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NOT SO UNUSUAL AFTER ALL: REMARKS ON THE LATIN CURSE TABLETS OF THE IMPERIAL AGE

This article examines the ritual contexts of two recent discoveries of materia magica in complex and carefully excavated archaeological sites, and situates the prayers found there within the wider range of prayer in traditional Roman religion. Both the texts found in the so-called 'magician's cellar' in Chartres and those on the lead tablets found behind the temple of Magna Mater in Mainz date to the first century CE and are thus among the earliest surviving magical texts in the West. Despite the usual assumption that many magical rituals migrated from east to west across the Mediterranean and then up into western Europe, it shows how these two early caches of magical text reflect, in fact, the pattern and style of early Latin votive formulae, as well as traditional Roman prayers, like those of the Arval Brethren, and traditional Roman rituals.

Keywords: Arval Brethren, Chartres, Mainz, Magna Mater, 'magician's cellar', votive formulae, Roman rituals, Roman religion, prayers, east-to-west migration

Recent work on magic, as well as increasing number of curses discovered in their archaeological context, have launched a general inventory and publication of these sources.[1] The great novelty of this research lies in the fact that, for the first time, the excavations provide access to many curses in their original context, so to speak, which allows one to reconstruct the process of the rites involved. Previously, one had only the collections of texts without context and it was necessary to look to ancient poets or historians to get an idea of the contexts in which they might have been performed, but now another method is

[1] J. Blänsdorf, *Die Defixionum Tabellae des Mainzer Isis- und Mater Magna-Heiligtums. Defixionum Tabellae Mogontiacenses* (Mainz, 2012) (hereafter *DTM*). A selection of these texts was published in J. Blänsdorf, 'Cybèle et Attis dans les tablettes de defixio inédite de Mayence', *CRAI* 149 (2005), 669–92 (*AE* 2005, 1122–6).

gradually emerging. For my part, I would like to approach these new texts, especially the Latin ones from the Imperial period, in order to examine what they can teach us about the isolated individual celebrating these rites and to show that the rites are representative of individual religious activities. At the outset, I wish to emphasize that these rituals are, in fact, no different from those religious practices, private and public, practised in the Roman Empire, but that they are often apt to reverse their actions. For it is obvious that in the performance of these rites the individual is alone, guided or not by a technician of the discipline, and that he tries to gain control over his personal affairs. These rites thus offer a revealing insight into the aspirations of individuals when they addressed the gods. But it will also be our task to observe the rituals as they are described and reconstructed, and to compare them with 'other' religious rites.

A sorcerer's basement in Chartres

Depending on the context in which they engage in their magical rites, individuals play a variety of roles. They may be specialists, non-specialists applying recipes obtained in one way or another, or the beneficiaries of these rites, with or without the assistance of a specialist. If we compare the rites and prayers practised by the magician to those used in everyday religion, there is a certain similarity, with the slight nuance that ordinary prayers do not include secret names or terms. Thus, when the donkey of Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* invokes the moon after having purified himself in the sea, he addresses the Queen of Heaven, of whose name he says he is ignorant, and proposes to call her Ceres, Venus, Diana, or Proserpine, invoking her by whatever name, whatever ritual mode, or whatever aspect under which it is legitimate to invoke her, in order to ask that she either return him to his previous form or kill him.[2]

This way of appealing to a divinity and of admitting one's ignorance of his or her real name and identity is similarly found in official prayers. For example, the formula of the consecration of Carthage and its army begins: 'Dispater, Veiovis, Manes, or if it is prescribed to call you by another name…', and the formula of the evocation of the city begins

[2] Apul. *Met.* 11.2.

even more simply with 'if it is a god or a goddess, who protects the people and the city of the Carthaginians…'.[3] And this same type of formula is found in private formulas of devotion, like that contained on a curse tablet found at Arezzo, near a spring:

> Quintus Letinius Lupus, who is also called Caucadio, and who is the son of Sallustia Veneria, or Veneriosa, I send him, dedicate him, sacrifice him to your power, so that you, Hot Springs, or you, Nymphs, or by what other name you want to be called, so that you make him perish, so that you kill him within one year.[4]

We shall return to the details of these formulas, but for the moment we should note that one speaks in the same way to the divinities concerned, even if, as in the case of Lucius, the intention is more peaceful and is followed by a dream-epiphany, in which Isis indicates to him the path he is to follow.

The role of the magician finds no parallel in the daily rites of the Romans. Normally, individuals were ritually qualified by birth and social status. The priests were chosen by the community, or, like the Vestals and *flamines*, were selected and called to perform their service by the *pontifex maximus*. In rare cases, the augurs consulted Jupiter on the choice that had been made; more generally, for the election of other priests, the auspices for an assembly were taken beforehand, since no assembly could take place without the consulting the auspices. During the Empire, even when the Senate made a choice that was then approved – in one way or another – by the assembly, the auspices had to be consulted prior to the sitting of the Senate. Unfortunately, we do not know the details of how priestly elections were conducted in the *municipia* and colonies, particularly whether the auspices were also consulted. Be that as it may, we see that, although the initiative always remained with the community of mortals, in one way or another their gods were consulted. In the case of the wizard's role, however, we are outside this framework. It was the magician alone who had the initiative. Indeed, the procedure was often to ask for union with a deity and the granting of powers, as we see in this passage from the great magical papyrus of the Louvre, which dates from the fourth century:

[3] Macrob. 3.9.10, 3.9.7. All translations are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

[4] *CIL* XI, 1823 (Arezzo) = A. Audollent, *Defixionum tabellae quotquot innotuerunt tam in Graecis Orientis quam in totius Occidentis partibus praeter Atticas in Corpore inscriptionum atticarum editas* (Paris 1905) (hereafter *DT*), 184, no. 129.

Then light a lamp that has not been used before and place it under the beetle in a new earthenware dish, so that the heat from the lamp barely reaches the beetle. Stay calm after you have thrown out the morsels, go to your quarters, and shut yourself in, for the one you have summoned will stand there…[5]

Compared to extant amulets and curse tablets, these papyri recipes have the advantage of also giving instructions and prayers, while the documents found in graves, places of worship, or underground sources of water transmit only the magic formula, or leave only a glimpse of the magical process, if they have been excavated carefully.

The highly exceptional documents discovered in Chartres and published by Joly demonstrate that this kind of prayer or initiation was not unique to Egypt in the fourth century CE.[6] The basement of a Roman house in Chartres contained one or more pieces of furniture and boxes, in which were placed various objects datable to the first century CE. Among these objects, there were three incense burners, two of which bore an identical inscription that is repeated four times, towards each of the four cardinal points, north, east, south, and west: 'I ask (*rogo*) that you, omnipotent powers, give all good things to Gaius Verius Sedatus, since he is your guardian. Echar Aha Bru Stna Bros Dru Chor Drax Cos Halcemedme Halcobalar Halcemedme.'[7]

The first important datum provided by these incense burners is chronological. Generally speaking, the documents collected in the Greek magical papyri, like the recipe quoted above, are dated to the third and fourth centuries CE. Secondly, the burners were discovered in Roman Gaul, where previously only a single magical phylactery had been dated from the first century CE. The first-century date of the materials found at Chartres guarantees that these traditions circulated for a long time in the ancient world, well beyond the borders of Egypt. Alongside the incense burners were discovered craters decorated with snakes and surmounted by small incense burners, a knife (no doubt sacrificial), animal bones, flasks, and other vases, as well as two lamps and fragments of glass. All of this material was

[5] *PGM* IV 66–72; see also 170 ff., 193 ff., and 208 ff. Translation from H. D. Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation* (Chicago, IL, and London, 1992), 38.

[6] D. Joly, F. Dupont, and C. De Frutoz, 'L'attirail d'un magicien rangé dans une cave de Chartres/Autricum', *Gallia* 67 (2010), 125–208 ; D. Joly, 'La panoplie complète d'un magicien dans la cave d'une domus à Autricum (Chartres, France): C. Verius Sedatus, Carnute, gardien des divinités', in M. Piranomonte and F. Marco Simón (eds.), *Contesti magici* (Rome, 2012), 211–23.

[7] *Vos rogo omnipotentia numina, ut omnia bona conferatis C(aio) / Verio Sedato, quia ille est uester custos. / Echar Aha Bru Stna Bros Dru Chor Drax Cos / Halcemedme Halcobalar Halcemedme.*

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found in the same stratigraphic level and should be considered the paraphernalia of a magician who lived in the house.

Significantly, the place of conservation of these objects is in the cellar, and not in the open rooms of the house, although it is not possible to conclude that the magician practised his rituals in this cellar. In any case, we see that he called upon the 'omnipotent powers', of which he claims to be the guardian. He therefore invokes the same closeness and the same services as the practitioner of the Great Magical Papyrus of Paris. We are ignorant of the rest of his practices, but there is certainly no evidence of offerings that might attest to a regular kind of worship. The magician therefore performed his rites essentially to enter into a relationship with a deity or a demon and get them to help him. As with all authors of spells, this relationship was supposed to allow him to gain material benefits and to satisfy his worldly desires. There is never any question of metaphysical knowledge, even if Apuleius seems to want to justify his curiosity (which aroused suspicion) by the desire for knowledge that was his own. Magic is essentially oriented towards this world and the material advantages of all kinds that can be drawn from it. And even when the divine men of late antiquity practise theurgy, it is for the practical goals of divination and to act upon the elements.

Obviously, not all individuals used spells of some kind, but a significant number of the inhabitants of the ancient world, or perhaps even all, had the opportunity to resort to them in everyday life, in an occasional manner or in a more systematic way. In any case, many people claimed at some time or other to be victims of curses.[8] Certain recipes, as well as direct testimonials corroborating such practices, prove it. But this does not mean that all individuals were wizards, even if their enemies might claim that they were in order to bring down upon them the wrath of justice. We might suppose that for these services one might resort to the skills of experts, who one found either in one's entourage or by paying remuneration, as was the case for private divination, for which the Romans had for a long time consulted the haruspices or the Chaldeans.

The curse tablets from Mainz

Beginning with the laws of the Twelve Tables in the fifth century BCE, Roman authorities came down hard on malicious magic, practices that

[8] For this, see J. Favret-Saada, *Les mots, la mort, les sorts. La sorcellerie dans le Bocage* (Paris, 1977).

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were as widespread among the elite as they were among the common people. Germanicus, the presumed successor of Tiberius, was said to have been fatally attacked by magic spells aimed at him by the *legatus Augusti* of Syria, Gnaeus Piso. In the case of binding spells, those regarding the judicial world reveal that orators and people who had to appear in court used them routinely.[9] And even if the curses do not give a clear idea of the social level of the people involved, the simple ones launched on the occasion of rivalry are very numerous. Thus, in Mainz, near the temple of Mater Magna, a first-century CE curse tablet written in reverse direction, as sometimes happens in this type of document, says: 'Avita, the mother-in-law, I make you a present of her, and I'm giving you Gratus as a gift.'[10] The curse is addressed to the goddess of the sanctuary, Mater Magna, and the person who wrote or had this document written promises his step-mother, Avita, as a votive gift for the goddess, and Gratus as well – no doubt a son whom she brought into the remarriage of his father. Likewise, on the external surface of another curse tablet, one reads: 'Cassius Fortunatus and his property, as well as Lutatia Restituta: kill them.'[11]

Sometimes the texts are longer and more flowery. Here, one of the texts from Mainz calls for the vengeance of the Great Mother in order to punish a woman who stole the *fibulae* (brooches) of another:[12]

> Great Mother, I ask you, by your worship and your divine power: that Gemella, who stole my fibulae, (I pray you), that she cuts herself, so that she does not become healthy in any part. Make sure that, just as the Galli have cut themselves and she also cuts herself. . .In the same way that they have placed the sacred objects [?] in an unreachable place, you, too, Gemella, must not be able to buy back your life, your health from the Mother, neither with sacrificial victims nor with gold nor with money. But let the people witness your death. Verecunda and Paterna, I give you these women, Great Mother of the gods, their fortune. . .I ask that it [i.e. the same thing] happen to them, [as] what they did by deception to my goods and my resources, and that they must not be able to atone for themselves, neither with sacrificial victims carrying wool nor redeem themselves from your divine power with curse tablets or with gold or with silver. If only dogs, worms and other monsters may devour them! May the people contemplate their death. . .[the rest of the text is difficult to understand]

[9] Cf. Tac. *Ann*. 2.69–72; Cic. *Brut*. 217; Lib. *Or*. 1.243–50; C. Bonner, 'Witchcraft in the Lecture Room of Libanius', *TAPA* 63 (1932), 34–44.

[10] *DTM*, 111 ff., no. 8: *Auita(m) nouer|c|a(m) / dono tibi / et Gratum / [do]no tibi / [. . .]e mesmant [. . .]*.

[11] *DTM*, 128 ff., no. 13: *Cassius Fortuna/tus e[t] bona illius et / Lutatia Restituta: / necetis e[os]*.

[12] *Ibid.*, 1 = Blänsdorf 2005 (n. 1), 678 ff.: . . .*Quomodo Galli se secarunt, / sic ea [uelit]*. . . See also *DTM* 2 : . . .*Quomodo galli, bellonari, magal[i] sibi sanguin[em] feruentem fundunt*. . . ('. . .just as galli, the priests of Bellona, and Magali spill their hot blood. . .').

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This imprecation requires some explanation. This is one of those curses intended to avenge a theft. Normally, the victim donated the stolen object to a deity, who was then supposed to punish the one who held an object that had then become divine property. It is notably this kind of document that Versnel places in his category of appeals intended to obtain justice in the judicial prayers.[13] It should be noted that the author of the curse of Gemella refers to the cult of Mater Magna, that is to say to the Galli, fanatics within her cult – not at the high (namely, priestly) level that was traditionally attributed to them, as Van Haeperen has demonstrated, but at a relatively low level.[14] The intended victim of the curse, Gemella, should not be able to lament to the Mother, and when she sees the effects of the curse, she should not be able to atone for her sin by offering sacrifices or making offerings of gold or silver. It is the same for the other two women who are cursed (Verecunda and Paterna) and, in this case, binding curses on lead tablets are also mentioned (the text should be corrected to *plum{i}bi*).

As this curse against the three women makes clear, they must be delivered to the power of the goddess in the same way that consecrated things are deposited *in sancto*, literally 'in the inviolable space' of the temple. Finally, the punishment of the three thieves must be witnessed by the people – that is to say, before the eyes of all – which will increase their humiliation and accentuate the fame of the goddess. This clause of the curse implies that the citizens should to some degree be able to understand what is happening, and according to whose will. Therefore, despite the prohibition on malicious magic, the magical act unfolds itself before the eyes of everyone and has a communal dimension. It is likely that among friends and family no one had any doubt about the origin of the evils that struck the people concerned. The issue was rather that people believed it. Accusations of magical spells – like those which, in 79 BCE, Gaius Scribonius Curio claimed

[13] H. Versnel, 'Beyond Cursing: The Appeal to Justice in Judicial Prayers', in C. Faraone and D. Obbink (eds.), *Ancient Greek Magic and Religion* (Oxford, 1991) 60–106; J. G. Gager, *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World* (New York and Oxford, 1992), 175 ff.; M. Dreher, '"Prayers for Justice" and the Categorization of Curse Tablets', in Piranomonte and Marco Simón (n. 6), 29–32; H. Versnel, 'Response to a Critique', in Piranomonte and Marco Simón (n. 6), 33–45.

[14] F. Van Haeperen, 'Les acteurs du culte de Magna Mater à Rome et dans les provinces occidentales de l'Empire', in S. Benoist, A. Daguet-Gagey, and C. Hoët-van Cauwenberghe (eds.), *Figures d'Empire, fragments de mémoire. Pouvoirs et identités dans le monde romain impérial* (Lille, 2011), 467–84.

before the judge's court that Titinia, daughter of Cotta, had used against him –prove that people took these curses seriously, or at least believed them.[15] Innumerable other accusations of this type prove it. In Pompeii, too, the imprecation against an unscrupulous friend expresses itself openly in an inscription on a tomb, an inscription pierced with a *defixio* nail.[16]

Prayers and votives

The documents from Mainz gave us a good sense of the world of curse tablets, especially those called 'prayers for justice' or 'prayers for revenge'. This allows us to return now to our investigation and compare these rites with other public or private rites. We will examine successively the prayers, the votive context, and the rites, before comparing these rites to those used in daily religion, in order to define the nature of the religious aspirations that are attested by the magic practices.

Aside from the brief formulas of binding, the structure of the magic prayers does not differ from those used in other cults. They usually begin with an invocation of the god or gods concerned, sometimes accompanied by a brief description of their power, and continue with the presentation of what the speaker wants – usually the paralysis, amnesia, or disappearance of the victim. The request is sometimes repeated several times, until a final formula asks the divinity solicited to act as quickly as possible. This is also the structure of the prayers that accompany a typical sacrifice. Some of these prayers are votive formulas. The prayer inscribed on the curse tablet against a certain Plotius contains such a votive-type formula:

> Good and beautiful Proserpina or Salvia, if you prefer that I call you so, wife of Pluto, snatch away the health, the body, the complexion, the strength, and the faculties of Plotius. Hand him over to Pluto, your husband. May he not be able to escape this [curse] by his wits. Hand him over to fevers – quartan, tertian and daily – so that they wrestle and struggle with him. Let them overcome him to the point where they

[15] Cic. *Brut.* 217.

[16] *AE* 1964, 160; 1896, 166b; 2006, 291. Cf. M. Elefante, 'Un caso di defixio nella necropoli pompeiana di Porta Nocera?', *Parola del Passato* 225 (1985), 431–3; S. Lepetz and W. Van Andringa, 'Archéologie du rituel: méthode appliquée à l'étude de la nécropole de Porta Nocera à Pompéi', in J. Scheid (ed.), *Pour une archéologie du rite. Nouvelles perspectives de l'archéologie funéraire* (Rome 2008), 105–26 ; S. Lepetz and W. Van Andringa, 'Pour une archéologie de la mort à l'époque romaine: fouille de la nécropole de Porta Nocera à Pompéi', *CRAI* 150 (2006), 1131–61.

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snatch away his soul. Thus I give over to you this victim, O Proserpina or Acherusia, if you prefer that I call you so. Summon for me the triple-headed hound to snatch away the heart of Plotius. Promise him [i.e. Cerberus] that you will give him three victims [gifts] – dates, figs, and a black pig – if he completes this before the month of March. These I will offer you, Proserpina Salvia, once you grant my vow.[17]

The text enumerates in detail all that the praying person is giving or promises by vow to give to the goddess. It should also be noted that the speaker fixes a date, before the month of March (*hoc sei perfecerit ante mensem Martium*): that is to say, sometime during the month of February. Since the tablet hands the victim over to various 'fevers', it is possible that the month of February was chosen because of its name, linked to the goddess Febris, a goddess who had a reputation as a torturer, or as the month of the Feralia, the festival of the dead, and also of purification. As such, this month was considered by this wizard to be particularly qualified for this kind of communication with Proserpine and Pluto. Neverthless, what interests us here is that it is the equivalent of a votive formula, a fact that Gager did not quite understand.[18]

One of the curse tablets from Mainz (no. 1) also refers to the votive context. The text is difficult to decipher as a whole, obviously written so that we cannot read it well, and the expert eyes of Blänsdorf have only understood a part, which, even if it is not, in fact, entirely satisfactory, is sufficient for our research. The text is written backwards, from right to left, and relatively poorly. We read: '. . . / . . . / you must oblige me to fulfil my vow (*uoto me condem*[*n*]*e*[*s*]). . .fine, execrate the healthy, the animated, (*sa*[.]*num animosum* [*dam*]*nat, deuoue(t)*). . .if he curses my property. . .'. This is apparently a votive contract, similar to that of the previous curse. The author asks to be constrained to fulfil his vow, a common formula meaning that he is forced to pay for his vow because the deity has satisfied him, and this is the curse of his enemy.[19] The second part of the curse refers to the counter-measures that would be necessary to take if his opponent made a curse of his own against the speaker.

[17] W. S. Fox, 'The Johns Hopkins Tabellae Defixionum', *AJP* 33 (1912), 1–9 and 11–68 = Gager (n. 13) 240–1, no. 134.13 ff. Lines 17–18: *Haec, Proserpina Salvia, tibi dabo, cum compote (m) feceris* (i.e. *me compote(m) feceris*).

[18] Gager (n. 13), 241.

[19] Cf. *CIL* II 1044 = *CILA* II 1.336 (Mirobriga, Baetica): *Proserpinae / sanctae sacru/m L. Samnius Su/lla uoto sani/tate condemnat[us]. . .*

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Lastly, there is a detailed text from the Mainz tablets which has been almost entirely deciphered by Blänsdorf. Let's go through it quickly.

> That person, whoever he is, who has committed this malicious deception regarding this sum of money. . ., Mother of the gods, pursue through all the lands, the seas, the wet and dry places, by your blessed one [i.e. Attis] and [all. . .]. . .In the same way that the Galli cut themselves and cut their manly parts, so must he cut his chest,. . .And you must not allow this one to be released, delivered from the curse, or redeemed by sacrificial victims or with. . .or with gold or money. Just as the Galli, the priests of Bellona, and the Magali make their blood flow hot and it falls cold on the ground, so, too, [may] all. . .his capacity and his thought, his intelligence. . .In the same way that he witnesses the blood of Galli, the Magali, and the priests of Bellona, the one who has committed this malicious deception, so, too, must they [i.e. the Galli, etc.] witness his death. And as the salt dissolves [in the water], his limbs and his marrow must be consumed. Tomorrow he must come and say that he has committed the wrongdoing. I give to you, in accordance with the ritual obligation, the task of redeeming from me my promises, and that I will respond to it gladly and heartily, if you have arranged for him a bad death.[20]

This text, which is almost complete, contains elements that clearly fall under the votive formula. The speaker refers to the *religio* (I consider Blänsdorf's restitution to be accurate), that is, to the religious obligation inherent in the votive exchange; and, just as the author of the vow is forced to pay it back, once the divinity fulfils his request, he tries in the same way, by means of his formula, to compel the divinity to do what is asked of him: 'I give to you, in accordance with the ritual obligation, the task of constraining me to fulfil my vows, and that I will respond to it gladly and heartily, if you have arranged for him a bad death' (*d*[*e*]*mando tibi rel*[*igione*], *ut me uotis condemnes et ut laetus libens ea tibi referam, si de eo exitum malum feceris*). *Religione* here means the same thing as *rite sacris perfectis*, 'the rites having been performed in accordance with custom and rule'. This meaning is illustrated by a number of documents. An inscription from Portugal prescribes an offering *ex religione iussu numinis*, 'because of the obligation created by the order of his divine power'.[21] In Musti, in Africa, a votive dedication to Janus is made *s(oluto) u(oto) religionis*, 'the vow having been paid according to the rule of worship', and in Mauretania, at Sertei, a place of worship was restored by a certain

[20] *DTM*, 2.
[21] *CIL* II 129 = *ILS* 4513c (Vila Vicosa, Portugal).

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Victor Sextus, *monitus sacra religione*, 'warned by sacred religious obligation'.[22] Finally, at the twelfth mile of the Via Praenestina, a priestess of Spes and Salus, who had magnificently honoured the promises made during her candidacy, had benefited from a statue, according to the inscription, *cum…religioni…satis fecerit*, 'because it had satisfied the ritual obligation' – that obligation here more generally defining the rule of the promises made during the election.[23]

Going back to the tablet from Mainz, the author of this curse announces that he will perform gladly and heartily, as in the well-known formula *uotum soluit laetus libens merito*. It should be noted that, in the preserved text, the author does not promise anything else to the Mother in exchange for the votive contract. However, as Blänsdorf points out, one can think that this text, whose beginning has disappeared, once opened with an invocation and the promise of a sacrifice. Blänsdorf clearly understood that it was a formulation of a wish (a *nuncupatio*), as the final conditional sentence proves, which is much more precise than the many acquittals of vows. The formula *condemnare uoto* is also well attested, as reported by Blänsdorf. It can be found on a Republican inscription at Sora in a small poem in Saturnian verse,[24] and on an inscription from Betica, in which L. Samnius Sulla offers something to Proserpina since he is condemned to fulfil the wish made for his healing.[25] These three examples show that spells used the same ritual means as those found in the rites that were celebrated in broad daylight, conferring on their curses the contractual and juridical side which characterized the vows issued for salvation, health, or someone's success.

There is other evidence. I have mentioned above another characteristic of the prayers, which consists in leaving open the question of the name of the divinity. We saw that the text of the curse against Photius gave us an example: 'Good and beautiful Proserpina or Salvia, if you prefer that I call you so…'.[26] As Salvia is not attested as one of Proserpine's epithets, Fox suggests that it might be the Latin translation of the epiclesis Sôteira, which was commonly borne by Proserpine in Greek

[22] *AE* 1898, 45 (Musti, Africa). *CIL* VIII 8826 = 20628 = *ILS* 4452= *AE* 1946, 92 = *AE* 2011, 1518 (Sertei, Mauretania Sitifiensis).

[23] *CIL* XIV 2804 = *ILS* 6218 (Castiglione/Gabii, I). See also *CIL* X 1717 (p. 971, Puteoli, I): *ut religioni satis fiat*.

[24] *CIL* X 5708 (Sora, I; *ILS* 3411).

[25] See note 19.

[26] Fox (n. 17), 35 = Gager (n. 13), 240 ff., no. 134, lines 1–2.

territory. The same precaution is attested in Arezzo, on the curse tablet already mentioned, where we read 'I send him, dedicate him, sacrifice him to your power, so that you, Hot Springs, or you, Nymphs, or by what other name you want to be called. . .'.[27]

A similar recourse to a legal formulation and the same concern for rigour are found in the following cases. A tablet from Aquitania summons the intended victims before the court of Pluto ('I announce to the persons mentioned below, Lentinus and Tasgillus, that they must appear before Pluto');[28] in the case of Gemella, in Mainz, the curse requires that the punishment be applied in public, before the people, in the same way as the punishments inflicted by the city.[29] The author wants to be as precise as legal documents are. The penalties to be inflicted are listed in detail and even several times, and the names of the people are formulated with particular care. In particular, attention is drawn to maternal filiation, which is regularly employed: rather than seeing any reminder of the matriarchy, one must see in it the desire for supreme accuracy. Since the father can never be securely identified, one gives the name of the mother.[30] But, as noted by Graf, this type of filiation may also testify to the desire to operate 'a reversal of current institutional practice', which is well suited to magical practice, which tends to reverse everything.

Conclusions

The Latin curse tablets also attest to a solid knowledge of religious institutions. I have mentioned the accuracy of the votive formulas. The texts also show that the authors of these curses knew how to distinguish – much better than some translators today – between the divinity and its *numen*, its 'divine power', and between what is *sacrum* ('consecrated') and what is *sanctum* ('inviolable'). In short, one gets the impression by reading these curse tablets that those who wrote or inspired them knew the language of religious life in general very well. And this is evident in all the provinces of the empire, not only in Rome and Italy. This confirms our impression that cursing rites were

[27] *Hunc ego aput uostrum (b) numen demando deuoueo desacrifico, uti uos Aqu(a)e feruentes, siu[e u]os Nimfas [si]ue quo alio nomine uoltis adpe[l]lari. . .* See note 4.

[28] *CIL* XIII 11069–70 = *DT*, nos. 111–12 (Chagnon, Gallia Aquitania).

[29] See note 16.

[30] See, for example, *DT*, nos. 247, 250, and 267 (Carthago).

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in fact only a subset of the vast ensemble of religious practices, including private cults. Beyond the correct use of ritual terms, their rites are not very different from those used by public authorities.

Take the example of the puppy that is pierced at the time of the curse, as an effigy of those whom the magician wants to render harmless or wants to kill – a practice that is well attested in Roman times.[31] It is not difficult to find a parallel in public religious institutions. When the *fetiales* concluded a treaty, which is rendered in Latin *foedum ferire* ('to strike a treaty'), their leader, the *pater patratus*, pronounced the following formula:

> If it happens that, by public deliberation or unworthy subterfuges, they break the words [of the treaty], first, then, great Jupiter, strike the Roman people, just as I am striking this pig today; and strike them with all the more severity as your power and strength are greater.[32]

He ended his curse and then struck the pig with flint, which was then offered in sacrifice to Jupiter. This is certainly a conditional curse, which is not a precise parallel for the curse tablets we have seen above, but the ritual principle remains the same: the priest threatened the Roman people to suffer the same fate as the effigy, if they violated the treaty.

In fact, public worship involved a number of public curses that were stated in the most explicit way. The first of these rituals was called a 'devotion' (*deuotio*): a vow directed to the deities below. This mythical rite, which was the specialty of the Deciorum *gens*, consisted of offering oneself and one's enemies by vow (*deuouere*) to the infernal divinities if they would at the same time destroy one's enemies.[33] It is an act that is exactly the same type as the curses we have seen, as Wissowa pointed out, citing in particular the example of the Arezzo curse 'I send, devote, sacrifice to your power' (*uostrum numen demando deuoueo desacrifico*).[34] We can also add to public practices the vow made by a public slave to an anonymous deity against the *defixio* of the whole colonial senate of Tuder, and especially the beautiful oracle of the second century CE

[31] *DT*, no. 112.

[32] Liv. 1.24.7–8 and cf. 21.45.8. The *fetiales* were Roman priests, who had diplomatic activities: they were to announce to enemies a decision of the Roman magistrates or the Senate, e.g. a declaration of war or the conclusion of a treaty (*foedus*).

[33] Liv. 8.9.4–11.

[34] See above, note 4. See also G. Wissowa, *Religion und Kultus der Römer* (Munich, 1912), 384–5.

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given to an unknown city located near Lake Koloè by Apollo of Claros.[35]

Finally, we should not forget family cults. The *bulla* and other *crepundia* were amulets intended to protect children against spells or imprecations, because it was believed that it was often practices of this type which were at the source of the intervention of the evil spirits who came to bring anxiety and torments to the living. The agents of these curses were certainly those dead who had been poorly buried or not buried at all, but others may have been the well-buried dead, who were nonetheless manipulated by spells. This is evidenced by certain folk rites such as those of Picumnus and Pilumnus, who were believed to protect the birth of a child and the newborn, or the rites celebrated at the Compitalia, in an area located at the point where several properties touched, or in cities at crossroads (*compita*). On such an occasion, families attached to the altar of the *compitum* dolls called *maniae* and balls of wool called *pilae*, which were designed to appease the ghosts of the dead (*Manes*). There were as many figurines suspended as there were free people in the *domus* (the family), and as many wool balls as there were slaves in the household.[36]

Ovid describes another rite celebrated by an old woman on the occasion of the festival of the dead, which took place in February. This consisted of making an offering of a small fish, whose mouth she had sewn shut in order to silence the gossips in the city:

> With three fingers she puts three lumps of incense under the threshold, where the little mouse has made for herself a secret path. Then she binds enchanted threads together with dark lead, and mumbles seven black beans in her mouth; and she roasts in the fire the head of a small fish which she has sewed up, made fast with pitch, and pierced through and through with a bronze needle. She also drops wine on it, and the wine that is left over she or her companions drink, but she gets the larger share. Then as the goes off she says, 'We have bound fast hostile tongues and unfriendly mouths.'[37]

[35] *CIL* XI 4639 (Tuder, VI) = Gager (n. 13), no. 135; F. Graf, 'An Oracle against Pestilence from a Western Anatolian Town', *ZPE* 92 (1992), 267–79. A *defixio* was a curse, generally written on a thin lead tablet, that was often pierced by a nail.

[36] W. M. Lindsay (ed.), *Sexti Pompei Festi. De verborum significatu quae supersunt cum Pauli epitome* (Leipzig, 1913), 273, s.v. 'Pilae et effigies': *Pilae et effigies viriles et muliebres ex lana Conpitalibus suspendebantur in conpitis, quod hunc diem festum esse deorum inferorum, quos vocant Lares, putarent, quibus tot pilae, quot capita servorum; tot effigies, quot essent liberi, ponebantur, ut vivis parcerent et essent his pilis et simulacris contenti.*

[37] Ov. *Fast.* 2.571–82.

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Similarly, a nocturnal rite in the month of May was performed by the father of the family, who drove the Lemures out of his house by redeeming himself and his family with an offer of beans. We do not know to what extent these rites were practised by all the families in Rome, in Italy, or in the municipalities or Roman colonies, but what matters in this context is the well-attested presence of such magical rites within the realm of domestic religion.

Another characteristic aspect of magic rites is repetition – an element that is also present in regular religion. The Arval Brethren, for example, recited three times in succession the verses of the hymn that they declaimed after the sacrifice to Dea Dia, and during the banquet of the goddess she received three times three meatballs on the table set up in her temple. In the imprecation from Pompeii against an unscrupulous friend mentioned above, the owner wishes to exclude him from a funerary agreement and not to be welcomed by either the Penates or the Dii Manes, as if the exclusion was equal to a *defixio*.

Finally, no distinction seems to exist between these two religious registers, whether the use of the rules of the vow, or references to the obligation or rule (*religio*) of worship, which obviously exceeds the magical domain. Another aspect worth noting is the use that expert magicians made of demons, summoned through a deity, to achieve their ends. Here we find at work a classical theological and religious schema, which has the effect of breaking down divine action into complementary segments, each of them divinized. The power of a deity, their capacity for action, could, in short, be divided between the different deities of their entourage, who were sometimes invoked at the same time. Everything suggests that those demons which the practitioner of magic tried to put into his service operated by the same logic. They were part of the divinities of service, that divine plebs mocked by Augustine, and which the magicians cautiously attempted to coerce into their service.[38] They prayed and usually tried to conciliate the great deities, asking them to put these demons at their disposal.

It is commonly said that magic consists in compelling the deities. That is true, but as soon as we look at more accurate documents, we realize that the actors proceeded with a certain amount of caution. Take the case of King Numa, who wanted to approach Jupiter. He did not immediately invoke the Almighty. On the advice of a nymph,

[38] August. *De civ. D.* 4.11.160: *turba quasi plebeiorum deorum.*

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the priest-king began by seizing the local deities Picus and Faunus and asking them for the means to summon Jupiter. Numa therefore proceeded as a magician eager to acquire knowledge of the secret and powerful names of the gods, as well as invocations that would allow a mortal to come into direct contact with them, and to ask them for service. In the Imperial era, these names and secret words often belonged to foreign languages, reputed to possess exceptional magical knowledge. And Numa, like the wizards, did not bow to the Almighty, but displayed the strength of soul necessary to stand up to him. He did so, it is true, not because of a secretly received teaching – even though he was at night meeting the nymph Egeria – but because he was the magistrate par excellence, sure of his facts, certain that he had done everything that he had to do. It was in the name of his faith, of this credit obtained by his good faith, that he found the courage to endure the gaze of the supreme god. This shows that, here again, at a theological level, magic conformed to beliefs and practices which were not dissimilar from those met in other cults.

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