GREEK CURSING, AND OURS

This paper looks at our term 'curse tablet' in the light of the Greek distinction between ἀραί ('curses') and κατάδεσμοι ('binding spells'). It analyses the role of cursing in Greek culture and sketches a short history of research that led German and Anglophone scholars to coin a modern terminology that disregards the ancient distinction.

Keywords: curse, *defixio*, binding spell, prayer for justice, terminology, magic, law

A curse tablet is a tablet that carries a curse: this truism still works nowadays, as it worked in Wünsch's epoch. In his preface to *IG* III, Wünsch argued that *defixiones* were written curses that belonged to magic, all the while giving them a prehistory in religion. In his view, they developed from the public oral cursing in religious practice at the moment when people realized that private prayer did not work as they intended it to work; as negative and self-serving prayers, *defixiones* were magical.[1] Since Wünsch's time, we have shed the evolutionary trappings and are trying to differentiate better in the world of ancient cursing. *Defixiones* are absent in the magisterial article on curses, 'Fluch', by Wolfgang Speyer, in the *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*: they did not belong to religion.[2] Watson's introduction to *Curse Poetry in Antiquity* of 1991 understands *defixiones* as one class of curses, namely 'unprovoked curses', as opposed to curses that react to a provocative transgression; the term is problematic because *defixiones* usually *are* in response to some provocation as well (a trial, a competition, a love triangle). Reacting to this, Esther Eidinow, in

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[1] R. Wünsch, *Sethianische Verfluchungstafeln aus Rom* (Leipzig, 1898), ii.
[2] W. Speyer, 'Fluch', in *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, vol. 7 (Stuttgart, 1969), cols. 1160–1288.

Oracles, Curses, and Risk Among the Ancient Greeks, classified all curses that are not *defixiones* as 'conditional curses'.[3] In a comparable move, in his contribution to this volume, Radcliffe Edmonds calls these same curses 'contingent curses'.[4] In my own contribution to the topic, the entry on 'Fluch und Verwünschung' in volume 3 of *ThesCRA*, like Watson and Eidinow I subsumed 'die magische *defixio*' under the overall topic of 'malediction' and attempted only a vaguely phenomenological distinction.[5]

This discussion shows that a distinction in the terminology of cursing seemed desirable, but that we have not yet found an acceptable terminology. Some scholars have even dispensed with differentiations altogether, using the term 'curse' to refer to the ritual public curses of archaic Greek *poleis* as well as to the *defixiones* of individuals. Sometimes, they even use the term *defixiones* for all ancient curses, as did Kai Brodersen in the small booklet on *Gebet und Fluch, Zeichen und Traum* that reflected a 1998 seminar on religious communication in the ancient world.[6]

In this article I want to articulate and stress even more radically the differences between what to us are two modes of cursing, arguing that to a Greek they were even further apart than they are to us. I will start from Greek terminology in order to understand distinctions that our own term 'curse' hides from sight.

The Greek terminology for curses

When one looks closely at the Greek terminology (the Latin situation is more complex, so for reasons of time and simplicity, I confine this article to the Greek world), the need for a strict separation and differentiation soon becomes obvious. In Greek texts, κατάδεσμοι, 'binding spells' are not ἀραί, 'curses'; nor are ἀραί ever used to describe κατάδεσμοι. In the long introduction to his collection, Audollent collected a large number of ancient literary texts that describe the praxis

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[3] E. Eidinow, *Oracles, Curses, and Risk Among the Ancient Greeks* (Oxford, 2007), 140.
[4] In this issue, 000–000.
[5] F. Graf, 'Fluch und Verwünschung', *ThesCRA* 3 (2007), 247–70.
[6] K. Brodersen, 'Briefe in die Unterwelt: religiöse Kommunikation auf antiken Fluchtafeln', in K. Brodersen (ed.), *Gebet und Fluch, Zeichen und Traum. Aspekte religiöser Kommunikation in der Antike* (Münster, 2001), 59–68.

of κατάδεσμος.[7] In these texts, the term ἀραί is used only once for binding spells. In his account of the death of Germanicus caused by sorcery, Dio Cassius describes the objects that were found in Germanicus' bedroom as 'human bones...and lead tablets that contained a sort of curse together with his name'.[8] The passage echoes Tacitus' report on the same event; Tacitus writes of 'spells, *devotiones* and Germanicus' name inscribed in lead tablets'. The Greek ἀραί thus is Dio's rendering of *carmina et devotiones* in Tacitus' non-technical Latin; because it was non-technical, Dio did not recognize his Greek κατάδεσμοι behind it – especially since Tacitus' third item, *nomen Germanici plumbeis tabulis insculptum* ('the name of Germanicus inscribed on leaden tablets'), describes a curse tablet – but translated *devotio*, the formal dedication of a living human to the underworld powers, as ἀρά, the Greek equivalent.[9]

In all other texts, the two terms are clearly separated. For a good example I can conveniently refer to an epigraphical text published in 2007.[10] A very long gravestone curse from presumably second-century CE Lydia, inscribed on a building block of a mausoleum, gives an extensive list of actions against the grave building, whose perpetrators are cursed. Among these actions is: 'If someone heaps earth up for an intractable *pharmakon* ['curse' or 'spell'] or a *defixio*' (ἀπόρ[ου φαρ]μάκου τε ἕνεκεν ἢ καταδέσμου προσχώσῃ) – that is, if the perpetrator digs up the grave either to obtain parts of the body as ingredients for a deadly ritual or to hide a lead lamella. This description resonates with some of the details that Tacitus gives. Κατάδεσμος is as technical as φάρμακον: it is the act of dedicating someone to the infernal powers. The term (κατ)αρά, on the other hand, appears at the very end of this list in self-reference to this very mausoleum curse: in good lawyerly

[7] A. Audollent, *Defixionum tabellae* (Paris, 1904), cxvii–cxxviii.

[8] Dio Cass. 57.18.9 (= Audollent [n. 7], cxx): ὀστᾶ τε γὰρ ἀνθρώπων ἐν τῇ οἰκίᾳ ἐν ᾗ ᾤκει κατορωρυγμένα καὶ ἐλασμοὶ μολίβδινοι ἀράς τινας μετὰ τοῦ ὀνόματος αὐτοῦ ἔχοντες. All translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

[9] Tac. Ann. 2.69.3: *reperiebantur solo ac parietibus erutae humanorum corporum reliquiae, carmina et devotiones et nomen Germanici plumbeis tabulis insculptum, semusti cineres ac tabo obliti aliaque malefica quis creditur animas numinibus infernis sacraria* ('And certainly there were found hidden in the floor and in the walls disinterred remains of human bodies, incantations and spells, and the name of Germanicus inscribed on leaden tablets, half-burnt cinders smeared with blood, and other horrors by which in popular belief souls are devoted to the infernal deities'; translation from A. J. Church and W. J. Brodribb [ed. and trans.], *Tacitus. Annals* [New York, 1942]). The same term appears in Suet. Calig. 3.3 (Piso attacked Germanicus *veneficiis et devotionibus*).

[10] *SEG* 57.1207 = *Arkeoloji Dergisi* 9 (2007), 117–21; the letter forms point to the Imperial age, most likely the second century CE.

fashion, the text caps the list with a sentence that covers any other eventuality: 'and [if the person does] whatever deserves a curse that is not listed, this same thing might happen to him' (εἴ τι κατάρας δίκαιον ἔστιν [ὃ] οὐκ ἀναγέγραπται, καὶ τοῦτο αὐτῷ γένοιτο). Nothing in the text leads to the idea that κατάδεσμος would be just a species of the genre called κατάρα; the two are distinct ritual procedures – κατάδεσμος the very problematic *defixio*, κατάρα the entirely legitimate curse as a punishment of an unknown perpetrator – connected only because they both concern the infernal divinities, implied in the shared preposition κατά.

This recently published text also sheds a welcome light on a lead text that we have known much longer, the late Hellenistic prayer of a wronged family man to Demeter from Arkesine on Amorgos.[11] The overall text asks Demeter for a long list of punishments that transform the formulas of known public curses into the sphere of domesticity and private life: 'May no child cry in his house, may he never lay a happy table, may no dog bark and no rooster crow…may neither land nor sea bear him any fruit.' One of the provisions is: 'May a binding spell take over his house and hold it' (κατάδεσμος αὐτοῦ τὴν οἰκίαν λάβοιτο ἔχοι). Again, κατάδεσμος is here not a self-reference to the lead text, but refers to one specific way to damage the offending culprit.[12]

The key for understanding the difference between κατάρα and κατάδεσμος is formulated most conveniently in Kurt Latte's Habilitationsschrift, *Das Heilige Recht*, a small but rich book that still remains important, despite some evolutionist anachronisms.[13] The overall aim of the treatise is to derive Greek law from the sphere of religion; curses are a major exhibit in Latte's demonstration. In his introduction to the chapters on curses ('Fluch'), he explains the final formula of a late archaic citizenship decree from Olympia (*IvO* 11,

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[11] T. Homolle, 'Inscriptions d'Amorgos: lames de plomb portant des imprécations', *BCH* 25 (1901), 413, no. 1 (no autopsy, from a drawing by the finder, a local priest; French translation) = *IG* XII 7, p. 1.

[12] See H. S. Versnel, 'Prayers for Justice in East and West: Recent Finds and Publications', in R. L. Gordon and F. Marco Simón (eds.), *Magical Practice in the Latin West. Papers from the International Conference Held at the University of Zaragoza, 30. Sept.–1. Oct. 2005* (Leiden, 2010), 336 n. 168.

[13] K. Latte, *Heiliges Recht. Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der sakralen Rechtsformen in Griechenland* (Tübingen, 1920), 61–8; there is a good evaluation in R. Parker, 'Law and Religion', in M. Gagarin and D. Cohen (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Greek Law* (Cambridge, 2005), 51–81.

hesitatingly dated towards the middle of the sixth century BCE). The decree, issued by an otherwise unknown deme group named the Khaladrioi, awards citizenship to one Deukalion and grants him land in Pisa. The text continues: 'But if someone disturbs his ownership, this person should go to Zeus, if the *damos* [that is, the assembly of the adult male Khaladrioi] does not agree' (line 5: αἰ δέ τις συλαίε̄ Φέρ[ρ]εν αὐτὸν πο[τ] τὸν Δία, αἰ με̄⋆ δάμοι δοκέοι). The conditional phrase implies that only a decision of the *damos* could legalize an infringement of private ownership.

Latte explained the phrase ἔρρειν πρὸς Δία as a legal formula that corresponds to the Attic popular curse ἔρρειν εἰς κόρακας, 'go to the devil', known to us from comedy: the unlawful aggressor of the public order is handed over for justice to Zeus for whatever the god had in mind for him. Latte found the same act mentioned in two other archaic texts from Olympia, expressed by the verb κατιαραίω, the Elean dialectal version of Attic καταράω, 'to curse'. The curse, in Latte's reading, is a legal tool that he then opposes to the illegitimate *defixio*.

This is convincing. The only problematical argument is the evolutionary construction: it leads from the original religious action in the archaic period – handing the criminal over to the gods – to the rise of collectively set and humanly enforced law in the course of the fifth and fourth centuries, with the unintended by-product that religiously enforced law lost its power (Latte used the term *erlahmen*, 'to wilt or slacken').[14] At least in the use of curses in Greek society, there is no trace of such a 'wilting' – on the contrary. In grave curses from Roman Anatolia, the combination of curse and heavy fine paid to the city is very common: this proves how, in the Imperial period, the two legal tools, curse and fine, were understood as working hand in hand.

Curses as legal tools

One has to be more precise, however. Both fines and curses were punitive legal tools, but there was a distinction. Fines are activated by a human decision only when a transgression has occurred, in a strictly punitive sense. Curses, once uttered, do not need additional human

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[14] Latte (n. 13), 76.

activation; they hang around with their gods and wait to strike as soon as the transgression becomes a fact. This is their function, for example, in an oath where a self-curse was regularly intended to prevent perjury.[15] In these cases, the term 'conditional curses' makes eminent sense.

But the conditional grave curses or the self-curses of oaths cover only one area where curses were used, namely the prevention of a transgression.[16] Almost better known is the curse that is used as an immediate punishment of a violation, with the prayer spoken by the ἀρητήρ (priest) Chryses in *Iliad* 1 as the first Greek example, spoken alone on the beach, and the impressive public curse uttered by the Athenian priestesses and priests against Alcibiades, 'standing, facing the west and shaking their purple vestments according to the old and traditional custom'.[17] These examples show how both punitive and preventive curses were used by individuals as well as by collective bodies. Some public curses were regularly repeated to ensure permanent protection. The best-known instance is that of the public imprecations at Teos, inscribed in the 470s BCE; they were pronounced at a predetermined number of festivals throughout the year by the leading magistrate.[18] Other institutionally repeated curses are known from archaic Chios and classical and Hellenistic Athens.[19] In all these cases, the communities saw a need for repetition to preserve the protection – less because they did not trust the curse to wait for a transgression than because the cyclical repetition reaffirmed the punitive power of the community and its insistence on its framework of order. In this sense, its Roman correlate is not a religious act but again a legal one, the annual repetition of the praetor's edict.

The crimes against which curses were to protect varied from place to place. They were always actions that were often difficult to punish by other means, such as the encouragement of piracy or the use of

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[15] This is also their function in a public prayer to protect a sanctuary, as in Kos: *IG* XII 4 1.311 (*SEG* 55 930; *LSCG* 162).

[16] An unfortunately very damaged example of a preventive oath is *IG* II² 1175 (*c.* 367/366); the body of the text is lost, but the curse (ἀρ | [ὰν) by the demarch, the treasurers, and the priestesses and priests has the same function.

[17] Description in Lysias, *Contra Andocidem* (= *Or.* 6), 54: ἐπὶ τούτοις ἱέρειαι καὶ ἱερεῖς στάντες κατηράσαντο πρὸς ἑσπέραν καὶ φοινικίδας ἀνέσεισαν κατὰ τὸ νόμιμον τὸ παλαιὸν καὶ ἀρχαῖον. According to Plut. *Alc.* 22.4, the priestess of Athena, Gorgo, refused because 'she had become a priestess to pray, not to curse', presumably an anachronistic argument.

[18] R. Osborne and P. J. Rhodes (eds.), *Greek Historical Inscriptions, 478–404 BC* (Oxford, 2003), no. 102, a fragmentary text with a complicated history.

[19] Speyer (n. 2), 1197.

φάρμακα in Teos, the granting of asylum to exiled citizens in Akarnania, or the hostility and threat of Philip V against Athens.[20]

A decree from early fifth-century Chios (*I.Chios* 76) illustrates the interplay between punishment by legal officers and curse. After a democratic revolution in the 470s, the land was newly distributed, seventy-five new boundary stones were set, and a body of border guards (ὀροφύλακες) was given the task of protecting these boundaries from being changed again by adherents of the old order; the guards were given the obligation to fine heavily anyone who attempted to redraw the new borders. If the guards were not living up to their task, they were to be denounced to the Fifty (an unknown executive committee of the assembly); the Fifty were handed the task of fining the negligent border guards. If, however, the Fifty in their turn did nothing, they were cursed. Obviously, there was no other democratic institution above them that would have been able to fine them.

Thus, public curses reached crimes that the public institutions of a *polis* could not, for several reasons: the perpetrators might represent the highest civic authority, as in Chios; they might have changed sides, as Alcibiades did; or they might be foreigners, as Philip V was. In these situations, curses were not a tool of the weak, as has been said, but asserted the power of the citizen body. But there is more. It is striking to see how many public curses arose in situations of civic tension: after the expulsion of oligarchs and the ensuing land reforms in Chios, in the tension surrounding the Sicilian campaign, or in the Macedonian pressure on Athens; there is also a curse story in Rome set in the time of the first triumvirate. These were all times of high partisan tensions.[21] We are just now learning how, in a partisan environment, democratic legal tools come under strain or are used reluctantly in order not to deepen the partisan rifts. In such a moment, curses are handy tools whose public and repeated proclamation also influences emotions and collective attitudes.

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[20] Akarnania: Polyb. 9.40.6. Athens and Philip V: Liv. 31.44; see also 31.24 and Diod. 28.7.

[21] On cursing and land reform see Pl. *Leg.* 3.684e: ὡς ἐπιχειροῦντι νομοθέτηι κινεῖν τῶν τοιούτων τι, πᾶς ἀπαντᾶι λέγων μὴ κινεῖν τὰ ἀκίνητα καὶ ἐπαρᾶται γᾶς τε ἀναδασμοὺς εἰσηγούμενον καὶ χρεῶν ἀποκοπάς ('when a legislator attempts to change this, everyone confronts him with the cry, "Hands off", and they curse him for introducing redistributions of land and remissions of debts, with the result that every man is rendered powerless'). On the cursing of Crassus when marching out against the Parthians, see Plut. *Crass.* 15.5–6; less elaborate versions occur in Dio Cass. 39.39.5–7; Vell. 2.46.3; App. *B Civ.* 2.66; Flor. 1.46.3. The contemporary Cic. *Div.* 1.29 only speaks of bad *omina* (omens): the curses were a fabrication to remove the blame for Carrhae from Crassus.

And then there were public curses that look as if they were intended mainly for their propagandistic effect: in the 360s and 350s, the assembly of Mylasa three times decided upon public curses in connection with attempts on the person or power of King Mausollos. Once, the attacker was apprehended and executed; a second time, he died in the attempt. In all three cases, Mylasa decided to confiscate and sell their possessions and hand the money over to Mausollos. Every time they cursed whoever might want to change the decree; the third time, they added a curse against whoever might invalidate the sale of the confiscated land. Again, we are dealing with political partisanship; at the same time, it is only reasonable that Mylasa also wanted to impress mighty Mausollos by its loyalty.[22]

Private curses

Thus far, collective curses. Then there are the many curses by individuals. Many – such as the grave curses – are protective; others are punitive. One can bundle them into different groups that are well known. First, there are the grave curses as analysed by Johan Strubbe in his Ἀραὶ Ἐπιτύμβιοι.[23] The texts all come from the Greek East; they defend a grave against use by non-family members or against any form of violation. Often the curse is either accompanied or replaced by a fine paid to a city, the Roman *fiscus* (treasury), or a temple. Then there are the curses against those who were thought to have caused an untimely and sometimes violent death of a person, which are a subset of Greek and Latin grave inscriptions; I have collected them in my contribution to *Daughters of Hecate*.[24] This is a small group of texts from all over the ancient world that share the fact that the death was caused by persons unknown, sometimes by robbers or street violence, more often by a disease that was understood as the result of φαρμακεία or a binding spell. The third group consists of curses against embezzlement, theft by person unknown, and slanderers; Gudmund Björck and Henk

[22] Texts in *SIG*³ 167; W. Blümel, *Die Inschriften von Mylasa*, vol. 1 (Bonn, 1987), nos. 1–3; Osborne and Rhodes (n. 18), no. 54.

[23] J. Strubbe, Ἀραὶ Ἐπιτύμβιοι. *Imprecations Against Desecrators of the Grave in Greek Epitaphs of Asia Minor. A Catalogue* (Bonn, 1997).

[24] F. Graf, 'Victimology, or: How to Deal with Untimely Death', in K. Stratton and D. Kalleres (eds.), *Daughters of Hecate* (Oxford, 2014), 386–416.

Versnel called them prayers for justice – a term that has recently raised a discussion.[25] I will come back to them.

A final group comprises curses inside a family. Curses in mythology usually belong to this group (Theseus curses his son Hippolytos, Oedipus his two sons). Plato cited some of these mythical curses, uttered by fathers who felt dishonoured by their sons, in his *Laws* when he wanted to illustrate that 'a parent's curse laid upon his children is more potent than any other man's curse against any other, and most justly so'.[26] The context of the passage makes it sound as if this would still have contemporary relevance. A confirmation for this comes from an unexpected quarter, the Lydian and Phrygian confession *stelai* of the second and third centuries CE.[27] In several instances we meet families where one member uttered a curse against a relative: a mother against her two children, apparently for selling a shed against her will; a woman against her child for an unknown, but baseless, reason that in the end resulted in divine anger against the cursing mother; another woman who retaliated against the curse of her child with her own curse, and both died in this war of curses.

Overall, this is a world that is full of curses, usually of people who feel helpless and try to defend themselves, but who sometimes misuse the power of the curse, such as the mother-in-law whose son-in-law lost his sanity, and the village gossiped that she had poisoned him. She reacted with a curse against the slanderers, but it fell back on her because, as the popular interpretation went, she really had used poison. It is obvious that, in all these instances, making recourse to the law would have brought nothing for the simple reason that there were no relevant laws available. But it is worth underlining that cursing, in all these cases, was as public a matter as a legal action would have been – in fact, in these parts of Anatolia, cursing was a legal action as well.[28] It was often accompanied by *the* ritual of 'elevating of the staff'

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[25] G. Björck, *Der Fluch des Christen Sabinus* (Uppsala, 1938); H. S. Versnel, 'Beyond Cursing: The Appeal to Justice in Judicial Prayers', in C. A. Faraone and D. Obbink (eds.), *Magika Hiera. Ancient Greek Magic and Religion* (New York and Oxford, 1991), 60–106; Versnel (n. 12).

[26] Pl. *Leg.* 11.931b–d.

[27] The basic edition is G. Petzl, *Die Beichtinschriften Westkleinasiens*, *EA* 22 (Bonn, 1994). Since then, more texts have been found: see, e.g., H. Malay and G. Petzl, *New Religious Texts from Lydia* (Vienna, 2017).

[28] For the background, see N. Belayche, 'Les stèles dites de confession: une réligiosité originale dans l'Anatolie impériale?', in L. de Blois, P. Funke, and J. Hahn (eds.), *The Impact of Imperial Rome on Religions, Ritual, and Religious Life in the Roman Empire. Proceedings of the Fifth Workshop of the International Network Impact of Empire (Roman Empire, 200 B.C.–A.D. 476), Münster, June 30–July 4, 2004* (Leiden, 2006), 66–81; A. Chaniotis, 'Ritual Performance of

(ἐφίστημι σκῆπτρον), as in the case of the poisoning mother-in-law. The details of the staff ritual are not fully clear, but the cursor must have installed a staff as the symbol of divine power in a visible place, either a shrine or the market place; as long as this staff was standing, the curse was just waiting to strike, and its existence publicly asserted the power of the cursing person.[29]

Binding spells as defensive tools

Latte saw that this was a very different world from that of *katadesmoi*, the binding spells, both as to the ritual forms and as to the intentions of the ritual. In a way, the most striking difference is that between orality and writing (noticed by Wünsch) and, as a corollary to this, between open and secret acts. All curses, private and public, are oral performances, some quite impressive, such as the public curse pronounced against Alcibiades.[30]

The κατάδεσμοι, on the other hand, are (contra Wünsch) not just written texts but spoken as well: in their self-designation they are either κατάδεσμοι ('binding rites': that is, very specialized ritual acts) or ἐπαοιδαί ('incantations, spells': that is, speech acts).[31] But it seems that a text had to be written down on a lead tablet and deposited to make the spell permanent: once written, the tablet was hidden. The oldest Sicilian texts, with their full array of negative wishes against an adversary, already use compounds of the verb γράφειν ('to write') to describe the action that the speaker performs;[32] some later Latin

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Divine Justice: The Epigraphy of Confession, Atonement and Exaltation in Roman Asia Minor', in H. M. Cotton, R. G. Hoyland, J. J. Price, and D. J. Wasserstein (eds.), *From Hellenism to Islam. Cultural and Linguistic Change in the Roman Near East* (Cambridge, 2009), 115–53.

[29] For the staff ritual, see R. Gordon, 'Raising a Sceptre: Confession-Narratives from Lydia and Phrygia', *JRA* 17 (2004), 177–96.

[30] See above, n. 17.

[31] Self-designation as κατάδεσμοι: see e.g. E. Ziehbarth, *Neue Verfluchungstafeln aus Attika, Böotien und Euboia*, Sitzungsberichte der Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Phil.-Hist. Klasse (1934), 1023 (Boiotia); *SEG* 26 1717 (Antinoupolis); see also *IG* XIV 2413.17 = *I.Akrai* 52 = Roy Kotansky, *Greek Magical Amulets. The Inscribed Gold, Silver, Copper, and Bronze Lamellae. Part 1: Published Texts of Known Provenances* (Opladen, 1994) 126.32, an amulet that protects against κατάδεσμοί (lines 10–11: [αὐ]τὸ φορῶν οὐ φοβήσῃ μάγον οὐδὲ κατάδεσμον).

[32] M. A. López Jimeno, *Las Tabellae Defixionum de la Sicilia Griega* (Amsterdam, 1991); see also Lamont in this issue.

defixiones call attention to their written textuality by defining themselves as *carta* (*scripta*), '(written) paper'.[33]

Unlike curses, binding spells are not legal tools. They are secret weapons to gain an advantage in an asymmetrical situation of private competition; they are tools for urgent wish-fulfilling beyond the acknowledged social rules: that is, for bullying.[34] Only the judicial binding spells belong to the world of the law; but they are not an integral part of the law system, existing merely as weapons of last resort, because asymmetrical competition can also arise in a law court. In the Imperial era, when jury trials disappeared and judicial binding spells fizzled out, *katadesmoi* as such did not disappear. If anything, they become more numerous and powerful.

Thus, curses and binding spells are two radically distinct types of ritual action. Almost the only thing that they share is the idea that the curse or spell as an independent utterance goes on working on its own until it is stopped somehow. But this mechanism works differently for curses and for *katadesmoi*. It is common among binding spells that only the destruction of the text on the lead tablet puts an end to its power, and a famous recipe in the *Greek Magical Papyri* suggests that, if one were to throw a lead tablet into a river, one should tie a string to it, so one could pull it out again and stop its action.[35] Stopping an *ara*, on the other hand, is not as easy as this; one needs to perform a formal act of purification to do so. The many mythical curses had run their course through generations until a purificatory ritual stopped them, as with the Atreidai and Orestes: a local myth from Xanthos tells how Bellerophon asked Poseidon to put a curse on the Xanthians, a curse that could only be lifted because the local wives interceded with the god.[36]

The same is true in the reality of lived religion. In the Lydian confession *stelai*, the chain of misfortune and death due to a curse ended only when one performed a ritual 'to take down the staff', as the texts say. In one case, after a chain of deadly accidents, the gods themselves intervened to stop a curse, and they ordered relatives of the now dead curser to

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[33] *Carta picta perscripta: Tabellae Sulis* no. 8: see R. S. O. Tomlin, '"Carta Picta Perscripta": Anleitung zum Lesen von Fluchtafeln', in K. Brodersen and A. Kropp (eds.), *Fluchtafeln. Neue Funde und neue Deutungen zum antiken Schadenzauber* (Frankfurt am Main, 2004), 11–29 and xxx.

[34] See C. A. Faraone, 'The Agonistic Context of Early Greek Binding Spells', in Faraone and Obbink (n. 25), 3–32.

[35] *GEMF* 74 = *PGM* VII 435–438.

[36] Plut. *De mul. vir.* 9.238d, after Nymphis of Herakleia, *FGrHist* 432 F 7.

perform the necessary ritual.[37] Unlike with the *katadesmoi*, both here and in the mythical cases there is no written text that can be destroyed; there is only a resounding performative word and its symbol, the staff. Given this difference, I do not think it is a coincidence that the first *defixiones* appeared in the sixth century BC, when writing became more common: whatever the prehistory of binding spells outside Greece (if there is a pre-history), in the Greek world *katadesmoi* were offspring of a literate world, while curses were the result and tools of an oral one.

The other characteristic that curse and *defixio* share is what I would call the mapping of destruction. In early public curses, this mapping concerns punishment only and is restrained, aiming at the annihilation of the social persona including household, possessions, and genealogy. In later private curses and *defixiones*, the mapping often becomes much more gruesome and extravagantly sadistic, as scholars have underlined.[38] The imagination of punishment reflects the ways in which a society is willing to hurt a living being; thus it is no coincidence that in the age of gladiators these catalogues become more extravagant.

Prayers for justice

Above, I listed Versnel's 'prayers for justice' as a subgroup of private curses. They share the fact that they are public with another subgroup, the cursing of the perpetrators of a violent early death. These curses were either part of a grave inscription or, like the two Delian invocations to the Jewish god to revenge a girl killed by φάρμακα, were free-standing marble *stelai* and as such comparable with the lead tablets from the Demeter sanctuary in Knidos brought to the British Museum by Charles Newton, or with a bronze tablet from Anatolia in the Musée d'Art et d'Histoire in Geneva, all of which show nail holes for hanging them on a wall.[39] They also share the fact that legal

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[37] *TAM* V 1 318 = Petzl (n. 27), no. 69: μεγάλοι οὖν οἱ θεοὶ οἱ ἐν Ἀζίττοις ἐπεζήτησαν λυθῆναι τὸ σκῆπτρον καὶ τὰς ἀρὰς τὰς γενομένας ἐν τῷ ναῷ.

[38] R. Gordon, '"What's in a List?" Listing in Greek and Graeco-Roman Malign Magical Texts', in D. Jordan, H. Montgomery, and E. Thomassen (eds.), *The World of Ancient Magic. Papers from the First International Samson Eitrem Seminar at the Norwegian Institute at Athens 4–8 May 1997* (Bergen, 1999), 239–78.

[39] The Knidos texts: Audollent (n. 7), nos. 1–12; the Geneva text: *SEG* 28 1568 = C. Dunant, 'Sus aux voleurs! Une tablette en bronze à inscription grecque du Musée de Genève', *MH* 35 (1978), 241–4. For a discussion of the public display of these texts, see C. A. Faraone, 'Curses, Crime Detection and Conflict Resolution at the Festival of Demeter Thesmophoros', *JHS* 131 (2011), 25–44.

action was difficult or impossible, because the perpetrators were unknown or because the victims could not prove their claims. Many of the 'judicial prayers' react either to the embezzlement of a deposit or the stealing of a garment: in the first case, word stood against word; in the second, the perpetrator remained unknown and unknowable. But these texts still remained legal tools and resonate with Roman legal practice: theft of garments in a public bath and embezzlement of a deposit were common enough to deserve their own entries in Justinian's Digest.[40] It also explains the observation that these prayers for justice often used legal language.[41]

Audollent classified them as *defixiones*, mainly because they were written on lead. Now that we know that lead is only the longest lasting of the media for these texts, this is no longer a valid argument; content and function become vital. The prayers for justice share with the *defixiones* the violent images of punishment, the imaginary aggression that fits the same map of sadistic satisfaction. This is psychologically understandable: when someone has stolen my cloak in the bath for which I have no convincing legal recourse because I cannot prove it, I can at least formulate my wish for punishment with the same emotionality as in a *defixio* with which I attack a rival.

One can thus feel tempted to understand the prayer for justice as a hybrid between curse and *defixio*. But to assume that something is a hybrid is, as Versnel pointed out, very often a rather desperate move of frustrated taxonomists.[42] If I focus on the function, I am happier to be left with two groups only – curses and *defixiones*, or, in Greek, ἀραὶ καὶ κατάδεσμοι – with the prayers for justice as a regional variety of private curses, widespread as a religious fashion not only in the Latin West but also in a related form in western Anatolia, with the texts from Cnidus in part as precursors of the confession *stelai*.

Coda: a tentative history of our terminology

If there is a clear ancient distinction between curse and *defixio*, how have we come to efface that distinction with our deceptively simple term 'curse tablet'? A final look at the history of the term is necessary. It is a recent expression, as is the history of research on the written *defixiones*. In English, the term was first used in the dissertation of

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[40] Digest. 16.3, Depositi vel contra; 47.17, De furibus balnearis.
[41] Versnel (n. 12), 288–9.
[42] *Ibid.*, 321.

William Sherwood Fox, now a little-known scholar but one who played an important role in Canadian classics and deserves the honour of having introduced the term 'curse tablet' into Anglophone scholarship. Fox received his PhD in 1911 at Johns Hopkins with an edition and commentary of a series of *defixiones* that the University Museum had acquired not long before, 'The Johns Hopkins Tabellae Defixionum'; it was printed as a supplement to the *American Journal of Philology* of 1912. Fox uses the term *defixio* consistently for the lead object, but 'curse' for what it effects; in the introduction he clarifies that *tabellae defixionum* are what are 'popularly known as curse-tablets'.[43]

This is consistent with the one earlier American paper on the topic, by the young William James Battle (1870–1955); it represents his contribution to the 1894 meeting of the American Philological Association and is the first attempt to assess the content and function of the *tabellae defixionum*.[44] Battle understands the *defixiones* as curses and makes no distinction between ἀρά and κατάδεσμος; but interestingly he distinguishes between the public forms (what Versnel would call 'prayers for justice') and the 'absolute curses' from graves and similar places. 'Curse tablet' remains, however, connected with his contemporary Fox: in a publication of two tablets in the Royal Ontario Museum in the *American Journal of Philology* of 1913, Fox calls them *defixiones* or curses in the text, but 'curse tablets' in the two captions of drawings. Only in his next publication on the topic, his 1919 paper 'Cursing as A Fine Art' in *The Sewanee Review*, does he use the more popular (hyphenated) 'curse-tablets' – and includes them in a much longer history of cursing in Greece, Rome, and the Bible: he describes *defixiones* as the 'instrument of private vengeance', implying that the other curses served mostly public retribution.[45] Likewise A. D. Fraser in 'The Ancient Curse: Some Analogies', in the *Classical Journal* of 1922: he not only puts 'curse-tablets' into a frame that ranges from the Old Testament to Christian monasticism, but includes all their Greek forms under the term *ara*.[46]

Despite the scholarly interest in North America, the term's origin crucially involves German scholarship on the topic. In the first decades

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[43] W. S. Fox, *The Johns Hopkins Tabella Defixionum*, *AJP* 33, supplement (1912), 10.

[44] W. J. Battle, 'Magical Curses Written on Lead Tablets', *TAPA* 26, *Supplement: Proceedings of Special Session* (1894), liv–lvi. Battle went on to become president of the University of Texas at Austin (1914–16): see <https://president.utexas.edu/past-presidents/william-james-battle>, accessed 25 September 2020.

[45] W. S. Fox, 'Cursing as a Fine Art', *Sewanee Review* 27 (1919), 466–70.

[46] D. Fraser, 'The Ancient Curse: Some Analogies', *CJ* 17 (1922) 454–60.

of the twentieth century, several German studies were dedicated to these texts, after the two main corpora had just appeared or were appearing: Wünsch's in 1897 and Audollent's in 1904. Wünsch's corpus is written in Latin, but in 1898 he published the slim volume *Sethianische Verfluchungstafeln aus Rom*, where 'Verfluchungstafel' is unusual, despite its precision. The German word as we know it appears in a slightly later publication, Erich Ziebarth's *Neue attische Fluchtafeln* of 1900, a supplement to Wünsch's *IG* edition. Several other German publications of these years use the term 'Fluchtafel' in their titles, all by epigraphers: Rudolf Münsterberg's *Zu den attischen Fluchtafeln* of 1904, Adolf Wilhelm's *Über die Zeit einiger attischer Fluchtafeln* from the same year, Adolf von Premerstein's *Ein Fluchtäfelchen mit Liebeszauber aus Petovio* of 1906, and Wünsch's collection for the classroom, *Antike Fluchtafeln*, of 1912. Von Premerstein makes it clear that the term is mainly epigraphers' slang when he writes of a group of documents that they are 'welche wir als Fluchtäfelchen zu bezeichnen pflegen' ('those that we usually call "Fluchtäfelchen"').

   This is decisive: Fox's 'popularly known curse-tablets' look like calques on the technical term of the German epigraphers. He cited those studies in his dissertation, and, as importantly, he was familiar with European scholarship because he spent the year 1903–4 in Geneva and Athens. In an interesting contrast, the native German speaker but bilingual Swiss Max Niedermann, who taught in German-speaking Basel and French-speaking Neuchâtel, in 1908 tentatively used the French 'tablettes d'exécration ou tablettes imprécatoires' for *defixio*; this again looks like a calque, but it did not have staying power.[47]

   None of these publications attempted a distinction between ἀρά and κατάδεσμος; *Fluch* was *Fluch*, as 'curse' was 'curse'. Nor did Battle's subtle observation find a parallel in the German studies, and it would have no future before Versnel. A few years earlier, Erich Ziebarth, like Wünsch, Battle, and Fox still early in his career (the tablets attracted mostly younger scholars – the subject must have seemed cutting edge, like the Magical Papyri[48]), had published a paper on the

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[47] M. Niedermann, 'Remarques sur la langue des tablettes d'exécration', in *Mélanges de linguistique offerts à M. Ferdinand de Saussure* (Paris, 1908), 71–8.

[48] Ziebarth was born in 1868; he taught at a local gymnasium (grammar school) between 1900 and 1919, before becoming the founding professor of Ancient History at the new Hamburg University. Fox (born 1878) taught Greek and Latin at Brandon College in Brandon (Manitoba), 1900–9, from where he moved to Princeton in 1909, then more permanently to Western University in 1917, where he also served as Dean of the Faculty of Arts and President:

curse (ἀρά) as a protective legal instrument, 'Der Fluch im Griechischen Recht'.[49] Although the paper does not mention curse tablets, Ziebarth must have regarded the tablets as just another form of Greek cursing. In this evaluation, he followed his only predecessor, the nowadays forgotten but in his time spectacularly successful Ernst von Lasaulx (1805–61), a Classicist, cultural philosopher, and politician with a Romantic pedigree and a lively interest in religion.[50] In a paper of 1842 on curses in Greece and Rome – which is part of a study of 'powerful' and, as Lasaulx sees it, 'magical' verbal rituals, oaths, prayers, and the song of Linos – he mentioned forbidden 'curses that damage humans' in a list of powerful words in antiquity.[51] In his time, the lead *defixiones* were not yet known, and in his Romantic emphasis on the 'Inbrunst' (fervency) of powerful religious speech, Lasaulx did not perceive any difference between the magical power of prayers and their inversions, curses. This Romantic inheritance remained behind the terms 'Fluchtafel' and 'Fluchtäfelchen', as it remained with its English equivalent, to judge from Battle's overview.

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see the Rutgers Database of Classical Scholars, <https://dbcs.rutgers.edu/all-scholars/8707-fox-william-sherwood> and <https://president.uwo.ca/president/emeriti/w_fox.html>, both accessed 22 September 2020. Another contemporary was Richard Wünsch (1869–1915), who was awarded his PhD in Marburg in 1893; on a Mediterranean trip the following year, in part with Albrecht Dieterich (1866–1908), he bought the lead tablets that he published in 1897 for the supplement of *IG* III. The Austrian epigrapher Adolf Wilhelm (1864–1950) belonged to the same generation, as did the French epigrapher and ancient historian Auguste Marie Henri Audollent (1864–1943).

[49] E. Ziebarth, 'Der Fluch im Griechischen Recht', *Hermes* 30 (1895), 57–70.

[50] On Lasaulx, see R. Stölzle, *Ernst von Lasaulx (1805–1861). Ein Lebensbild* (Münster, 1904); S. Petz, *Die Wiederkehr im Unterschied. Ernst von Lasaulx* (Freiburg and Munich, 1989); and the short characterization in N. Vance, review of R. Hill, *Lord Acton*, *IJCT* 9 (2003), 653. Ziebarth (n. 48), 57 n. 5, cites Lasaulx as his predecessor.

[51] E. von Lasaulx, *Studien des Classischen Alterums. Akademische Abhandlungen* (Regensburg, 1854), 159–77 (159: 'Mit dem Glauben an die magische Kraft des Willens im Gebete hängt naturnothwendig zusammen der Glaube an die magische Macht des Fluches' ['The belief in the magical power of the will in prayer is naturally connected to the belief in the magical force of the spell']). The volume collects earlier papers; the other relevant texts are: *Die Gebete der Griechen und Römer*, 137–58 (orig. 1842); *Die Linosklage*, 345–56 (orig. 1842); *Der Fluch bei Griechen und Römern*, 159–77 (orig. 1843); *Der Eid bei den Griechen*, 177–207 (orig. 1844); and *Der Eid bei den Römern*, 208–32 (orig. 1844). One could also add his interest in archaic oracles, demonstrated by *Das pelasgische Orakel des Zeus zu Dodona*, 283–315 (orig. 1840).