

Curse-Writing and the Epigraphic Habit in Athens

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In the first half of the fourth century BCE, the following text was inscribed on a thin lead tablet in Athens (*ArchEph* 1903, 58.5, *SGD* 18):

θεοί. ἀγαθὴ τύχη.
καταδῶ καὶ οὐκ ἀναλύσω Ἀντικλέα Ἀντιφάνος Ἀντιφάνην καὶ Φιλοκλέα
Πατροκλέος καὶ Κλεοχάρην
3 καὶ Φιλοκλέα καὶ Σμικρωνίδην καὶ Τιμάνθην καὶ Τιμάνθην.
καταδῶ τούτους ἅπαντας πρὸς τὸν Ἑρμῆν τὸν {τὸν} χθόνιον καὶ τὸν δόλιον
καὶ τὸν
κάτοχον καὶ τὸν ἐριούνιον καὶ οὐκ ἀναλύσω.

Gods. With good fortune! I bind down and shall not unloosen Antikles, the son of Antiphanes, Antiphanes, and Philokles, the son of Patrokles, and Kleochores and Philokles and Smikonides and Timanthes and Timanthes. I bind down them all in the presence of Hermes—the chthonic and the crafty and the restrainer and the helper—and I shall not unloosen (them)!

This malediction sought to bind and thereby restrain or incapacitate at least seven men; it invoked the god Hermes under various epithets to bring the curse to fruition. The object itself was implicated in a curse ritual, but one would not suspect as much from the text's opening line. Set off as a header before the primary curse verb, the text begins with a formula commonly found in civic decrees (so too other types of official documents, from dotal inscriptions to sacrificial calendars).¹ It might seem contradictory to open a private curse with a civic formula calling for “good fortune”, but there was no incongruity in the

1 Dotal inscription (a record of a dowry given by a father to a daughter or other female relative): *Syll.*³ 1215. Sacrificial calendars: *CGRN* 156 (Mykonos, third century), *SEG* xxii 131 (Erchia, c.375–350 BCE, [θ]εοί only). The θεοί invocation may reflect the opening prayer in meetings of the Athenian Assembly; many Attic decrees mention θεοί in the heading, but integrate τύχη ἀγαθή within the main body of the text (e.g., *RO* 131.40—other states however include this in the heading also, e.g., *RO* 14, 32), see further discussion of this heading in Rhodes and Osborne 2018, xxi.

mind of the scribe (nor in that of the author of *DTA* 158, which similarly begins θε]ός, τύχη ἀγαθή). Perhaps this header imbued the curse with the semblance of authority, and was understood to bolster the ritual's overall efficacy. Or possibly the header seemed appropriate if the conflict undergirding the curse was grounded in the lawcourts, or another civic context. Regardless of intention, such formulae alert us to the fact that private Attic curse texts were shaped by public forms of communication and civic discourse—in this case, the official decrees and public inscriptions that dotted the Attic *polis* in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE.

As ritual objects that circulated outside the control of any centralized administrative body (polis, priesthood, cult association, or otherwise), inscribed curse texts are diverse and preserve an array of influences, including several that were epigraphic in nature. This is just *one* reason why curse tablets have much to offer the epigraphist and historian: some of these private texts carried formulae found elsewhere in the Classical city, and can illuminate, for example, language use and literacy in non-elite circles, in addition to social attitudes toward the writing-down of text. In this capacity, one aim of the chapter is to demonstrate the diversity of written sources that could shape Athenian curse texts—sources that included (but were not limited to) civic decrees, public name lists, and epistolary genres of communication. The chapter's second goal is to show why and how an epigraphic framework—mounted in terms of the so-called “epigraphic habit”—can help explain the proliferation of Attic curse tablets during the fourth century BCE. After an historical overview of early Greek curse practice, this chapter argues both points, beginning with the latter. I engage throughout with broader questions often subsumed within discussions of the epigraphic habit, including correlations between private and public inscriptions, how individual Athenians might read and adapt publicly-displayed inscriptions to private ends, and basic modes of expressing literacy in Classical Athens.

1 Athenian Curse Tablets

The text with which this chapter opened, *SGD* 18 above, is an example of a Greek curse tablet. Broadly defined, curse tablets are small, thin sheets of lead inscribed with maledictions and spells against rivals, lovers, or wrongdoers. Deposited in graves, chthonic sanctuaries, wells, and other subterranean locales, these objects aimed to harness supernatural powers, and bring them to bear upon unfolding situations and relationships. The vast majority were composed in Greek and Latin; yet curse tablets were a pan-Mediterranean

(and beyond) phenomenon, adopted in the late Classical and Hellenistic periods by communities with whom the Greeks came into contact, from Oscan and Etruscan enclaves in Italy to Punic-speakers in Carthage to Iberian groups in Spain.² The Romans later spread the technology well beyond the Mediterranean basin, facilitating through army and empire the adoption of curse practice across the frontier provinces. These lead texts—and the ritual processes they embody—offer rare insights into the public and private lives of individuals, honed as they were from shortly before 500 BCE down through Late Antiquity by citizens and enslaved persons, men and women, pagans and Christians. Over 2,000 curse tablets are known from antiquity, and excavations continually yield still more on a regular basis.³

All current evidence suggests that curse tablets had their beginnings in Sicily, in the Greek settlements on the island's western coast. The earliest emerge around 500 BCE in Selinus, a site from which some 45 curse tablets have been published.⁴ The recent recovery of 54 curse tablets from Himera's Western Buonfornello necropolis will significantly expand the Sicilian curse corpus; at the time of writing only two of these have been published, but they are also quite early, found in graves dating from ca. 480 BCE (and thus nearly contemporary with the oldest Selinuntine tablets).⁵ By the mid-fifth century, curse tablets emerge from funerary contexts in the nearby coastal *poleis* of Camarina, Acragas, and Gela.⁶ Deploying formulae found in early tablets from Selinus, inscribed curses appear at Cumae in the Bay of Naples (*DTA* 302) and in significant numbers in Attica by the late fifth century BCE. The practice was adopted by indigenous Oscan-speaking groups of southern Italy by the later fourth century BCE, by which time curse tablets had already appeared across

2 Oscan curse tablets: Murano 2012, Vitellozzi 2019; Etruscan curses: Massarelli 2019; Punic curse tablets: *DTA* 213–14; Iberian, probably: Marco Simón 2019: 376–97.

3 Curse tablets recently uncovered in Attic graves: Eliopoulos 2010; Kroustalis and Tsaravopoulos 2008; Lamont 2015. Recent north Pontic curse tablets from Olbia and the Cimmerian Bosphorus: Stolba 2016; Belousov, Dana, and Nikolaev 2016; Belousov and Dana 2017: 162–64. The discovery of the sanctuary of Magna Mater and Isis in Mainz, Germany (Mogontiacum), with its many Latin curse tablets: Blänsdorf 2012: 141–89.

4 In 2005, Luca Bettarini published an important edition of 31 lead tablets from Selinus; in 2009, he noted: “possiamo contare oggi su un corpus notevolissimo di quarantacinque defixiones” (Bettarini 2009: 137). On why the practice of curse-writing emerged in Sicily, with consideration of epigraphic habits, see Lamont 2023, Chapters 1–2.

5 Brugnone et al. 2020: 47, 87.

6 Curbera 1999.

the Greek cities of the northern Black Sea and the north Aegean, including those of Macedon.⁷

The vast majority of Greek curse tablets come from Attica—well over 500 Athenian curse tablets are known today—and most of these date from the fourth century BCE. Athenian curse tablets first appear in graves of the Kerameikos in the late fifth century. Curse assemblages also emerge in urban deme cemeteries at Kynosarges, Piraeus, and Xypete soon after 400 BCE.⁸ During the fourth century, curse production intensifies in Athens. The ritual spreads across the polis, and diversifies in form, language, and contexts of deposition. Fourth-century tablets emerge beyond the urban center, attested at Eleusis, Halae, Decelea, Oropos, perhaps Daphne, and possibly even the Vari farmhouse.⁹ Later fourth-century Attic curse tablets also appear outside funerary contexts, and were incised on materials other than lead. At least one lead tablet is known from the sanctuary of Palaimon-Pancrates on the Ilissos River (*SEG* LX 264), while dozens were deposited in wells in the Kerameikos cemetery and the Athenian Agora (whether deliberately, or as a secondary dumping: Well B 34; Well J 51).¹⁰ Curses inscribed on lead and ceramic media were also buried in so-called pyre deposits in industrial and domestic spaces bordering the Classical Agora.¹¹ Curse rituals are then attested in Attica down through the Hellenistic period, continuing well into the Roman era, albeit with a decrease in the third and second centuries BCE, according to current orthodoxy.

2 Attic Curse Tablets and the Epigraphic Habit

Why do Athenian curse tablets first appear in the late fifth century BCE, and increase exponentially over the course of the fourth? Some scholars have linked this proliferation to contemporary historical events, attributing the intensification in curse-writing to “a marked shift in Athenian behavior and

7 Oscan curse tablets: Murano 2012: 629–55, Vitellozzi 2019: 335–62. Northern Black Sea curses: Stolba 2016, Belousov, Dana, and Nikolaev 2016, Belousov and Dana 2017. North Aegean: Curbera and Jordan 2003 (Pydna), Voutiras 1988 (Pella).

8 Stroszeck 2019; Eliopoulos 2010; Kroustalis and Tsaravopoulos 2008; Lamont 2015.

9 Eleusis: Dimou 2016, 258. On Daphne and Vari, see the notes of Jordan 1985: 163. Halae (*DTA* 24), Decelea (*SGD* 39–41), Oropos (Curbera 2016 no. 1).

10 Stroszeck 2019; Curbera and Lamont 2023.

11 Lamont 2021; Rotroff 2013; Jordan and Rotroff 1999.

beliefs, which may be considered as part of a larger cultural revolution.”¹² It has been argued that related factors included (1) elevated apprehensions concerning risk, (2) “a dynamic of generalized distrust”, and (3) resentment or loss of self-confidence among Athenians following the Peloponnesian War.¹³ Tempting though these chronological correlations may be, such arguments are problematic. One would be hard-pressed to claim that Athens’ internal and external affairs in, say, 508/7 BCE, or 480/79 BCE, were any *less* strained than during the late fifth century. Surely many Athenians experienced bitterness, anxiety, and a heightened sense of risk, or an atmosphere permeated by mistrust, amidst the turbulence that led to the ousting of Hippias and ushered in the Cleisthenic democracy in the late sixth century BCE; so too during the second Persian invasion of Attica. Yet these years of apprehension did *not* find the Athenians writing curses. From the late sixth century BCE through the late fifth, Athens was marred by internal and external conflicts, in other words; apprehension and risk did not emerge only after the Peloponnesian War to suddenly ignite curse-writing around 400 BCE.

Faraone has also cautioned against ascribing the intensification of Athenian curse-writing to a new sense of risk or a collapse of faith in the traditional pantheon following the Peloponnesian War. Rightly decoupling Attic curse production from such shifts in collective mentalities, he advised looking instead to the spreading technology of writing, increased literacy, and the abundance of lead from Laurion as a medium for writing.¹⁴ While thoroughly convincing, Faraone’s remarks would benefit from deeper analysis and alignment with an epigraphic framework like the one advanced by this volume.

Indeed, a better explanation for the intensification of Attic curse production might have little to do with the loss of self-confidence during the Peloponnesian War, and everything to do with broader epigraphic habits in Athens. An epigraphic approach, grounded in regional writing practices and social attitudes to the writing-down of public and private text, proves useful here. Curse tablets could only proliferate once the technology of writing and the ability to read and compose text had been established within a community of practitioners (how the term “literacy” is used here). Athenian curse-writing can be situated alongside contemporary epigraphic habits, as the practice (or “habit”) of inscribing text was itself culturally and historically determined—an

12 Eidinow 2007a: 44–45.

13 Thus Eidinow’s 2007 article, “Why the Athenians Began to Curse”, seeded in a volume positing broader revolutionary change for the years between 430–380 BCE (Eidinow 2007a: 44–45, 2007b: 231–32). See the justified cautions of Faraone 2012: 115–17.

14 Faraone 2012: 115–16.

overarching theme of the present volume. The notion of the “epigraphic habit” was first outlined by Ramsay MacMullen in a study that documented the spread of Latin inscriptions in the Roman Empire from the first to third centuries CE—especially the adoption of Latin inscriptions in some of the western provinces, Danube regions, and North African territories, that is, the non-Roman communities with whom the Romans came into contact.¹⁵ Drawing upon the earlier work of Mócsy, which demonstrated that the inscribing of stone epitaphs was a custom acquired through Roman contact, MacMullen argued that the practice was controlled by a sense of “audience”, and that epigraphic production was culturally, rather than linguistically, defined.¹⁶ Domenico Musti examined the relationship of writing to democratic forms of government, while Charles Hedrick later situated the epigraphic habit in an Athenian context, focusing on the relationship between the Classical democracy and the practice of inscribing text for public display.¹⁷

The implications of the epigraphic habit(s) for Greek history are significant, and can help explain, *inter alia*, regional discrepancies in writing practices across early poleis.¹⁸ Consider the example of Sparta, a city often contrasted with democratic Athens with regard to literacy.¹⁹ Though the mightiest Greek polis during the Archaic period, and arguably throughout the fifth and early fourth centuries BCE, the Spartan state did not rely in any meaningful way on written text; nor do Spartan inscriptions abound in private contexts during these years.²⁰ Sparta’s strict social discipline fixed individuals within a hierarchical power structure, and other aspects of life conformed to a rigid observance of rules.²¹ This social rigidity left little space for the spoken word, let alone the written one, either in public or private forms of expression (recall the

15 MacMullen 1982.

16 Mócsy 1966: 419–20 and MacMullen 1982: 233–46.

17 Musti 1986; Hedrick 1999.

18 For the epigraphic habit in Thespieae: Osborne 2020; southern Boeotia: Papazarkadas 2016; Thasos: Osborne 2009.

19 Harvey 1966: 628 and *passim*; Cartledge 1978.

20 Individual Spartans did, of course, possess basic faculties needed to read and write (especially the kings, Pythioi, gerousia, ephors), and inscribed texts from the seventh and sixth centuries *are* known from Lacedaemon (especially votive dedications to Helen, Orthia, Menelaus, et al., and several inscribed grave stelai: Jeffery 1961: 199–201), but to a lesser degree than elsewhere in the same period. That Spartan “formal inscriptions on stone” were probably inscribed by perioikoi, see Cartledge 1978: 32. Cartledge (1978: 25–37) also convincingly refutes the charge of complete illiteracy in early Sparta, “even in the case of the humblest Spartan ranker” (29).

21 Spartan society was not open to discursive debate or discussion, and the arts of rhetoric, negotiation, and oratory found relatively little expression in Classical Lacedaemon.

parodic depictions of Spartans as quasi-illiterate by fourth-century Athenian authors: Pl. *Protag.* 342a; Pl. *Hipp. Ma.* 285c; Isoc. *Panath.* 209, 251). If writing is the graphic counterpart of speech, one would expect the written word to be marginal in a truly laconic society. The Spartan tendency toward laconism was reflected, in other words, in written culture and the epigraphic habit—or the slightness thereof. Relatively few dipinti, inscribed gravestones, graffiti, and stone inscriptions have emerged from Sparta, and official state documents inscribed on stone are almost entirely absent.²² Social propensities for the writing-down of text were slim in Sparta, and civic life was conducted without great reliance on the written word.

This was decidedly not the case in Athens. Athenian society looked favorably upon the writing-down of text, and the Attic epigraphic habit was robust. Inscribed tombstones and grave monuments were common by the middle of the sixth century, and graffiti and dipinti abound from the Archaic period onward. Attic public inscriptions also became common beginning in the sixth century BCE, with a great surge of civic texts published on stone during the fourth.²³ The emergence and intensification of Attic curse-writing must be contextualized against this epigraphic backdrop.

Indeed, the appearance of Athenian curse tablets in the later fifth century BCE, and their proliferation during the fourth, corresponds to the dramatic increase in other public and private inscribed texts during these same years (in this regard, the “epigraphic habit” applies to public and private texts, and helps account for parallel language and forms across both groups). Notable among epigraphists are the many civic inscriptions on stone *stelai*: civic decrees, laws, accounts and inventories, receipts of property sales and leases, and sacrificial calendars, to name but a few epigraphic genres.²⁴ Let us briefly consider the case of the Attic sacrificial calendar. Sacrifice had always been present in the Attic polis, obviously. But the epigraphic record suggests that Athenians began to *write down* on stone information pertinent to these sacrifices—days, months, locations, specific colors and ages of sacrificial victims, etc.—all across Attica during the late fifth and fourth centuries BCE. Surviving from these years are inscribed stone sacrificial deme calendars (Thorikos, Erchia), regional sacrificial calendars (the Marathonian Tetrapolis), civic sacrificial calendars (that of the Athenian polis, newly revised: *Lys.* 30.17), and even a rupestral calendrical

22 In contrast, consider the literacy of king Demaratus (*Hdt.* 7.239), and the presence of written text on organic media that would not preserve in the archaeological record (a wooden tablet coated in wax: *Hdt.* 7.239; a *στυτάλη* with rolled leather strips: *Xen. Hell.* 5.2.37, *Plut. Lys.* 19, *Ar. Lys.* 991). See too Détienné 1988: 56–58; Bodel 2001: 11–14; Cartledge 1987: 31–35.

23 Hedrick 1999: 390–92.

24 On the proliferation of Attic *stelai* during the late fifth century, see Meyer 2016.

graffito detailing sacrifices to Hermes, likely inscribed by rural inhabitants in the deme of Sounion.²⁵ The fourth century also saw the inscription of civic and archival documents on metal tablets, such as lead cavalry tablets and bronze dikasts' *pinakia* from the Agora.²⁶ In the case of the former, we know that inspections of the Athenian cavalry had been occurring for many decades; yet it was during the fourth century that this information was first recorded on lead, in keeping with the good democratic penchant for accountability.

This was also the period in which the technology of writing was making inroads within the Athenian law courts. Christophe Pébarthe has shown how the early fourth century BCE witnessed a shift in Athenian legal procedure, after which the submission of witness testimonies, pleas, and other documentation was required in written form.²⁷ The great proliferation of legal curse tablets during these same years may parallel this development; perhaps these objects were even seen as ritual extensions of the litigation process.

The emergence of Athenian curse tablets during the late fifth century also mirrors trends in private inscriptions. For example, Mark Lawall has collected, studied, and dated all transport amphorae from the Athenian Agora; he found that these vessels were inscribed (post-firing) with private graffiti—information about the vessel's contents, recipients, and vendors—with great vigor between 430–400 BCE. Lawall notes that private texts were incised on the exteriors of ceramic transport amphorae “on an unprecedented scale” in the final three decades of the fifth century BCE.²⁸ Here again we see evidence of Athens' robust epigraphic habit, unfolding in the private realm of commerce and trade. Unless we can link the density of Athenian amphora graffiti to an altered sense of risk, or a shift in collective wartime mentalities, this argument should not hold for inscribed curses either.

During the late fifth and fourth centuries BCE, Athenians were thus writing *a lot*, in public and private contexts, and on different media. The proliferation of curse tablets therefore corresponds to broader epigraphic trends in Attica. The great boom in Athenian inscriptions on lead, bronze, stone, and ceramic during these years speaks to the same socially-determined epigraphic “habit”, which was amplified by the spread and diversification of written literacy. The writing-down of curses fits comfortably within this broader epigraphic

25 Erchia (*SEG* XXI 541): Daux 1963, 603–4. Marathonian Tetropolis (*SEG* L 168): Lambert 2018: 149–80. Calendar of Nikomachos: Lambert 2002. Thorikos (*SEG* LV 58): *NGSL* 1. Rupestral: Langdon and Watrous 1977: 168–73.

26 Kroll 1977; Dow 1963.

27 Pébarthe 2006, 315–31.

28 Lawall 2000: 3.

landscape—we are observing this same phenomenon, here manifest in the realm of private ritual practice.

3 Epigraphic Influence on Curse Tablets

The epigraphic habit, and broader social proclivities for the writing-down of text in fourth-century Athens, may also help explain parallels between private curses and public inscriptions, like that seen in *SGD* 18, the tablet with which this chapter opened. Curse-writers drew upon a variety of influences when performing curse ceremonies and inscribing tablets. This included both oral and written cultural forms, but, in keeping with the theme of this volume, the remainder of this chapter focuses on the latter, considering templates drawn from civic decrees, public name lists, and epistolary communications.²⁹ The first two case studies suggest that Athenian curse-writers were aware of the civic inscriptions displayed throughout the city; they were not only able to read them, but also to understand them sufficiently so as to adopt and transform their language (and format) to private ritual ends.

Like *SGD* 18 and *DTA* 158, both of which open with headings found in official decrees, other Athenian curses drew inspiration from civic inscriptions. Attic curse tablets provide a clear point of correspondence between public and private inscriptions of the fourth century. Consider Curbera and Papakonstantinou 2018 no. 1, a lead curse tablet deposited in the Kerameikos during the early fourth century BCE (Fig. 14.1).³⁰

The near-*stoichedon* curse contains three columns of neatly incised text, and makes sporadic use of punctuation and diacritics (: and <) in columns II and III; in formatting the text clearly mirrors civic decrees. As Curbera and Papakonstantinou observe, each column refers to a distinct lawsuit: a δίκη βλάβης involving one Athenodoros (Col. I), a δίκη βλάβης introduced by Smindyrides (Col. II), and a trial overseen by the Polemarch involving a woman named Eirene (Col. III).³¹ In several places the curse also employs civic terminology, including language familiar from the Assembly, *Boulē*, and lawcourts. We find forms of the verb ἐπιβουλεύειν (ἐπιβουλεύει, I.7, II.7), which Curbera notes is familiar from public inscriptions on stone.³² The curse also

29 For the influence of earlier, oral curses on Greek curse tablets, see Faraone 1985, 1995, 2012: 116–17; Lamont 2021 discusses fourth-century Attic curse tablets that presumably drew from older oral binding spells.

30 Curbera and Papakonstantinou 2018: no. 1, with previous bibliography.

31 Curbera and Papakonstantinou 2018: 213.

32 Curbera and Papakonstantinou 2018: 212.

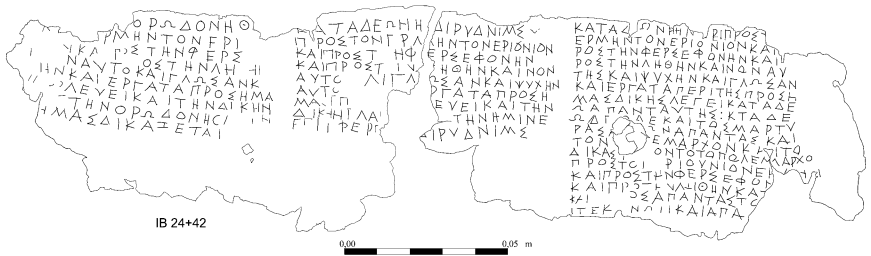


FIGURE 14.1 Kerameikos IB 24, 42; Curbera and Papakonstantinou 2018, no. 1. Early fourth century BCE
DRAWING BY J. CURBERA, REPRINTED WITH KIND PERMISSION

DTW 7

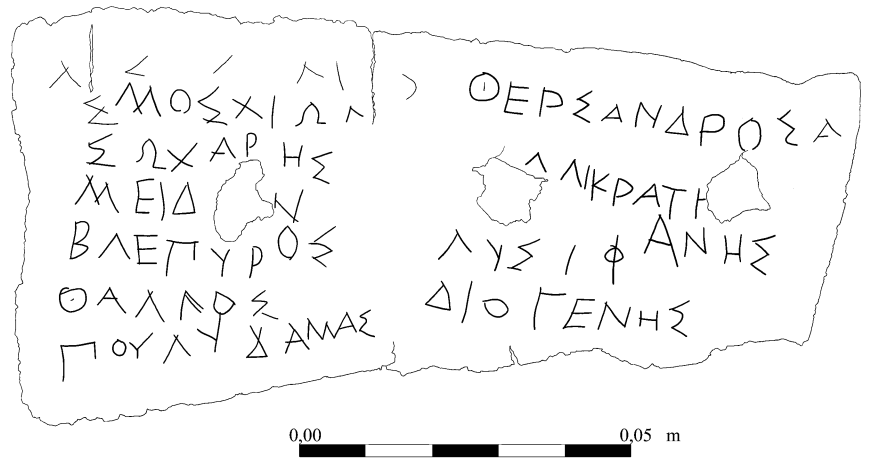


FIGURE 14.2 New drawing of DTA 7, purportedly from Patissia in Athens, fourth century BCE
DRAWING BY J. CURBERA, REPRINTED WITH KIND PERMISSION

draws language from the legal realm, often used in reference to trials: *δικάζε-ται* (I.9), *δίκην βλάβης* (I–II 8). Across these three columns of text, the scribe “was clearly trying to imitate as close as possible the style and appearance of official documents.”³³ The curse-writer had a thorough comprehension of public decrees and inscriptions, and sought to use the civic authority implicit therein—including fine-grained details such as punctuation, columniation, and *stoichedon* alignment—to craft powerful private curses meant to influence legal outcomes.

33 Curbera and Papakonstantinou 2018: 212.

Athenian curse tablets were also influenced by civic name-lists, many of which were prominently displayed throughout the city. This is especially clear in curse texts arranged into columnar lists such as *DTA* 7 (Fig. 14.2), purportedly from Patissia in Athens (new edition forthcoming by Curbera, IG II/III³ 8):

1	Μοσχίων	Θέρσανδρος
	Σωκ[ράτ]ης	[Πα]νκράτι[ος]
	Μειδ[ία]ν	Λυσιφάνης
	Βλέπ[υ]ρος	Διογένης
5	Θαλλός	
	Πουλυδάμας	

Like *DTA* 7, the majority of Greek curse tablets comprise simple lists of names. Here the names of ten individuals—all of whom were registered for cursing—were arranged into two columns of text. Each name is rigidly separated from those around it, and the stark text resists additional details: verbs, patronymics, and even conjunctions are absent. But what the curse sacrifices in discursivity it gains in visual effect, calling attention to each individual name in turn.

Drawing upon Rosalind Thomas' work on literacy, Richard Gordon has suggested that public lists—that is, lists in which individual names were recorded and publicly displayed in columnar formats—came to influence the physical layout of curse tablets such as *DTA* 7 above.³⁴ Some 40 of the 135 complete texts in Wünsch's corpus of Attic tablets (30%) comprise columnar lists of named individuals, while 15 of the 34 Attic texts in Jordan's "Survey of Greek Defixiones" (*SGD*) from before 300 BCE are columnar lists of names (44%). These numbers need updating in light of the many tablets recovered since 1985, but they nonetheless demonstrate the popularity of the columnar list curse-format in Athens. The power of these columnar curses resides in the agency of public lists in the ancient city, Gordon has argued. In sixth- through fourth-century Attica, such lists included deme registries with names of male citizens and (later) metics, public lists of military deserters, lists of homicides and would-be tyrants, and lists of public debtors.³⁵ Gordon suggests that the use of the columnar list in curse tablets, at least in democratic Athens, demonstrates how curse-writers could harness symbols of (often negative) civic authority to create a powerful private curse:

34 Gordon 1999: 250–57.

35 Gordon 1999: 256–57; on democratic literacy, see Thomas 1989: 64–66.

The columnar list is an example of magical practice usurping tokens of authority in the dominant world for its own ends. The public list of infamy singled out each name as a separate object of inspection, opened to scorn and derision; the private list drew upon that public model as a source of guidance to the powers of the Underworld, who were invited to react as the Athenian public reacted. More precisely, perhaps, the private columnar list sought to evoke the public process of exposure and condemnation that prefaced the appearance of a name on these lists of infamy.³⁶

Gordon attributes the attraction of the columnar list to “a tradition of democratic literacy”, yet the popularity of such curses in western Sicily during the late sixth and early fifth centuries suggests that public lists appealed widely across administrative regimes—deployed in oligarchies and tyrannies as well as in democracies.³⁷ The popularity of the columnar list curse was surely related to its simplicity; a lower degree of literacy was needed to inscribe individual names, and the ease of composition must have appealed to amateur curse-writers. We should imagine that many persons in fifth- and fourth-century Athens would have been capable of inscribing such texts (as lists of names were indeed omnipresent in the Classical polis), and that curse-writing was thus accessible to those possessing more basic levels of literacy.

One final type of inscribed document that came to influence some Athenian curse-writers was the private letter, a form of correspondence that was undergoing standardization around this time.³⁸ Two fourth-century curses identify themselves as “letters” addressed to subterranean deities; these objects aimed to convey their victims to the realm of the Underworld. Hence Curbera and Papakonstantinou 2018, no. 4 (previously *DTA* 103) opens,

Ἑρμ[ηι] καὶ Φερσεφόν<η>ι τήνδε ἐπιστο[λή]ν ἀπο|πέμπ[ω].

I am sending off this letter to Hermes and Persephone.

So too does *DTA* 102.1–8 (Fig. 14.3) claim

³⁶ Gordon 1999: 257.

³⁷ Lamont 2022; for example, from Sicilian Himera c.480 BCE: Brugnone et al. 2020, 108, Fig. 22. I would add that in Classical Athens, a sizable number of columnar name lists were not negative or defamatory in nature: lists of prytaneis, public donations, men who served on the Council, deme lists, etc. On Athenian lists, see Berti and Kató 2017.

³⁸ See recently Dana 2021, Ceccarelli 2013.

ἐπιστο{σ}λὴν | πέμπων | [δ]αίμο<σιν> | καὶ Φρεσσεφών<η> {ς} | κομίσας |
Τιβιτίδα | τὴν Χοιρίνης | τὴν ἐμ<ἐ> ἀδικο(ῶ)σαν

I am sending this letter to the daimones and to Persephone, conveying Tibitis, the daughter of Choirine, who has wronged me!

Both curses present themselves as letters (ἐπιστο[λ]ήν, ἐπιστο{σ}λὴν), and their deposition is framed as an act of sending (ἀποπέμπω, πέμπων) a missive to Underworld deities. For wrongful deeds the victims are conveyed to Hermes, Persephone, and the *daimones* at large, and are thereby brought to justice. This expression of the needs or wishes of the curse-writer (a standard feature of private correspondence) is then followed by personal names.³⁹ In other contemporary curse tablets, the names of chthonic deities are also inscribed on the outer side of the lead sheet, mirroring the form of address used in private letters (e.g., *DTA* 107). The influence of epistolary communications is pronounced in these texts.⁴⁰ We can compare a contemporary lead letter from the Athenian Agora, which dates to the early fourth century BCE (Agora IL 1702, *SEG* L 276).⁴¹ The letter opens with the verb ἐπιστέλλει, introducing itself as a missive from Lesis (nominative) to Xenokles and his mother (dative): Λῆσις {ις} ἐπιστέλλει Ξενοκλεί καὶ τῇ μητρί (*SEG* L 276). The verb ἐπιστέλλει recalls the phrase ἐπιστολὴν [ἀπο]πέμπω[ν] in *DTA* 102 and Curbera and Papakonstantinou 2018

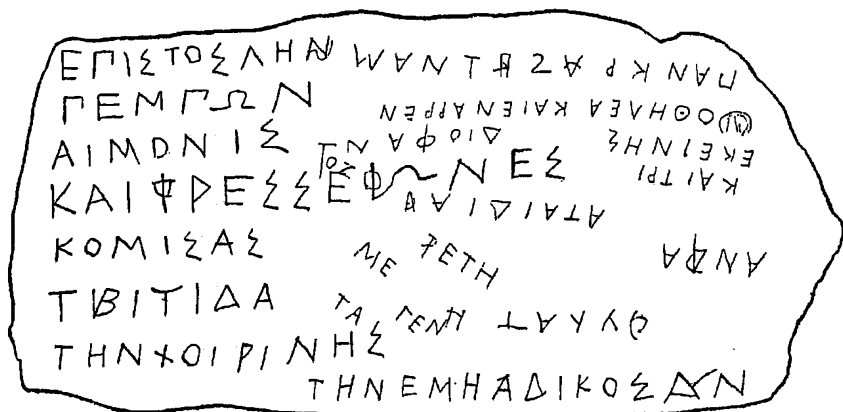


FIGURE 14.3 *DTA* 102, fourth century BCE
DRAWING BY R. WÜNSCH (1897: 26 NO. 102)

39 Both tablets intimate a sense of wrong perpetrated by the targets of the curse, deploying terms like ἀμαρτωλούς, τυχεῖν τέλο(υ)ς δίκης, and ἀδικο(ῶ)σαν.

40 See discussions in Dana 2007; Eidinow and Taylor 2010: 42–46; Ceccarelli 2013.

41 Jordan 2000.

no. 4, and at least two other letters from Classical Athens are announced with ἐπιστέλλω or ἐπέστελε.⁴² Like the lead curses, the letter of Lesis also formulaically addresses its recipients in the dative, before proceeding down a different (ritual) path to resolving private crises. The linguistic parallels between the curse texts and the private letters of Lesis, Pasion, and Sosineos emerge elsewhere in Classical Athens. For example, a phrase parodying a letter in Aristophanes' *Clouds* uses the verb ἐπέστειλεν with dative recipients (608–10).⁴³ These parallels, proximate in time and place, suggest that the epistolary formulae used to open private letters were deeply engrained in Athenian society by the early fourth century BCE, and were drawn upon by curse-writers looking to send maledictions to Underworld recipients. Here again epigraphic habits help contextualize the influences at work on private curse texts in Classical Athens.

In conclusion, this chapter has explored how the Athenian epigraphic habit proves useful for approaching fourth-century curse-writing rituals. An epigraphic framework helps explain the intensification of Attic curse tablets during the fourth century BCE, as the floruit of curse-writing corresponds to the intensification of inscriptions on stone; so too the writing-down of public and private texts on lead, ceramic, and other portable media. As private texts with decentralized modes of circulation, curse tablets also preserve various strands of influence, including several that are epigraphic in nature: language and formats found in civic decrees, public name-lists, and epistolary genres of communication. Indeed, situating curse tablets in relation to epigraphic habits and social attitudes that favored the writing-down of text has much to offer the historian and epigraphist of fifth- and fourth-century Athens.

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42 A legal missive from the banker Pasion opens "I write [this] letter", Jordan 2003. A fifth-century private letter on an amphora sherd from the Athenian Agora opens Σοσίνεο<ς> ἐπέστελε Γλαύκοι, "Sosineos sent to Glaukos": *Agora* XXI 9, no. B9.

43 Aristophanes *Clouds* (608–10): "Selene met with us, and told us first to write a message (ἐπέστειλεν) to greet the Athenians and their allies (Ἀθηναίοισι καὶ τοῖς ξυμμάχοις); and then declared that she was angry."

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