

## Curse tablets: hell hath no fury ...

One experience that remains consistent for humanity is the need to seek one's own justice. Whether it's the person who cut in front of you or the boy or girl who broke your heart, numerous injustices are not codified in law. Curse tablets offer an enlightening view on unwritten laws and the extent to which individuals relied on other means to achieve an end. The recipients of these requests were often Chthonic 'earth' deities, and we can gain an insight into how it was believed magic worked by studying them as well as the individuals who petitioned them.

This case study will focus on curse tablets found at Bath, but it will also consider those that were recently discovered in the Fountain of Anna Perenna, Rome.

### *What is a curse tablet and how do I get one?*

Cursing was hardly a new phenomenon. It was practised all over the Greek world, from Sicily to Attica, with everyone from unfaithful lovers to lawyers in court on the receiving end. The materials on which the curses were written ranged from wood to papyrus, although lead appears to be one of the most common media. This may be due primarily to the fact that the latter was widely available (there were ample lead deposits in Britain), but the fact that the metal came from the earth and was a more permanent medium probably played a part, too. Moreover, if revenge is a dish best served cold, then cold, heavy, dark lead was ideally suited to the task. It certainly served as a contrast to the shiny, polished bronze upon which laws and public religious dedications were inscribed. Location was also important: a spring or an aqueduct might ensure that the curse was carried through the water, while in North Africa curses on performers were placed at dangerous turning points in the circus. The documents are often called *defixiones*, from the Latin verb *defigo* ('to nail down'), a name that also attests to their power and permanence.

While the writing on curse tablets is somewhat formulaic, the manufacture and organization of the surviving tablets do not suggest a standardized practice or uniform production. Making curse tablets was probably not practised as a sole career, but it may well have been a lucrative side-business or hobby for metal craftsmen, all of whom possessed the necessary raw materials and skills. The maker would hammer out the lead, often into a rectangular sheet. This might then be decorated like a *tabella ansata* (the framing for an inscription), and some included capital letter forms from monumental inscriptions (compare the writing on [Slide 5](#) with that on [Slide 7](#)).

### *'God damn it!' How do I write a curse? Examples from Bath*

'Docilianus [son] of Brucerus to the most holy goddess Sulis. I curse him who has stolen my hooded cloak, whether man or woman, whether slave or free, that ... the goddess Sulis inflict death upon ... and not allow him sleep or children now and in the future, until he has brought my hooded cloak to the temple of her divinity.'

(Translation by R. Tomlin)

Cursing has not changed much across the ages. It always tends to begin by invoking a deity. These are often deities associated with the earth or water sources, such as Minerva Sulis (at Bath) or Anna Perenna (Rome). Sometimes noting a prayer or an

offering, the curse (as in the text above) identifies its target, often laying a wide net: for instance, *si vir si femina, si servus si liber* ('if male or female, slave or free') (Slide 5) for the cheeky person who stole the *caracalla* ('woollen cloak'). This is followed by a suggested punishment: Docilianus seeks death or insomnia for the culprit and his present and future offspring.

A *caracalla* was not a terribly expensive item, and one might think that this sort of crime would be reported to a local magistrate, rather than Sulis. Does this suggest that the victim had already tried and failed to secure justice from the local magistrates in Bath? The lockers at the baths were certainly common targets for thieves, and the theft of one's cloak could have had especially embarrassing consequences. Perhaps it was this that prompted Docilianus' rather brutal revenge.

The writing, often cursive, is sometimes written backwards, and the vocabulary reveals regional dialects and spellings of the spoken vernacular in Roman Britain. For example, 'Vilbia' (who inspired the character of the same name in the Cambridge Latin course) was initially thought to be the name of a woman (Slide 6) who was stolen, according to a curse tablet found in Bath. However, it is rather irregular to list a woman as a stolen object (primarily the curse focuses on items of clothing), and the list of possible culprits includes both men and women. In either event, the notion of inconspicuously carrying a person away from the baths is rather dubious. An eminent scholar of these inscriptions, Roger Tomlin, has therefore suggested that Vilbia is actually a dialectal version of *fibula*, a metal (sometimes bejewelled) clasp or brooch that was used to hold together the layers of a cloak. This interpretation makes much more sense, although it is somewhat less dramatic. Regional dialect and creative vulgar spellings can also be seen in another curse tablet, which uses the word *baro* instead of *viro* for 'man' (Slide 7), illustrating that similar vocal sounds – such as 'f', 'b' and 'v' – were often intermingled in different dialects. To learn more about these tablets, see the excellent Roman Baths website (in web resources below).

### *Water, water, everywhere! How curse tablets worked: the Fountain of Anna Perenna, Rome*

Curses are not exclusive to water sources, but it was clearly a popular medium. The link between curses and water sources is evident in the curses themselves, which sometimes called for a person's heart or body to be 'liquefied'. Moreover, water was a means of carrying a curse and an element of nature. The Romans received their water from aqueducts, so they were well aware that it could travel vast distances. Its omnipresence in the ground, the air, the sky and the human body made water an ideal mode of both transporting and inflicting a curse.

In the city of Rome, near the Euclide Metro station, excavations for a parking garage uncovered an ancient fountain to Anna Perenna, located near the first milestone of the *Via Flaminia*. Thought to be the sister of the unlucky Dido, Anna Perenna was associated with the turning of the year, 'per annum', and her feast day was the unpropitious Ides of March. She was popular among the plebs and was associated with Minerva (the divinity ascribed to the waters at Bath). As people prayed that a year should turn happily – attested in Ovid's *Fasti* and on bases discovered at the fountain (Slide 8) – they also turned to Anna Perenna in despair. Starting presumably with her sister Dido, who famously cursed Aeneas as he left Carthage (*Aeneid* 4.584–

629), the Fountain of Anna Perenna became a location for both prayers and curses. Prayers and dedications feature at the front of the fountain, while the dark cistern behind contained a number of curse tablets folded into lamps, contrasting light and dark with the elements of fire and water. What appear to be voodoo dolls encased in lead have also been discovered, revealing a number of different religious practices. Items in the fountain and cistern date from the fourth century BC to the sixth century AD, recording centuries of curses in Rome.

### *Conclusions: did curse tablets work?*

It's hard to argue that a practice that pervaded nearly a millennium of human history was not in some way effective. Curses, like oracles, were open to interpretation, offering an oblique response to a specific situation. Of course, not knowing who the perpetrator of a crime was (as is observed in many cases) would have made it impossible to know if a curse had actually worked. But perhaps more importantly, curses attest to a faith, still held by many cultures today, that justice is a force unto itself. While the theft of a coat from a bath-house should, technically, have had legal repercussions, the presence of curses reveals a lack of faith in the legal process as well as a sense that some things are simply beyond the reach of a legal code. Irrespective of whether a curse worked, the simple act of creating a curse and 'seeking one's own justice' afforded a sense of control as well as a ritual purging of anger. For the creator, this experience would have been both cathartic and empowering.

In a modern context, social media networks abound with defamations of antisocial behaviour, suggesting that the need to proclaim and shame miscreants remains a key component of the human experience. Today, as in Roman times, cursing the man who knocked you over in the street may not bring justice, but if it makes you feel better, perhaps that is an end in itself.

### *Web resources*

The Centre for the Study of Ancient Documents at Oxford has created an amazing resource on curse tablets, including a catalogue, a list of sites and details of the historical context, as well as an informative (and fun) section on how to write a curse yourself: <http://curses.csad.ox.ac.uk/>

Some PowerPoint images have been replicated from an online tool created by the museum at Bath: <http://www.romanbaths.co.uk/docs/Curse%20tablets%20final.pptx>

Carly Silver has written a fascinating article on British curse tablets, available at: [http://wp.chs.harvard.edu/chs-fellows/files/2012/04/SURS.Silver.paper\\_.pdf](http://wp.chs.harvard.edu/chs-fellows/files/2012/04/SURS.Silver.paper_.pdf)

An article (in English) by Attilio Mastrocinque on the finds at Anna Perenna is available at: <https://web.duke.edu/classics/grbs/FTexts/47/Mastroc.pdf>

### *Bibliography*

G.W. Adams, '[The social and cultural implications of curse tablets \[\*defixiones\*\] in Britain and on the continent](#)', *Studia Humaniora Tartuensia*, 7 (2006), pp. 1–15.

J.G. Gager (ed.), *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World*, Oxford University Press, 1992.

M. Henig, *Religion in Roman Britain*, Batsford, 1984.

- A. Mullen, 'Linguistic evidence for "Romanization": continuity and change in Romano-British onomastics: a study of the epigraphic record with particular reference to Bath', *Britannia* 38 (2007), p. 37.
- D. Ogden, 'Binding spells: curse tablets and voodoo dolls in the Greek and Roman worlds', in B. Ankarloo and S. Clark (eds), *Witchcraft and Magic in Ancient Europe: Greece and Rome*, Athlone Press, 1999.
- R. Tomlin, 'The curse tablets', in B. Cunliffe and J. Davenport (eds), *The Temple of Sulis Minerva at Bath: The Finds from the Sacred Spring*, Vol. 2, Oxford University Committee for Archaeology, 1988.