred to as *katadesmoi*, pre-imperial terminology is far more varied. In the rare cases when the spells refer to themselves, they use “prayer,” or simply “the lead” (a reference to the material on which the spell is written); two examples refer to themselves as letters.⁵¹ Unfortunately, relevant literary evidence from this period is sparse.⁵² There are possible references to the practice of magical binding in ancient drama, but few explicit mentions exist.⁵³ What there is suggests a fluidity of terminology: Plato, for example, uses two different terms, *κατάδεσμος* and *κατάδεσις*.⁵⁴ Latin literary evidence provides a more consistent

49 Ogden, “Binding Spells: Curse Tablets and Voodoo Dolls,” 52; for this pattern of behaviour see also D. Frankfurter, “Fetus Magic and Sorcery Fears,” *GRBS* 46 (2006): 37–62, *OCR* 225–37, and E. Eidinow, “Patterns of Persecution: ‘Witchcraft’ Trials in Classical Athens,” *Past and Present* 208 (2010): 11–35, and *Envy, Poison, and Death: Women on Trial in Classical Athens* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

50 This number dates to 1991 (Ogden, “Binding Spells: Curse Tablets and Voodoo Dolls,” 4 and C. Faraone, “The Agonistic Context of Early Greek Binding Spells,” in *Magika Hiera*, 22). There have of course been discoveries made since then (see collections listed above).

51 Various terms from the Greeks: include ‘the lead’ *DTA* 55, side a, l. 16 (and see also *DT* 85, side A, l. 8 (acc. to E. Ziebarth, “Neue Verfluchungstafeln aus Attika, Boiotien und Euboia,” *Sitzungsberichte der preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, Phil.-hist. Klasse 33 (Berlin: Verlag der Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1934), no. 23); *κατάδεσμον* *DT* 85, side B, l. 8 (acc. to Ziebarth, “Neue Verfluchungstafeln aus Attika, Boiotien und Euboia,” no. 23); *ἀπορίαν*: Ziebarth, side A, l. 13, with translation in *CTBS*, 87; *εὐχά*: *SGD* 91 (according to a reading by A. P. Miller, “Studies in Early Sicilian Epigraphy: An Opisthographic Lead Tablet” (Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1973), supplied and discussed in *CTBS* 76, no. 17); described as letters, *DTA* 102, 103.

52 As E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and Irrational* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951), 205, n. 99.

53 Comedy: Aristophanes, *Acharneses*, ll. 703–18; Aristophanes, *Vespae*, 946–8 Scholion, with Faraone 1989. Tragedy: Aeschylus, *Eumenides*, 306 ff. with C. Faraone, “Aeschylus’ *humnos desmios* (*Eum.* 306) and Attic Judicial Curse Tablets,” *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 105 (1985): 150–54.

54 Plato, *Respublica*, 364c–e; cf. *PGM* IV 2176–7. *Leges*, 933a; a third indirect reference is found in Dinarchus (in Harpokraton, *Lexicon of the Ten Orators*, entry under *καταδεσθῆναι*).

terminology, preferring *devotiones*, but Latin epigraphic terminology remains varied. *Defixio* is rarely found in Latin curse tablets, which offer, instead, a range of other terms, including *donatio* “dedication,” *execratio* “curse,” *devotio* “dedication/curse/spell,” *commonitorium* “memorandum” and *petitio* “petition.” However, these indicate that the underlying aim of these texts was not to bind the target, but to provoke the enactment of divine punishment: these are prayers for justice.⁵⁵

With regard to binding spells and curse tablets more generally, as we will see, the evidence suggests that people from across society participated in different ways in this ritual practice—be it commissioning or writing, selling or using them.⁵⁶ There is no doubt that this was a practice that set individuals against each other, but larger groups may also have been involved, in terms of both writers and targets of texts. As discussed in more detail later in this essay, evidence may indicate the existence of workshops of practitioners producing multiple texts to order.⁵⁷ Some binding spell texts, which use legal terminology, target a number of individuals all from one legal team, and this may suggest, in turn, that they were commissioned, even composed, by the opposing legal team.⁵⁸ Moreover, while we think of this practice as highly private, it is also worth noting that it has some counterpart in community, or even *polis* rituals used to ward off anticipated dangers, both mortal and divine. Some city-states seem to have held annual rituals for binding gods (or representations of them) that represented a particular danger.⁵⁹ Obviously, there are marked differences between these and the majority of curse tablets, which tend to be texts; but,

55 Literary terminology: Tacitus, *Annals*, 2.69, 4.52, 16.31 uses *devotiones*; the verb *defigi* is frequently found to describe the practice in Seneca, *On Benefits*, 6.35.4, Pliny, *Natural History*, 28.4.19; Ovid, *Amores*, 3.7.27–30. Epigraphic terms, see *TSM*, 59.

56 See *OCR*, 172 with n. 20 for examples and further reading.

57 See discussion Brashear, “The Greek Magical Papyri,” 3419 (and further on this below).

58 *OCR*, 180–86.

59 See C. Faraone, *Talismans and Trojan Horses: Guardian Statues in Ancient Greek Myth and Ritual* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), ch. 5, especially 74–5. Examples given include bound mortals: Olympiodorus of Thebes reports the catastrophic effects of the removal of three bound silver statues *FHG* iv p. 63 F27. Bound gods: *Iliad*, 5.385–91 and *Odessey*, 8.296–99, Enyalios at Sparta: Paus. 3.15.7; Clarian instruction to the Syedrans to bind Ares: Parke 1985, 157–58, Bean and Mitford 1965, no. 26, 1st century BCE; inscription possibly from a bound Ares, *Palatine Anthology* 9.805.). Cities and god-binding rituals include: Artemis Eurynome at Phigalia (Pausanias, 8.41.6); Artemis Soteira at Pellene (Pausanias, 7.27.3, Plutarch, *Aratus*, 32.2); Artemis Orthiea (Lygodesma) at Sparta (Pausanias, 3.16.7–11); Dionysus Aisymnetes (Pausanias, 7.16.6–9); Aphrodite Morpho (Pausanias, 3.15.10–11) at Sparta; Palladium (Pseudo-Plutarch, *Moralia*, 309–10 and Derkylos, *FHG* 4.377.5) at Troy and (Juvenal, 6.265) at Rome; Gorgon’s lock at Tegea (Pausanias, 8.47.5 and Pseudo-Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca*, 2.7.3).

although the use of images in, and related to, the corpus of curse tablets is comparatively rare, both figurines and drawings do occur.⁶⁰ If perishable materials were used, as some evidence suggests, they may have been more popular than surviving data indicate.⁶¹ Christopher Faraone has also drawn attention to a possible source of both civic and private binding rituals involving effigies in Egyptian and Near Eastern rituals for removing enemies, both human and supernatural.⁶² However, as indeed he stresses, we can only speculate on the mode and method of cultural transmission; moreover, the implications of the existence of *polis*-binding rituals for the status of, and attitudes towards, individual binding rituals is unclear.⁶³

Nevertheless, some of the later possible routes of transmission can be traced from the material evidence. At its simplest, the development and spread of the practice of writing binding spells can be described as starting in Sicily in the late sixth/early fifth century BCE, then appearing next in Attica, where most of the tablets from the fourth or third century BCE have been found. Tablets dating from after this period are found across the Greco-Roman world: finds from Olbia near the Black Sea reveal how far afield the practice can be traced by the early fourth century.⁶⁴ As noted above, texts in other languages start appearing in the second half of the fourth century BCE, and the earliest curse tablet in Latin, found in a grave in Pompeii, dates to the second century BCE.

At the level of ideas or themes in the texts themselves, there are striking cross-cultural similarities. For example, Katherine McDonald has argued that Greek curse tablets provided a “direct model” for South Oscan curse tablets, which draw very closely in their form and formulae from Greek curse tablets.⁶⁵ However, as the initial examples at the beginning of this section illustrate, this should not be taken to mean that there was a single practice. Rather, as McDonald argues, the Oscan texts indicate the “possibility of moving away from those models to create new, local traditions within this genre,” an insight shared by other scholars.⁶⁶ Evidence for these local variations suggest that

60 See further below; and in this volume, Wilburn, below, Chapter 18.

61 See n. 68 below.

62 Faraone, *Talismans and Trojan Horses*, 78–81 and 84–86.

63 See also below, Eidinow, Chapter 28.

64 See SGD and NGCT, also A. Avram, C. Chiriac, and I. Matei, “Defixiones d’Istros,” *BCH* 131 (2007): 383–420, with S.R. Tokhtas’ev, “A New Curse on a Lead Plate from the North Pontic Region,” *ACSS* 15 (2009): 1–3; O. Caloru, “Old and New Magical Inscriptions,” *ZPE* 176 (2011): 135–36; A. Belousov and N. Fedoseev, “A New Magical Inscription from Panticapaeum’s Necropolis,” *ZPE* 190 (2014): 145–48.

65 McDonald, *Oscan in Southern Italy and Sicily*, 134.

66 McDonald, *Oscan in Southern Italy and Sicily*, 165; see Gordon and Simón “Introduction,” note that examination of the phraseology of the Latin tablets recently discovered in

rather than a single practice, curse tablets comprise a family of associated rituals shaped by the needs of local contexts, cultures, communities, or even individuals.⁶⁷

4 Lead and Buried

The use of lead as the medium for these texts was perhaps particularly appropriate because it was cold and grey, like a corpse; indeed, as we will see, some spells do refer to these properties as part of their formulae. But it is also the case that lead was used for other kinds of records and correspondence: it was cheap and plentiful. Jorge J. Bravo III has suggested that the four inscribed lead curse tablets excavated from the Heroön of Opheltes in the Sanctuary of Zeus at Nemea may have been created from lead left over from construction at the site.⁶⁸ Sometimes the lead was more elaborately shaped than a simple strip or tablet. From Sicily come tablets that appear to have been intended to represent the part of the body—a foot or a tongue—at which they were aimed (reminiscent of the body-parts unearthed at Aesclepiian shrines, used to request or thank the god for healing).⁶⁹ Others, such as Text 2 above, were shaped into

Mainz also indicates that, even if the idea of seeking justice from a god was widespread, “there was a wide spectrum of opinion about how best to realize that goal” and (22) the patchy pattern of this transmission also raises questions.

- 67 There is evidence that other materials, apart from lead, were used, but few, if any, examples from the Classical period have survived. Wax: *DTA* 55; Plato *Leges*, 933a–c; gold or silver: *PGM* X. 24–35; iron: *PGM* IV. 2145 ff.; linen: *Suppl. Mag.* 1, no. 44; also copper, tin, *ostraca*, limestone, talc, papyrus and gemstones, see *CTBS*, 31, n.5.
- 68 Suitability of lead: Wunsch, *DTA*, ii–iii; Lead for other records and correspondence: E. Eidinow and C. Taylor, “To Whom It May Concern: Writing, Communication and Crisis in the Ancient Greek World” *Classical Quarterly* 60 (2010): 30–62; D.R. Jordan, “Two Inscribed Lead Tablets from a Well in the Athenian Kerameikos,” *Mitteilungen Des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts Athenische Abteilung* 95 (1980): 225–39. As Henk Versnel kindly points out, the fact that a slave probably wrote one of these letters (see E.M. Harris, “Notes on a Lead Letter from the Athenian Agora,” *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 102 (2004): 157–70 (= *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 104 (2006): 271–79; cf. F.D. Harvey, “‘Help! I’m Dying here’: A Letter from a Slave,” *zpe* 163 (2007): 49–50) also supports the idea that lead was a common writing material; see also J.J. Bravo III, “Erotic Curse Tablets from the Heroön of Opheltes at Nemea,” *Hesperia* 85/1 (2016): 121–52.
- 69 A tablet shaped like a foot on SGD 87; like a tongue, SGD 86 (L.H. Jeffery, “Further Comments on Archaic Greek Inscriptions,” *Annual of the British School at Athens* 50 (1955): 74). See C. Roebuck, *Corinth. Vol. XIV: The Asklepieion and Lerna*. (Princeton, NJ: American School of Classical Studies at Athens, 1951), 114–28; F.T. van Straten, “Gifts for the gods” in *Faith, Hope and Worship*, ed. H.S. Versnel (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1981), 105–46. The

figurines, some with mutilated or bound body parts, and occasionally even placed in or near miniature coffins. At Antioch, nine horse-shaped figurines have been found, each inscribed with a name, possibly elements of a binding spell aimed at charioteer teams.⁷⁰

The most obvious explanation for these specially shaped curse tablets is that they were intended to work with analogical power, such that the characteristics of the object on which the spell is written become the characteristics of the spell's target. Indeed, this intention is explicitly stated in some texts (see below). The shaping of the lead is a practice that continues into the Imperial period, and, if anything, becomes far more elaborate. One of the most famous examples is the "Louvre doll," a figurine of a woman on her knees, hands bound behind her back, body pierced with nails in 13 places.⁷¹ But whatever shape the material of the curse took, some sort of ritual activity probably accompanied its physical manufacture, and this probably involved an oral aspect, perhaps a sung or intoned spell. Later evidence certainly suggests this—instructions in the *PGM* for the creation of spells include both spoken and written ritual—but there are also earlier indications. For example, in Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, the Furies, acting as the prosecution, sing a *humnos desmios* or "binding song" against the defendant, Orestes, in order, it seems to strike him dumb.⁷² If it is a binding-spell, as the scholiast suggests, then it not only precedes the earliest material evidence from Athens, but also indicates an oral tradition of binding. Meanwhile, between these two ends of the chronological spectrum, there are also tablets with spells written in verse, which suggest a performative aspect to their creation.⁷³

Once the tablet was inscribed it seems usually to have been folded, nailed through, and buried.⁷⁴ Some of the earliest tablets have been found deposited

practice continues today see, for example, L. Barnes and S. Sered, *Religion and Healing in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 107.

70 *CTBS*, 15; H. Seyrig, "Notes archeologiques," *Berytus* 2 (1935): 48.

71 Discussed further by Wilburn, below, Chapter 18. See P. du Bourguet, "Ensemble magique de la periode romaine en Egypt," *Revue du Louvre* (1975): 255–57 and du Bourguet, "Une ancêtre des figurines d'envoutement percées d'aiguilles, avec ses compléments magiques, au Musée du Louvre" *Mémoires publiés par les membres de l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale* 104 (1980): 225–238.

72 Aeschylus, *Eumenies*, 306 (Faraone, "Aeschylus' *humnos desmios* (*Eum.* 306)," 150–154).

73 For example, DTA 108 in dactylic hexameters, 3rd century BCE.

74 The difficulties of unrolling the lead tablets and trying to read the remains are usefully described in A. Rosenburg, "The Conservation of Lead Curse Tablets," in *The Circus and a Byzantine Cemetery at Carthage*, ed. J.H. Humphrey, vol. 1 (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1988), 134–40, R.S.O. Tomlin, "Carta picta perscripta: Anleitung zum

in graves, others in sanctuaries of gods with underworld associations.⁷⁵ These remained popular burial spots throughout the history of the practice of writing curse tablets; manuals among the *PGM* provide explicit instructions to bury spells in such areas.⁷⁶ Later material evidence introduces other subterranean locations: for example, sites near water became popular, as the tablets found in the hot springs at Bath testify.⁷⁷ As M. Piranomonte has explained, with regard to all the offerings (not just the 22 curse tablets) found in the cistern of the fountain of Anna Perenna at Rome, fountains and springs were viewed as “transition points between two worlds.”⁷⁸ Later tablets have also been found buried close to the individual or site of the event that the spell concerns: examples of the latter include spells against charioteers buried at or near circuses;⁷⁹ while one of the most famous examples of the former is Tacitus’ account of the death of Germanicus (Text 6).

Although some scholars have argued that the writing of curse tablets in ancient Greece was probably illegal, there is no explicit evidence for this:

Lesen von Fluchtafeln aus dem römischen Britannien,” in Brodersen and Kropp, eds, *Fluchtafeln*, 11–29.

- 75 Graves: SGD 99, 100 (slightly later 107); during the Imperial period offering pipes were common in Greek graves and provided a convenient way of inserting a curse tablet into a closed grave; see SGD 114.
- 76 As an example, *PGM* IV. 2210–2215 offers a spell for wrecking chariots: the tablet must be buried “for three days in the grave of someone who died untimely.”
- 77 Wells: Jordan’s Athenian Agora texts (D.R. Jordan, “Fourteen Defixiones from a Well in the SW Corner of the Athenian Agora,” *Hesperia* 54 (1985): 205–55); Rivers: Latin curse text found in a river near Hamble, Hampshire, UK, M.W.C. Hassall and R.S.O. Tomlin, “Roman Britain in 1996,” *Britannia* 28 (1997): no. 1; Tomlin, “The Curse Tablets”; drain of bath-house, Leintwardine, Herefordshire: R.P. Wright, “Roman Britain in 1968,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 59 (1969): 241, no. 31. Bath houses are also popular sites for the performance of magical rituals—because they were thought to be haunted (see C. Bonner, “Demons of the Bath” in *Studies Presented to F. L. Griffith*, ed. S.R.K. Glanville and Nora Macdonald Griffith (London: Egypt Exploration Society, 1932), 203–208; other refs at *Suppl. Mag.* 1, pp. 132–33).
- 78 M. Piranomonte, “Religion and Magic at Rome” in *Magical Practice in the Latin West*, 191–214.
- 79 SGD 149; also SGD 167, Beirut, Syria, late second or early third century CE, targets horses and drivers of the “Blue team,” found near the race-course. Other tablets, not completely read, have been found in Antioch, near the *metae* of the circus (SGD, p. 93) and nine tablets from the amphitheatre in Carthage directed against *venatores* (DT 246–54). D.R. Jordan, “New Defixiones from Carthage,” in *The Circus and a Byzantine Cemetery at Carthage*, ed. J.H. Humphrey, vol. 1 (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1988), 117–34 describes three tablets excavated from the hippodrome in Carthage, each of which seems to curse a charioteer and his horses.

secrecy and illegality should not be confused.⁸⁰ The earliest unequivocal official condemnation of magical practice is the well-known edict from the Twelve Tables, which states that it is illegal to move the crops from another person's field to your own "by magical means" (the Latin is *veneficiis*).⁸¹ Later evidence needs to be considered in the context of wider legislation and its concerns, for example, anxiety over Imperial security.⁸² However, it does seem likely that binding spells were buried, in contrast to the apparent treatment of some prayers for justice, which seem to have been put on display in sanctuaries. This includes a number of texts found in the temple of Demeter in Knidos, Karia, dating to the first century BCE,⁸³ as well as some of the examples found in Britain.⁸⁴ Even if (as some of the British evidence suggests), these texts were nailed in such a way that the inscription itself was turned to the wall,⁸⁵ it is possible that the process involved in setting up the tablet alerted the wrong-doer to the writer's actions, prompting, perhaps through psychological pressure, the righting of the original wrong.⁸⁶ Such a scenario seems to form the background to some of the confession inscriptions found in Lydia and Phrygia, which relate how a crime was made right by the wrongdoer after the victim "submitted a tablet."⁸⁷

80 For example, Ogden, "Binding Spells: Curse Tablets and Voodoo Dolls," 83 (he argues that prayers for justice probably were not); compare Versnel, "Prayers for Justice, East and West," 331 description of prayers for justice and *defixiones* as "sanctioned and unsanctioned," respectively.

81 Servius ad Vergili, *Eclologa*, 8.99 = *XII Tables*, VIII.8 (*FIRA2*) = VIII.4 Crawford; see also J.B. Rives, "Magic in the XII Tables Revisited," *Classical Quarterly* 52 (2002): 270–90.

82 See, for example, D. Potter, *Prophets and Emperors: Human and Divine Authority from Augustus to Theodosius* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

83 *DT* 1–13, although C.T. Newton, *A History of Discoveries at Halicarnassus, Cnidus and Branchidae* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1862–1863), claims 14 tablets; near remains of a statue of Ceres.

84 <http://www.csad.ox.ac.uk/RIB/RIBIV/jp4.htm>; *TSM*, 84.

85 *TSM*, 101–5.

86 However, not all such tablets were treated as if they were intended to be read, see H.S. Versnel, "Writing Mortals and Reading Gods: Appeal to the Gods as a Dual Strategy in Social Control," in *Demokratie, Recht und soziale Kontrolle im klassischen Athen*, ed. D. Cohen, *Schriften des Historischen Kollegs: Kolloquien* 49 (Munich: De Gruyter, 2002), 68–72. On the social dynamics that could lead to such resolutions see Eidinow, *Envy, Poison, and Death*, esp. 221–23.

87 See E.N. Lane, *Corpus Monumentorum Religionis Dei Menis*, vol. 1 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1971), nos. 58 and 69, and discussion in Versnel, "Beyond Cursing: The Appeal to Justice in Judicial Prayers" and Versnel, "Prayers for Justice, East and West." A useful collection of texts is found in *CTBS*, 176.

5 Words and Pictures

Some of the earliest binding spells from mainland Greece comprise a list of names. Some include a little further detail; many do not give any further information about the victims. A possible explanation for this list formula returns to the idea of an accompanying oral practice: the writer of the text would inscribe the names of his victims on the tablet, intoning the binding spell that described his intention for them. However, the more detailed written texts of the early fifth century should not be taken as superseding this oral aspect: in ancient Greek texts, the list formula continues until at least the first century CE.⁸⁸ Besides, as mentioned above, instructions for binding-spell rituals in the *PGM* suggest a dual approach involving both written and oral aspects. This would reflect similar developments in other areas of Athenian life, as previously spoken activities, such as giving evidence in court or forming contracts, gradually acquired a written dimension.⁸⁹ It is even possible that the evolution of the binding practice was a result of direct influence from these other civic spheres: Richard Gordon has argued that the list formulation of the spells draws on an association with lists of names used in other areas of Athenian life.⁹⁰ As we will see, other terms in the spell texts also suggest possible influences between civic and supernatural life.

Alongside the lists, several regularly used formulae quickly develop across the Greek corpus, and these have been variously distinguished and categorized by scholars: none of them makes explicit the difference between *defixiones* and prayers for justice.⁹¹ Faraone suggests a direct binding formula, a prayer formula, a wish formula and a “*similia similibus*” (that is, analogical) formula. Amina Kropp’s slightly different categories were created with Latin curse tablets in mind, but it will be adopted here because of its insightful consideration

88 In *defixiones* from Selinunte, the list formula appears towards the end of the fifth century, with more elaborate formulae at the beginning (see J. Curbera, “Defixiones,” *Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa Serie IV, Quaderni I* (Pisa: 1999), 65). In prayers for justice, the list formula continues well into the Imperial period.

89 See R. Thomas, *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). First written contract: Isocrates, 17 *Trapez* .20; earliest evidence for the reading out of written testimony in court around the late 390s: Isaeus, 5.2.

90 R. Gordon, “What’s in a List?,” in *The World of Ancient Magic: Papers from the first International Samson Eitrem Seminar at the Norwegian Institute at Athens, 4–8 May 1996*, ed. D.R. Jordan, H. Montgomery, and E. Thomassen (Bergen, Norwegian Institute at Athens, 1999), 239–78.

91 E.G. Kagarow, *Griechische Fluchtafeln*, Eos Supplementa 4 (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1929), 29–44, C. Faraone, “The Agonistic Context of Early Greek Binding Spells” and Kropp, *Defixiones*.

of speech-act theory.⁹² Kropp builds on Faraone's work proposing that his direct binding formula should be divided between two types of formulae, a "manipulation formula" and a "committal formula." The manipulation formulas refer to ritual operations performed on the lead tablet, which were understood to have direct effects on the victim. But the manipulation of a tablet may include not only ritual operations that work on the lead tablet, but also those that dedicate it to supernatural powers. Kropp draws a distinction between these two, identifying the "committal formula," which includes not only dedicatory verbs of manipulation, but also verbs of giving/bestowing/transferring.⁹³ A third formula, the "request formula," encompasses both Faraone's wish formula and his *similia similibus* or analogical category.⁹⁴

Turning to the Greek tablets, the first type of formula includes a verb of action, e.g., binding, coupled with the name and/or aspects (usually body-parts) of the target(s).⁹⁵ The verb is often invoked repeatedly with each target or aspect of that target, including body parts (e.g., the tongues of targets, see above, Text 1); work-related items (a workshop or tools); and even abstract entities, such as words and deeds, or the mind or spirit of the victim. Other verbs are used: e.g., spells that "bury" their victim (e.g. *DT* 49, *SGD* 170), which may be related to the ritualized burying of the curse tablet; while a Latin tablet from Dax says of the person who stole the writer's ring, *immergo* "I submerge (him)," which presumably refers to the submerging of the tablet.⁹⁶ In later Greek and many Roman tablets, curse-writers explicitly set their sights on murder—asking not just that their victims be bound, but that they are wholly destroyed

92 As Kropp notes (*Defixiones*, 377–78), her "manipulation formula" (see below) cannot be classified in Searle's original taxonomy; drawing on F. Rambelli, ("Editorial: Sounds for Thought," *Semiotic Review of Books* 4, 2 [1993]: 1–2) she proposes a new category of speech acts: "transformative." See Kropp, *Defixiones*, 370–72, for a table of comparison between the different categories of formulae of different scholars.

93 Kropp, *Defixiones*, 363–64.

94 She also suggests a fourth category of "curse formula," but this includes only one example.

95 *καταδέω* "I bind" is the most common, but we also find *καταδεσμεύω* meaning "I bind up," and *κατέχω*, "I immobilize or restrain." Imperative forms are discussed below in more detail. Some tablets offer subjunctive forms, "let x suffer y," e.g., *DTA* 64, or, turning on the fulfilment of certain conditions, *DTA* 97 and 98.

96 Kropp, *Defixiones*, 361; for the tablet from Dax, see Marco Simón and F. Marco Simón and I. Velázquez "Una nueva defixio aparecida en Dax (Landes)," *Aquitania* 17 (2000): 261–74. In a footnote (18), Kropp notes that "the manipulation is not always manifest in the archaeological context" apart from a few examples. Another example may be a tablet from Theveste in Africa (*SGD* 136) which declaims of its victim "I cut up all of her quickly, for all time."

(see Text 5 above)—but it may be that this is also the implicit aim of earlier binding spells.⁹⁷

How directly does the physical act map on to the magical? It has been argued that the “binding” verb was actually short for *καταδέω ἦλοις* “I fix with nails,” linking it to the specific action of nailing the tablet shut.⁹⁸ This seems unlikely, since some tablets describe activities of both binding and nailing down, suggesting that the idea of binding had come to describe the overall binding ritual, rather than corresponding directly to the act of nailing.⁹⁹ Binding is not so much a metaphor, in which one action is described in terms of another; it is rather a conceptual blend—in which selected elements from different conceptual domains are introduced to produce new meaning. The physical act referred to is not only the manipulation of the tablet but draws into the ritual act a set of ideas from another domain—that of capital punishment. Not only can we argue, as does Kropp, that manipulation formulae were invoked in order to change everyday state of affairs, but we can suggest why those formulae were deemed to be powerful, by examining the frame of reference that organized their meaning. In these spells, I would argue, the appeal to “bind” finds a close counterpart in the state-sanctioned penalties of the judicial process—the binding of capital punishment. As a result of the conceptual blend created by the spell, the spell-writer becomes an agent of civic justice, instituting a process of legitimate punishment against a target who deserves it, and the process is supported or witnessed by the power and authority of a supernatural agent.¹⁰⁰

If this is the case, then the verb of binding is not only manipulative in the sense that Kropp has suggested. The model of the spell-writer as agent of justice may also explain a conceptual association between binding spells and prayers for justice, if both, in their different ways, were seeking the legitimate punishment of those they saw as their enemies. And the model helps to

97 Rare early examples of the death wish may appear in SGD 89 (second century BCE, Sicily) *DTA* 75 (fourth century BCE, Athens); *DT* 92 (third century BCE, Black Sea), although, as with most curse tablets, the texts are fragmentary and some of the readings speculative. However, these could be early examples of the type of request that occurs more frequently in later texts: *DT* 93a (first century CE, Brigantium), *DT* 129 (mid-second century CE, Arezzo). Versnel points out that this kind of plea is characteristic of (later) prayers for justice: perhaps this is a reminder that these modern categories may not have been as clear-cut for the ancients as they are for modern scholars.

98 Wünsch, *DTA*, iii (cf. Pindar, *Pythian Odes*, 4.71); noted Faraone, “The Agonistic Context of Early Greek Binding Spells,” 24 n. 24.

99 Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World*, 135–37; cf. also verbs in SGD 48.

100 The conceptual blend (along with the process of conceptual blending itself) is explained in Eidinow, *Envy, Poison, and Death*, 243–50.

explain further the phenomenon of “border area” curses, which exhibit features of both binding spells and prayers for justice.

This interpretation leads in turn to those texts that include a “committal formula”: clear examples of the latter include compound verbs of $\tau\acute{\iota}\theta\eta\mu\iota$ and $\delta\acute{\iota}\delta\omega\mu\iota$, meaning “I place/give/dedicate,” which suggest a “consigning” of the victim to the underworld gods.¹⁰¹ In some cases, this may indicate the ritual placing of the tablet, with the victim’s name on it, in a sanctuary. In later tablets, this gesture may be made more explicit by the addition of some kind of “stuff” (the Greek is $\omicron\upsilon\sigma\acute{\iota}\alpha$) from the victim, such as strands of their hair, included in the ritual, perhaps attached to the tablet (as indicated in Text 4, above).¹⁰² The textual details vary: sometimes no god is mentioned as the recipient of the consignment;¹⁰³ sometimes a divinity appears in the dative case, or is hailed in the vocative.¹⁰⁴ These dedicatory texts may clearly be understood as prayers for justice. However, formulae that use compounds of $\gamma\rho\acute{\alpha}\phi\omega$, “I write” raise more complex associations. In Kropp’s terms, they describe the manipulation of the physical tablet through the process of writing on it;¹⁰⁵ but it seems likely that they also allude to a “real-world” legal process, insofar as the victim is “being registered” with the god or gods (in some examples “for misfortune” or with more complex meanings).¹⁰⁶ Some tablets exhibit a combination of

101 See discussion in Faraone, “The Agonistic Context of Early Greek Binding Spells,” 10, for the range of nuances of the different verbs involved; Kropp, *Defixiones*, 362, calls this the “committal formula.”

102 Also in the text of a tablet that apparently shows the imprint of hair (SGD 251–255); but SGD 155–56 mention $\omicron\upsilon\sigma\acute{\iota}\alpha$ and hair in the spell.

103 E. g., DTA 42, DT 84; in DTA 55, the victims are consigned “in lead and in wax and in water (?) in unemployment, obscurity, ill-repute, in defeat and in remembrance both these and all the children and wives with whom they live”; SGD 124; NGCT 78.

104 Examples of dedications to gods in the dative case: DT 1–14, from the temple of Demeter, at Knidos; the gods are usually Demeter and Persephone, but sometimes other chthonian deities are mentioned; see also DT 86 where the divine recipients are in the dative case. On DTA 100, the text addresses *Hermes Katochos* and entrusts him with watching over the writer’s enemies and their actions.

105 See DTA 55, which lists the different media (“in lead and in wax and in water”) in which the victim is “assigned” (the verb is $\kappa\alpha\tau\alpha\delta\acute{\iota}\delta\omega\mu\iota$), suggesting physical actions by the writer. However, the text goes on to list abstract properties, including “in obscurity, in ill-repute, in defeat,” perhaps indicating the simultaneous metaphysical nature of the statement.

106 For $\kappa\alpha\tau\alpha\gamma\rho\acute{\alpha}\phi\omega$ as “register or enroll” see LSJ II.2. SGD 91 appears to use the verb $\acute{\alpha}\pi\omicron\gamma\rho\acute{\alpha}\phi\omega$ with a variety of different nuances (see discussion OCR 146). Although mention of a divinity in this formulation is, among extant examples, rarely made. Tablets with compounds of $\gamma\rho\acute{\alpha}\phi\omega$ include SGD 88, 91, 99, 101, 107, 109, and NGCT 66 from Sicily; DT 47 (Piraeus, Athens), NGCT 46 (Arethousa, Thessaloniki), DT 84 and 85 (Boeotia, Thebes), DT 87 (Corcyra, Epirus), SGD 58 (Delos), SGD 64 (Karystos, Euboea), NGCT 23; NGCT 38 (Pydna); Phila’s tablet from Pella in Macedonia (Voutiras, *Dionysophontos gamoi*).

verbs, indicating the different processes (physical and metaphorical manipulations) that were involved in their creation and the ways in which the ritual draws on particular conceptual frames for its power. Thus, the writer of NGCT 23 wants success for “the things I write down (καταγράφω) and which I entrust (παρατίθῃμι) to you.”¹⁰⁷

In the Greek tablets with formulae that use a verb of binding or consignment, supernatural figures are most often invoked in phrases using the preposition πρὸς + the name(s) of the god(s). Different translations give different interpretations of this phrase: Faraone describes the supernatural presence in these texts as “witnesses or overseers of the act,” translating it as “in the presence of,” and suggests that the phrasing may be influenced by contemporary legal and business transactions.¹⁰⁸ However, others argue that the phrase should be translated as “down to,” meaning that the victim is delivered to the gods. This is a parallel to phrases found in Latin curse tablets, in which victims are frequently consigned or dedicated “to gods.”¹⁰⁹ It may be that ideas about the

Those not mentioning the gods include: DT 47, 84, 87 (very fragmentary); in DT 85 (as read by Ziebarth, “Neue Verfluchungstafeln aus Attika, Boiotien und Euböia,” no. 23) the spell itself is registered. SGD 88, the victims are “registered” ἐπὶ δυσπραγίαις [αι] “for misfortune”; but not to any particular god; SGD 99 (“I inscribe”); SGD 101; SGD 124 (“written on the tablet”), NGCT 23 (but see further below), 38 and 66. God named at the beginning of the text: SGD 58; SGD 64 uses πρὸς and the name of the god Hermes; while SGD 107, found in the sanctuary of Demeter Malophoros at Gaggara (i.e., Selinus) uses παρὰ. SGD 109 includes the phrase “of her I write the letter,” discussed further below. See also a curse text from Kenchreai, third century CE, which registers the victim before Violence, Fate and Necessity (see Versnel, “Prayers for Justice, East and West,” 317 and 319) and Phila’s tablet from Pella in Macedonia (Voutiras, *Dionysophontos gamoi*) where she writes the spell and then entrusts it to Makron.

107 Versnel, “Prayers for Justice, East and West,” 317–19. discusses these two verbs in the context of Phila’s text (see Voutiras, *Dionysophontos gamoi*): he suggests that this is a prayer for justice, because it is only the verb of binding that indicates it can be considered a binding spell. However, if binding also has connotations of a civic process that seeks justice this may lead us better to understand the associations made by the writer of the curse.

108 Faraone, “The Agonistic Context of Early Greek Binding Spells,” 5.

109 Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World*, 125 and Kropp, *Defixiones*, 362–63. In the process of deciding between the two interpretations, it is worth bearing in mind that in some of these Greek tablets we find an individual bound or consigned (πρὸς + god’s name), several times, to a number of different gods: does such a series of individual recipients pose a problem for the process of dedication? This problem occurs again in a slightly different form in SGD 150, where Praxidike is asked to bind the victim, πρὸς Tyche, Zeus and the Charites—could a victim be bound by one supernatural figure while being dedicated to others? In the Latin tablets, the gods who are recipients of dedicated victims tend to appear in the dative case, with no preposition; gods plural tend to be addressed as a group, “the gods of the underworld.” In the Greek tablets, straightforward assignment to

consignment of a victim changed over time, under different influences and in different contexts. For example, where Greek spell writers may have sought a witness for the act of inscribing their victims, the Latin spell writers seem more frequently to have been influenced by, and used formula that evoked, the language of dedication.¹¹⁰ Other specific influences can be traced: for example, a curse from Alexandria, Egypt, appears to draw on legal terminology, using the language of orders for arrest and delivery (as recorded in the documentary papyri) to present its target to the chthonic powers.¹¹¹ Certain ideas may nevertheless be common to these approaches: in particular, the idea of a god taking some kind of responsibility for the outcome of the curse—sometimes accompanied by a notion of literal proximity of victim to god.¹¹² In those “border area” curses that entail a plea for justice as well as binding formulae, the guilty person, or a stolen item, is sometimes explicitly handed over in such a way that the crime becomes the god’s problem—and its resolution a matter of divine pride.¹¹³

It is not just gods that are invoked: the dead are also present. In general, pre-Imperial Greek curses address their main invocation to chthonian gods, invoking the dead as witnesses or in analogies that emphasize their powerlessness.¹¹⁴ But in later spells, especially those found in Egypt, the dead

gods in the dative case does occur, but alongside use of $\pi\rho\acute{o}\varsigma$ + the name of a different god, which suggests a different kind of relationship is being invoked (e.g., *DT* 69, but this text is very fragmentary). Finally, we find that in *NGCT* 89, a rare bilingual tablet, the dative form in Latin is matched by a dative form in Greek, rather than use of $\pi\rho\acute{o}\varsigma$.

110 E.g. Text 5 above, where the god is addressed in the dative; *NGCT* 89, see Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World*, 125–26, and Kropp, *Defixiones*, 362.

111 *Suppl. Mag.* 2, no. 54 (Alexandria, Egypt, 3rd century CE): ll. 21–22, comm.; Similar wording is used in orders for arrest and delivery in the documentary papyri, e.g., *P.Hib.* 1 54, 20–22.

112 This may be made explicit in *SGD* 64, which registers its victim $\pi\rho\acute{o}\varsigma$ τὸν Ἑρμῆ, and then asks that she be bound near him; and in *SGD* 108, where the text describes how the victim will be bound in murky Tartaros “with Hekate of the underworld.” Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World*, 126, notes that different formulas have “more or less the same function ... the victim is still delivered to Hermes, who details (therefore his epithet) him by tying up his limbs.”

113 H.S. Versnel terms this “cession” and notes its difference from the votive style of offering, found, for example, in *SGD* 173 (and much rarer). It is particular common in prayers for justice (especially the tablets found in Britain), see Versnel, “Beyond Cursing: The Appeal to Justice in Judicial Prayers,” and Tomlin, “The Curse Tablets,” 118–19. Victim as gift also occurs in curse tablets *SGD* 54 (see Faraone, “The Agonistic Context of Early Greek Binding Spells,” 24, n. 15) and 109.

114 For example, *DT* 43, 44, which address “Pasianax” (perhaps the corpse with which the tablet was buried) and ask that (*DT* 43 and 44, ll. 6–7) “just as you, O Pasianax lie, useless (*DT* 44 and nothing) here” the victim(s) also be (*DT* 43, ll. 7–8; *DT* 44, ll. 8–10) ‘as useless

play a far more active role: as with Text 4, above, these curses clearly expect the dead to enjoy easier access to, and exert greater power over, the world of the living.¹¹⁵ It seems likely that they were understood to belong to one of three categories likely to make them suitably restless: they are either *biaiothanatoi* (dead by violence), *ataphoi* or *atelestoi* (unburied or not properly attended to in death), or *aoroi* (untimely dead); for examples see Texts 3 and 4 above.¹¹⁶ They usually remain anonymous, although not always (one late papyrus even features a drawing of the mummified corpse it addresses).¹¹⁷ These later dead have also, one might say, changed their form of manifestation. That is, they are now addressed as—or alongside (see below, it is not always clear)—*daimones*, and from this throng of intermediary beings the spells often single out a particular *nekudaimon* (“corpse-daimon”) to carry out the instruction of the spell. Why *daimones*? Plato’s Diotima can offer some guidance: she tells us that *daimones* were regarded as supernatural messengers who impinged on mortals with divine permission. Through them, she says, mankind is able to practice divination, priestly art, sacrifices, initiations, spells, divining and *goeteia* (“sorcery”)—they provide the route of communication with the gods.¹¹⁸

The later binding spells suggest that in some contexts the dead were taking on some of these *daimonic* aspects, creating a hybrid creature that was

and be nothing’ and *DT* 52 (ll. 1–9) “Kerkis, Blastos, Nikandros, Glykera. I bind Kerkis, both his words and the deeds of Kerkis and his tongue, before those youths who died unmarried, and whenever they recognize these words, then will be the time for Kerkis to speak” (i.e., never). But this is not always the case: SGD 173 (3rd–1st century BCE) appears to expect the unknown figure that the tablet addresses to restrain the victims of the curse: is this the corpse with which the tablet is buried (the formula of address is similar to that found in *DT* 43), or could it be some other anonymous supernatural entity?

¹¹⁵ *Suppl. Mag.* 2, no. 53. (SGD 151).

¹¹⁶ For the changing role of the underworld gods, and the dead, see discussion in Johnston, *Restless Dead* and S.I. Johnston, “Songs for the Ghosts: Magical Solutions to Deadly Problems,” in *The World of Ancient Magic*, 83–102, where she seems to argue for an earlier active role for the dead (but on this aspect see *OCR* 148–50).

¹¹⁷ *Suppl. Mag.* 1, no. 37 (SGD 158–159) the corpse’s name is Horion, son of Sarapous, named on the first of two tablets that originally formed a diptych; *Suppl. Mag.* 1, no. 47 (SGD 152) the corpse is Antinous, perhaps the friend of the emperor Hadrian; and *Suppl. Mag.* 1, no. 50 (SGD 156) where the name was added between the lines (some editors have preferred to see it as an instruction from the formulary that was miscopied by the writer of this spell).

¹¹⁸ J. Winkler in “The Constraints of Eros,” in *Magika Hiera*, 214–243 observes the similarities between demons and dreams in *agogai* (and remember the demon that is sent to Xerxes in Herodotus, 7.12–18); Plato, *Symposium*, 202 E.

restless and demanding, and could act on instructions.¹¹⁹ We can identify some influences that may have played a part in these developments: for example, as David Frankfurter and Jacco Dieleman have emphasized, the texts from Egypt were composed within a cultural background of Egyptian temple ritual.¹²⁰ This included the practice of “letters to the dead,” in which a dead person, addressed by name, was asked to carry out a particular instruction. However, tracing the path of such influences demands extreme care: parallel practices of addressing or involving a corpse should not lead us to assume the simple influence of one practice on another.¹²¹

Nor is the structure of this new supernatural bureaucracy straightforward. For example, in Text 4 above, the *daimones* seem to be expected to help the corpse-*daimon* to carry out its tasks. They appear listed alongside gods and various representatives of the untimely dead, but it is not clear whether they are to be considered as a separate supernatural constituency. Compare the invocations on *DT* 22 and 25, tablets from Amathous in Cyprus, dating to the late second or third century CE.¹²² The texts are very similar, both calling on a range of *daimones*, including “those under the earth” (chthonian powers?), “*daimones* whoever you may be,” “you who lie here” (the restless dead of the burial ground?), and “the king of the *daimones*,” asking him to work in the writer’s favor. In both, it is far from clear whether this address indicates separate groups—and, if so, how they might have been related. The spell on *DT* 25 does address one *daimon* “who lies here,” presumably the body with whom the curse tablet is to be buried—but it also invokes the wordlessness (they are called “just as you are.... wordless and speechless”) and powerlessness of these spirits, which suggests that it is unlikely that any particular *daimon* could

119 For the changing role of demons in antiquity, and insights this may offer into the changing structure and nature of beliefs, see J.Z. Smith, “Towards Interpreting Demonic Powers in Hellenistic and Roman Antiquity” in *ANRW* II 16.1 (1978): 425–39.

120 D. Frankfurter, “Ritual Expertise in Roman Egypt,” in *Envisioning Magic: A Princeton Seminar and Symposium*, ed. P. Schafer and H. Kippenberg (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1997), 115–35, Frankfurter, “The Perils of Love: Magic and Countermagic in Coptic Egypt,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 10.3–4 (2001): 480–500 and Dieleman, *Priests, Tongues and Rites*.

121 See in particular Johnston, *Restless Dead*, 90–94, and C. Faraone, “The Ethnic Origins of a Roman-Era *Philtokatadesmos* (*PGM* IV 296–434),” in *Magic and Ritual in the Ancient World*, ed. M. Meyer and P. Mirecki (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2002), 319–43, in which he assesses the level and nature of the influence of Egyptian “letters to the dead” on the family of five texts that appear to draw on *PGM* IV.335–406.

122 See *CTBS* 45 and 46.

be considered to be an active supernatural agent capable of carrying out the writer's instructions.¹²³

These examples of invocations bring us to Kropp's third type of formula, the "request" type, which involves appeals to supernatural powers, encompassing wishes and persuasive analogies.¹²⁴ Across the corpus of curses, appeals to supernatural powers take a variety of forms: those asking the gods for help appear in the fifth century but are particularly common in Attic curse tablets, especially of the fourth century. The gods involved are usually chthonian deities, such as Persephone, Ge, Hermes the Binder and Hekate. They are addressed in a variety of ways: imperative forms are found in both Greek and Latin curses;¹²⁵ sometimes the imperative appears alongside the writer's own claim "I bind."¹²⁶

123 The nature of the *nekudaimon* or corpse-daimon needs closer attention. Although it receives instruction in a number of spells, it is not always clear that the corpse-daimon and daimon that will act out the instructions of the curse are the same. One text, written in ink on a lead tablet, even instructs the *nekudaimon* to rouse its daimon, which suggests that the latter was a separate entity from the former (*Suppl. Mag.* 1, no. 39; SGD 160). Later, as Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World*, 292) has pointed out, the Christians will begin to merge the identity of (pagan) gods and daimons—bringing to birth the demon of modern imagination. This last point provides us, perhaps, with some sense of how to think about this bewildering supernatural workforce. Rather than expecting them to provide a neat organisational chart of the underworld, we should perhaps view the problems of personnel that these texts present as offering us a sense of the diversity of popular beliefs and their development in different contexts over time.

124 "Persuasive analogy": this term was coined by S.J. Tambiah in an analysis of magical action: "Form and Meaning of Magical Acts: A Point of View," in *Modes of Thought: Essays on Thinking in Western and Non-Western Societies*, ed. R. Horton and R. Finnegan (London: Faber, 1973), 212; for its relevance to ancient ritual, see discussion in Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World*, 205–233, in particular of the identity of the person being persuaded (209–210): "The magic rite thus seems to short-circuit the communication: the sender and the recipient are identical," 210). Discussion of this aspect in Latin curse tablets in Kropp, *Defixiones*.

125 E.g., the verbs ὀρκίζω and ἐξορκίζω "I adjure": the formula "I adjure you by so-and-so" enters the Greek magical tradition in the first century CE, appearing in the curse tablets from North Africa e.g., *DT* 235, 240, 243, 237, 241 and see Text 4, above. The phrase originates in Jewish rituals of exorcism: see Faraone, "The Ethnic Origins of a Roman-Era Philtokatadesmos," 328, n. 28 (who draws on Martinez, *Michigan Papyri XVI*, 69–73 and R. Kotansky, "Greek Exorcistic Amulets," in *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power*, ed. M. Meyer and P. Mirecki, RGRW 129 (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 1995), 243–77 for details and further references. See discussion, Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World*, 124.

126 Greek examples: (singular, κατέχε), *DTA* 88, 89, SGD 75, (plural κατέχετε) *DT* 50, SGD 81, *DTA* 102) all using the verb κατέχω—rarely found used by the mortal agent of a curse (exception *DTA* 109); see also SGD 118–121. Latin: *DT* 250. Imperative alongside writer's claim to bind: *DTA* 88 and 89, *DTA* 109. Verbs of command (to the gods) are not found in Greek or Latin curses (A. Kropp, "How Does Magical Language Work? The Spells and Formulae of the Latin Defixionum Tabellae," in *Magical Practice in the Latin West*, 366).

Other examples show more indirect approaches to the gods: for example, two Greek texts address the gods in the vocative, and then make their appeal in a passive third-person form ("let him be bound").¹²⁷ A text on a tablet from Uley includes an elaborate phrasing to couch a request to the gods ("I would ask ... that you (Mercury) do not allow him ... health"); more frequently found are curses formulated as wishes: e.g., "May x suffer y."¹²⁸

These bring us, finally, to persuasive analogies, which ask to transfer to the victim the characteristics of something mentioned in the spell.¹²⁹ This verbal technique might include the corpse with which the tablet is (presumably) buried (*DT* 68) or the lead on which the spell is written (*DTA* 105), or the way the curse tablet itself has been set apart.¹³⁰ Some spell texts were inscribed with scrambled letters, or written backwards, and these adjustments are then mentioned in the spell as the desired effect that the spell will have on the target's thoughts, words or deeds.¹³¹ This kind of analogical spell-making may also explain the more elaborate shapes of some curse tablets, as described earlier: in particular the dolls, or even doll/coffin sets. It also helps to explain the use of animals in spells: a particularly famous example is the mutilated chameleon found in the walls of the orator Libanius' study. (Once removed, he recovered from a malaise that had prevented him from public speaking, working or teaching.) But there are other instances in the corpus of curse tablets, including a dead puppy mentioned in a tablet from late second century Gaul ("just as this puppy is turned on its back and is unable to rise, so neither may they ...").¹³²

Over time, further features developed to accompany these formulae: binding spells become increasingly syncretistic, revealing the influence of a wide range of other cultures, including Latin, Greek, Coptic, Hebrew, Egyptian, and Babylonian.¹³³ Foreign words and names of gods appear, and sometimes other material that was ritually powerful for a particular community. A curse written on a marble stele, from the island of Rheneia, includes allusions to biblical passages from the Septuagint *LXX*; this may indicate a Jewish or Samaritan

127 The passive third-person singular perfect imperative, in *DTA* 105 and 106.

128 Kropp, *Defixiones*, 366; *AE* 1992: 1197 (trans. Kropp) and wishes: *DT* 227 and *AE* 1994, 1072.

129 Faraone's so-called *similia similibus* formulae.

130 *DT* 85, according to Ziebarth, "Neue Verfluchungstafeln aus Attika, Boiotien und Euboia," 21–22, no. 23, the phrase is: "just as this lead is in a certain place separate from men, in the same way let Zoilos be kept in another place from Antheira."

131 *DTA* 65 and 67.

132 Puppy: *DT* 111–12; Chameleon: Libanius, *Orationes*, 1.245–49.

133 As Faraone, "The Agonistic Context of Early Greek Binding Spells," 10: it is important to note that these formulae do not develop chronologically; indeed, they may be found together on the same tablet. Syncretism: Faraone, "The Ethnic Origins of a Roman-Era *Philtokatadesmos*," 343.

origin (since there were both communities living on the island).¹³⁴ Egyptian influences are probably responsible for the introduction of some *voces magicae*, seemingly meaningless words or long strings of particular vowels or consonants, which start to appear frequently in ritual texts, including curses, from around the 1st century CE (although they were known earlier, see below).¹³⁵

Alongside nonsense words, “magical images” (*figurae magicae*) which often illustrate and echo the words of the spell, start to appear in this later material.¹³⁶ For example, a second century CE erotic binding spell written on papyri binds its target “to the tail of the snake and to the mouth of the crocodile and the horns of the ram and the poison of the asp and the whiskers of the cat and the forepart of the god”¹³⁷ and then includes images, including the god holding a staff, a snake, crocodile, cat, and ram, and a woman, presumably the female target of the curse. It seems likely that these drawings were meant to reinforce the efficacy of the spell.¹³⁸ This may also be true of the *charaktēres*: these symbols, somewhere between words and pictures, seem to have embodied great mystical protective power, although their exact nature and purpose is unknown (they may have had an astrological source). They appear in a range of documents from the second century CE onwards, not only in binding spells but also formularies for divination, amulets, and also Gnostic writings.¹³⁹

6 Writers and Targets

The longer, more elaborate, syncretistic spells described above were probably created by experts, and their development seems to indicate that at least in some areas there was gradual specialisation of binding spell practice during the Imperial period. The evidence suggests that collections of magical spells were first made in the Hellenistic period, but, as that material shows, this does

¹³⁴ *CTBS*, 187, no. 87.

¹³⁵ Demetrius, *On Style*, ch. 71 notes the singing of vowels by Egyptian priests (further references in *CTBS*, 34). In general on these verbal techniques see below, Frankfurter, Chapter 22.

¹³⁶ Brashear, “The Greek Magical Papyri,” 3442.

¹³⁷ *Suppl. Mag.* 1, no. 38 (SGD 161).

¹³⁸ *CTBS*, 11–12, who also points out the growing significance of religious imagery in late antiquity.

¹³⁹ *CTBS*, 10–11 (SGD 21 and 162); see *PGM* VII. 195 for instructions about the *charaktēres* to be used. See further on *charaktēres*, D. Frankfurter, “The Magic of Writing and the Writing of Magic,” 205–211, and below, Chapter 23; and H.S. Versnel, “Writing Mortals and Reading Gods”, and the *Charakteres* project (<https://charakteres.com>).

not make for cross-cultural uniformity in creation or product.¹⁴⁰ Christopher Faraone has argued that the *PGM* (specifically, the Anastasi papyri), while perhaps representative of the collection, transmission and performance of magical spells in late-antique Egypt, should not lead us to assume that magical spells were collected, transmitted and performed in this way in other parts of the ancient world.¹⁴¹ Focusing in turn on the Egyptian material, the relationship between Greek and Egyptian practices has been much debated. While there are significant factors that may associate Demotic and Greek texts, there are key differences: Jacco Dieleman draws attention to the ways in which Demotic spells are “clearly rooted in a long tradition of Egyptian text production,” while “the Greek spells have an unmistakable Hellenistic character.”¹⁴²

It is possible, indeed probable, that professionals (on commission) also wrote some of the earlier curse texts. This is suggested by archaeological evidence that includes caches of unused dolls or hoards of blank tablets, or tablets written in the same hand or using repetitive formulae.¹⁴³ Literary evidence offers further support: Plato’s reference to *katadesmoi* appears as part of a description of the itinerant salesmen of supernatural services, who “knock on the doors of the Athenian wealthy and offer to expiate current and ancestral sins, or cause harm to an enemy.”¹⁴⁴ In turn, non-specialists were surely continuing to write curse tablets throughout these periods, as well. It might

140 C. Faraone, “Handbooks and Anthologies: The Collection of Greek and Egyptian Incantations in Late Hellenistic Egypt,” *ARG* 2 (2001): 195–214.

141 Faraone, “Handbooks and Anthologies,” 195–6. See Dieleman, above, Chapter 13.

142 See further Dieleman, *Priests, Tongues and Rites*, 288–89. R. Ritner has argued that the Greek and Demotic texts were both shaped by the pharaonic tradition; scholars of Greek culture have suggested that this overemphasizes the Egyptian aspect. See for example, R. Ritner, “Egyptian Magical Practice under the Roman Empire: The Demotic Spells and their Religious Context,” *ANRW* 11.18.5 (1995): 3333–79; cf. Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World*, 5 and C. Faraone, *Ancient Greek Love Magic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 35–36.

143 From Tell Sandahannah (Palestine) a cache of 16 bound lead figurines—some complete with features (hair, sexual aspects, navels etc.)—most with bound hands and feet, which commentators have suggested may have been the “unused supply of a local magos” (*CTBS* 205). Blank tablets: *DT* 109 (Faraone, “The Agonistic Context of Early Greek Binding Spells,” 4–5 and n. 19. Similar handiwork: see *DT* 18–21 and P. Aupert and D.R. Jordan, “Magical inscriptions on talc tablets from Amathous,” *American Journal of Archaeology* 85 (1981): 184; *SGD* 22 and 23; Jordan also argues that one person made four lead figurines found in the Kerameikos (see Jordan, “New Archaeological Evidence for the Practice of Magic in Classical Athens,” in *Praktika of the 12th International Congress of Classical Archaeology, Athens, September 4–10, 1983*, vol. 4 [Athens: The Congress, 1988], 273–77). Text 5 from Uley appears to have been written by the same hand as a tablet from Bath (Hassall and Tomlin, “Roman Britain in 1988”).

144 Plato, *Respublica*, 364c–e.

be argued that the use of first-person verb forms (“I bind”) in spell texts offers support for this suggestion, but it is likely that professionalised spell sellers and model texts would also employ these phrases. More compelling are examples of highly unformulaic and individualistic phraseology, which suggest an “uncodified” approach. A Greek example of both these features is found in a binding spell written by a woman called Phila, which was found in Macedonia, and sets out to bind, first, the marriage of Thetima and Dionysophon, and then the relationship of any woman, widowed or maiden, with Dionysophon. The spell is written in the first person (it is one of the few pre-Imperial spells in which the writer gives her own name) and gradually devolves into an anguished pleading with the gods for their pity and help.¹⁴⁵ Similarly, turning to a Roman context, the formulae of the Mainz tablets, which combine plain language with idiosyncratic phrasing, especially analogies, suggest to J. Blänsdorf, that “these texts, or at any rate most of them, were not written by professional sorcerers or their scribes, but by private individuals”; he also posits that these were educated people from the middle or even upper classes, able to compose these texts without professional help.¹⁴⁶

My use of the term uncodified, above, to describe unprofessional curse-writers is not meant to suggest that in other contexts these materials would have gone through some type of official standardisation, or that other practitioners were (or even could be) somehow regarded as “licensed.”¹⁴⁷ Rather, the evidence suggests that binding is an example of a *self-regulating practice*, which gradually, over time, acquired a recognisable set of characteristics. Thinking of parallel unregulated professions, ancient as well as modern, we can speculate that it was the claim of ownership of the appropriate knowledge and compelling demonstration of it, rather than the approval of an external body, that endowed practitioners and their products with legitimacy.¹⁴⁸ The spells of the *PGM* certainly appear to contain “marketing” statements, included to persuade the reader of their power and efficacy.¹⁴⁹ Perhaps, one of those characteristics was that those who claimed, and were perceived to possess the requisite expertise might develop the practice, further developing those distinctive

145 Voutiras, *Dionysophontos gamoi*.

146 J. Blänsdorf, “The *Defixiones* from the Sanctuary of Isis and Mater Magna in Mainz,” in *Magical Practice in the Latin West*, 141–90.

147 E.g., as R. Parker, *Polytheism and Society at Athens* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 116: “unlicensed free enterprise religion”; and 133: “unlicensed religious professionals.”

148 For example, from our own time, management consultants, therapists and counsellors. For discussion of some examples of the sharing of spell recipes and rituals, see Winkler, “The Constraints of Eros,” 220–21.

149 See discussion by Dieleman, *Priests, Tongues and Rites*, 254–84.

characteristics.¹⁵⁰ We should perhaps be prepared to recognize a range of status among the writers, including amateurs and professionals, but also those in more ambiguous positions.

However, this model still leaves open the question of the identity of those who wrote or commissioned most of these texts. This is difficult to answer since, for the most part, binding-spells on tablets and in papyri give us very little information about their writers. From the pre-Imperial period, for example, there are only around six Greek curse tablets that include the name of the writer.¹⁵¹ Instead, information about curse-writers tends to be drawn from details in the texts that concern their victims—and these famously embrace most if not all aspects of ancient Greek society, from prostitutes to politicians, and everyone in between.¹⁵² It might be easier to try to identify the context in which binding spells were used; but caution is needed here, too. In terms of the Greek material, in addition to the border-area curses, most scholars use the following four categories: i) *judicial*: spells written in the context of the law courts, and usually identified by legal terminology;¹⁵³ ii) *commercial*: binding spells directed not just at individuals but also invoked against the workplace, labour, products and income;¹⁵⁴ iii) *performance*: ranging from choregic to theatrical to sporting events;¹⁵⁵ iv) *erotic*: both spells of restraint or *Trennungszauber*, which seek to separate couples (e.g., Text 3 above), and (like Text 4), those which are intended to bring couples together (*agogai*).¹⁵⁶

These useful categories do allow for observations to be made about the cultural development of the use of binding, and prompt some ideas about the likely motivations of their writers. As such, in most studies, scholars have tended to combine these categories with the theory that binding spells are written in situations of competition—and are intended, by their writers, to neutralize particular rivals in these particular contexts.¹⁵⁷ Nevertheless, keeping

150 As S.I. Johnston, "Sacrifice in the Greek Magical Papyri," in *Magic and Ritual in the Ancient World*, 344–58, esp. 346 has speculated with regard to the development of spells in the PGM.

151 OCR, 146–47, esp. n. 16.

152 Ogden, "Binding Spells: Curse Tablets and Voodoo Dolls," 67–71.

153 This is the largest category of binding tablets from the classical period.

154 The earliest have been dated to the fifth century, but most cluster in the third century BCE, and they tend to disappear after the Hellenistic period.

155 There are four dating to the pre-Imperial period; this type becomes far more popular in the Imperial period.

156 Pre-Imperial erotic binding spells tend to be *Trennungszauber*, that is, "separation" spells, which concentrate on restraining rivals. (A single spell from this period, from Macedonia, can be described as an attraction spell, or *agoge*), see OCR, 213.

157 Faraone, "The Agonistic Context of Early Greek Binding Spells."

too closely to these categories risks an approach that may blind us to the range of motivations and social situations in which the use of binding spells may have been thought appropriate.¹⁵⁸ What follows are a couple of examples of ways in which we might interrogate these widely held categories, focusing first on judicial binding spells, and then looking at commercial binding spells.

The most agonistic of contexts, the Athenian law court, is usually evoked as the setting for judicial, often politically motivated, duels between elite individuals. However, the binding spells themselves suggest an expansion of this traditional picture. Many of the texts that contain judicial terms appear to be concerned with teams of litigants, rather than individuals.¹⁵⁹ In some texts the teams appear to be of a limited number, and this may indicate a private suit in which a small group of individuals had joined forces; in other texts, far more litigants seem to be involved (in one rare case, over forty are listed) and this may indicate a *graphē*, in which numerous speakers might play a variety of parts.¹⁶⁰ But those who wrote these texts were not simply concerned with those who would speak in court: they also target other players in the court—some more surprising than others. These include informers (*menutai*¹⁶¹), witnesses (*martures*¹⁶²) and even judges (*dikastai*¹⁶³), but also women¹⁶⁴ and those “who stood around,”¹⁶⁵ who appear to be observers in the court who supported particular litigants.¹⁶⁶ The inclusion of this wide range of figures in these judicial binding spells suggests that legal action involved far more of the community than the traditional picture evokes, including networks of friends and supporters, male and female. These spells provide evidence for the experience of going to court: although competition may have been at the heart of a legal case, the targets of these texts—informers, witnesses, judges, friends and supporters—are not sources of competition, they are sources of risk.

158 OCR and E. Eidinow, “Why the Athenians Began to Curse,” in *Debating the Athenian Cultural Revolution: Art, Literature, Philosophy, and Politics 430–380 BC*, ed. R. Osborne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 44–71.

159 See Rubinstein, *Litigation and Cooperation*, esp. ch. 3.

160 Over 40 litigants can be found in SGD 42.

161 DTA 67.

162 DT 87, DTA 25, 65, 68a, 94 (see also μαρτυρία DT 49, 89b, SGD 173 [this may be a personal letter]; μαρτυρέω SGD 89; μαρτύρομαι DT 63).

163 DTA 65, 67; NGCT 46.

164 Some appear simply in lists of names: SGD 10, DTA 24, NGCT 50; in tablets including judicial terms: NGCT 10, DTA 39, DTA 67, DTA 68, 95 and 106.

165 The phrase is found in SGD 176; similar phrases in DTA 79 and DT 67.

166 See A. Chaniotis, “Watching a Lawsuit: A New Curse Tablet from South Russia,” *GRBS* 33 (1992): 69–73 and A.M. Lanni, “Spectator Sport or Serious Politics? οἱ περιεστηκότες and the Athenian lawcourts,” *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 117 (1997): 183–89.

Different kinds of questions are raised by those binding spells that include business-related details and so tend to be categorized as “commercial” and to be concerned allegedly with commercial competition. Taking as our starting point the fact that (as mentioned above) any information about business in the text tends to be related to the target of the spell not the writer, there are a number of texts where such details could plausibly be explained apart from commercial competition.¹⁶⁷ For example, a target’s profession may have been included in the text so as to help the gods to identify their victim correctly. In SGD 52, four victims are named and described: two are identified by their patronymics and demes, and two by their professions (both are netmakers). Although it is possible that this information was included because these two were commercial rivals of the spell-writer, it is equally plausible that their *technitika* were included because they did not have a demotic like the first two, and the writer wanted to find some way of describing them in more detail.¹⁶⁸ This explanation works particularly well for some puzzling tablets that list myriad individuals in a range of professions.¹⁶⁹ For example, DTA 68 attacks a miller, tavern/shop-keepers, a boxer and a pimp, as well as a number of prostitutes. In such cases straightforward business rivalry is unlikely—after all, what advantage could there be in seeking the commercial failure of so many people involved in so many different professions? For this tablet, another explanation for the motivation behind this spell may be suggested by the appearance of τοὺς μάρτυρας “the witnesses” in line 10; perhaps these characters all represented some kind of judicial threat.

These questions are not intended to deny the usefulness of “competition” as a basis for understanding some curses, but as a reminder that these texts

167 For a full analysis of the texts usually categorized as “commercial” and assumed to be motivated by commercial competition, see *OCR*, chapter 10. All the texts discussed in this section have been categorized as commercial in previous scholarship: for a list of those texts deemed to be part of this category see *OCR*, 322, n. 4.

168 DTA 55 also provides the professions of some targets, and the patronymics and demotics of others; for two he provides all this information. SGD 48 provides a further example, with three columns of mostly male names, some identified with demotics (abbreviated), one with his place of origin, one with his profession; the final column includes the names of four women and a man, qualified with *λαϊκάστρια*, an abusive term for a prostitute.

169 See also DTA 87; SGD 11, 20, 42, which offer examples of individuals described in terms of their profession with no attention paid to other aspects of their commercial lives. But even where texts are included which mention details of work (*ergasia*) as well as names and professions, why should this indicate commercial competition rather than a detailed malevolence towards the targets?

reflect the complex social dynamics between individuals.¹⁷⁰ As an example, consider Text 3, above, *DT* 68, which a number of scholars have categorized as commercial.¹⁷¹ The text certainly contains some commercial detail: on one side of the tablet, in the first half of the text, it refers to Theodora's ἐργασία, her business, as well as her ἔργα καὶ ἔπη, her words and deeds (also mentioned in the text quoted from the second half of the text on side B). Despite these commercial details, the main thrust of the spell in fact seems to be aimed at destroying the relationships of its target, Theodora. It may be that work and relationships were linked in this case; indeed, it has been argued that the writer of the text was a rival courtesan, jealous of Theodora's successful trade.¹⁷² Erotic competition might be an equally valid explanation: the writer may well have been a woman in any one of a number of relationships with Charias, who saw Theodora as a threat. Alternatively, since there is no element of the text that indicates the gender of the creator of the spell, the writer may have been male, and motivated by desire not for Theodora but for Charias, which would also explain the spell's request to make Charias forget his desire for Theodora (Side B, ll. 10–11). Perhaps, rather than examining this text for signs of *commercial* competition, we should be looking for other feelings of ill-will or even hostility.

Indeed, there are a number of texts that indicate that binding spells may have been one recourse in situations where social relations had simply broken down.¹⁷³ For example, in *DTA* 87, the writer describes some of his many targets as neighbours: should we be looking to this tablet for information about the nature of community dynamics, rather than competition between businesses? In the spectrum of hostile feelings that might have motivated one Greek to have “bound” another a particular possibility is that most virulent of ancient Greek emotions: φθόνος or “envy.”¹⁷⁴ This is further explored in another chapter of this volume, but it is worth noting here that exploring a dynamic such as φθόνος might help us to refine the idea of competition as a motivating force for the creation of binding spells: individuals were not only competing for the

170 Nor is this an attempt to argue that curse tablets are written simply from a position of uncertainty (contra Versnel, “Prayers for Justice, East and West,” 325).

171 Identified as an example of a commercial curse by Faraone, “The Agonistic Context of Early Greek Binding Spells,” 27, n. 47.

172 M.W. Dickie, “Who Practised Love-Magic in Classical Antiquity and in the Late Roman World?,” *Classical Quarterly* 50.2 (2000): 576.

173 For example, *DTA* 98, 100, 103, 158, *SGD* 58, *NGCT* 14 and 23, where the threat of the opponent appears to be ongoing, rather than in the past, as in true “prayers for justice.” Plato's doorstep salesmen offer spells to harm an enemy (rather than a competitor (Plato, *Republica*, 364c–e). See also Eidinow, “Why the Athenians Began to Curse.”

174 See further Eidinow, *Envy, Poison, and Death*; and below, Eidinow, Chapter 28.

same prize, but they were also determined to prevent their neighbours from achieving it—and felt justified in doing so.

7 Ideas for Further Work: Transmission and Motivation

Curse tablets, both prayers for justice and binding spells, tell us not only about ritual practices, but also about other aspects of the societies and communities in which those practices took place. To that end, continued attention to the categorisation of the texts in this growing corpus is invaluable, helping to identify and distinguish what seem, to our sensibilities at least, to be different classes of ritual practice and formulae. And these different classes prompt consideration of two avenues of further work: first, the implications of those findings for understanding the nature of cultural transmission, as practices appear to move between communities over time; and, second, the insights these texts may provide into relationships within communities, between individuals.¹⁷⁵ On the first point, we can look both within and beyond the Mediterranean. In terms of the latter, this essay has mentioned some of the work that has been done to examine the influence of Egyptian ritual practices on binding spells, and vice versa. The binding spells on papyri also reveal interactions with Jewish and Near Eastern ritual practices. Christopher Faraone has explored the influences of Near Eastern spells for erotic binding spells, and his work suggests a rich seam to be mined, with further work to be done in tracing imagery, approaches and formulations found in aggressive and apotropaic rituals from the Near East and the texts of the corpus of Greco-Roman binding spells. In addition, recent work on oath formulae in Near Eastern texts suggests that there are similarities and differences in formulae and approach to be traced between these and Greco-Roman oath curses.¹⁷⁶ In terms of the former, the number of binding spells found across territories within the Mediterranean

¹⁷⁵ See Voutiras, *Dionysophontos gamoi* for a particularly successful example of this approach.

¹⁷⁶ For example, A.M. Kitz, "An Oath, A Curse and Anointing Ritual," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 124, no. 2 (2004): 315–21 and M.R. Bacharova, "Oath and allusion in Alcaeus fr. 129," in *Horkos: Oath in Greek Society*, ed. A. Sommerstein and J. Fletcher (Exeter: Phoenix Press, 2007); see also C. Faraone, "Molten Wax, Spilt Wine, and Mutilated Animals: Sympathetic Magic in Early Greek and Near Eastern Oath Ceremonies," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 113 (1993): 60–80. On the spread of Near Eastern technological innovations to the Greek world, and concomitant spread of ideas, see W. Burkert, *Greek Religion*, trans. A. Raffan (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996); Faraone, *Talismans and Trojan Horses*, 26–29, and, with a slightly different but related emphasis, D. Wengrow, *The Origins of Monsters: Image and Cognition in the First Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

suggests that curse tablets were persistently popular. An attempt to map the distribution of this material, including details of dates as well as place, would reveal the extent and chronology of this popularity more precisely.¹⁷⁷ If such a mapping also included developments in formulae and details of find-sites, then this might give insights into not only the specific practices of particular communities but also the similarities and differences between practices. Any patterns of practice could potentially reveal interactions between local and distant communities, and this might further understanding of the networks of transmission—of knowledge and influence—within which these practices spread.¹⁷⁸

On the second point, these texts enable scholars to examine some of the social dynamics within communities, and the possible motives of those who, over time and place, wrote, ordered or manufactured these texts. Questions remain about the identity of individuals whose names are inscribed on the curse tablets themselves, and the relationships between those individuals and between them and the writers of the texts. In terms of identities, some tablets offer details of their targets' origins within Attica or beyond, others their work locations or professions, still others note which targets are their neighbours. Some refer to slaves and/or their owners; others list members of the same family; some extend the spell to unnamed relatives, even the children of their targets. A thorough analysis of the personnel of particular texts or groups of texts, and the connections between them, would greatly enrich our understanding of ancient society and the social dynamics of communities in which curses were used. In terms of the motivations and emotional dynamics that may have prompted the writing of curse tablets, and sustained its practice, different suggestions have been made.¹⁷⁹ As research on the relational nature of emotions develops, and in the context of the "cognitive turn" of scholarship, including ancient history and literature, this may also prove a fruitful area for further study.

177 This work is now made significantly easier by the development of the extensive online resources of, for example, the *Thesaurus Defixionum Magdeburgensis*. This project states its aim to be further research on the question of "what sort of balance exists between the trans-historic and trans-geographic elements and those traits that are specific of a given cultural context." See http://www-e.uni-magdeburg.de/defigo/wordpress/?page_id=2.

178 Spanish and British curse practice compared by Tomlin, "Cursing a Thief in Iberia and Britain," in *Magical Practice in the Latin West*, 245–73.

179 H.S. Versnel, "'Punish Those Who Rejoice in Our Misery': On Curse Tablets and Schadenfreude," in *The World of Ancient Magic*, 125–62 argues that *Schadenfreude* underlies the creation of curses, but Eidinow, *Envy, Poison, and Death*, 250–53, challenges this and argues for the importance of culturally specific emotions, suggesting in addition the central role of φθόνος or "envy."

Suggested Readings

- Dieleman, Jacco, *Priests, Tongues and Rites: The London-Leiden Magical Manuscripts and Translation in Egyptian Ritual 100–300 CE*, RGRW 153 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2005).
- Eidinow, Esther, *Oracles, Curses, and Risk among the Ancient Greeks* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
- Eidinow, Esther and Claire Taylor, “To Whom It May Concern: Writing, Communication and Crisis in the Ancient Greek World” *Classical Quarterly* 60 (2010): 30–62.
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- Versnel, Henk S., “Beyond Cursing: The Appeal to Justice in Judicial Prayers,” in *Magika Hiera: Ancient Greek Magic and Religion*, ed. C. Faraone and D. Obbink (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 60–106.

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