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INTRODUCTION

This collection of essays arises from the 'Curses in Context' project, which was funded primarily by the Neubauer Collegium of the University of Chicago, with important help in this instance from an anonymous East Coast friend. Under the aegis of this project, we have in the past organized a series of international conferences with a number of aims: to encourage archaeologists, historians, and epigraphists to give thematic papers on the regional and local features of the curse tablets from the relevant areas; to provide a venue for the presentation of newly discovered curse tablets; and to share techniques for their conservation and photography.[1] For the first three meetings, we roughly divided the world of curse tablets into three regional and temporal areas where they appear to be most popular: the first conference, in Lonato, focused closely on those curse tablets that were inscribed in Latin, Oscan, Etruscan, or Iberian language and were discovered on the Italian peninsula or in the Western Roman Empire;[2] the second conference, in Paris, primarily dealt with Greek curses from the eastern half of the Empire;[3] and the third, in Athens, with Greek curse tablets of the classical and Hellenistic periods.[4]

Versions of the papers printed here were almost all delivered at the fourth and final conference, held at the Franke Institute for the Humanities and the Neubauer Collegium, both of the University of Chicago.[5] The purpose of this final conference was to address more general and overarching questions. We asked the participants – more

[1] S. Torallas Tovar and R. Martín Hernández (eds.), *Technological Advances. The Materiality of Greek and Roman Curse Tablets* (Chicago, IL, forthcoming).

[2] C. A. Faraone and R. Gordon (eds.), *Curses in Context, 1. Curse-Tablets in Italy and the Western Roman Empire*, *Religions of the Roman Empire* 5.3, special issue (2019).

[3] C. A. Faraone and R. Gordon (eds.), *Curses in Context, 2. The Eastern and North African Provinces of the Roman Empire*, *Religions of the Roman Empire*, 7.2, special issue (2021).

[4] C. A. Faraone and I. Polinskaya (eds.), *Curses in Context, 3. The Greek Curse Tablets of the Classical and Hellenistic Periods*, Papers and Monographs from the Norwegian Institute at Athens 12 (Athens, 2021).

[5] John Scheid's paper was composed for the second conference, but was a better fit for this collection.

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than half of them *not* experts in curse tablets – to take a backwards glance over the recent trend in studying curse tablets in their local contexts and then to 'zoom out' again and inquire how these epichoric investigations have clarified and complicated our understanding of some of the larger questions, such as how curse tablets fit within the wider realm of public execrations or prayers, what they can tell us about the rise of literacy in the ancient Greek world, the relationship between cursing and the law or commerce, and finally how the spread of curse tablets in the ancient world can be explained as part of the history of ancient technology.

Curse tablets are small inscribed objects, usually, but not always, rectangular lead sheets, whose inscriptions aimed at cursing a rival or an enemy, often by means of prayers and/or incantations. The Greeks began to inscribe curses on lead in Sicily in the late sixth century BCE and in Attica by the late fifth, and then the practice spread slowly but continuously throughout the Mediterranean basin, the Black Sea, and the western provinces of the Roman Empire, a process that lasted over three-quarters of a millennium. By far, the majority of the curse tablets of the classical and Hellenistic periods were inscribed simply with a name or a list of names, presumably of the victim(s), and were then rolled or folded up and sometimes pierced with a nail; those tablets that provide a more substantial text usually aim at binding or restraining a rival or an enemy, as their ancient name in Greek (*katadesmoi*) attests.[6] By the fourth century, however, we begin to see a small number of curse tablets inscribed on lead, bronze, and stone that belong to a very different genre. Henk Versnel has dubbed these 'prayers for justice' because they almost always take the form of a plaintive prayer, in which the authors beg a god to punish someone who has wronged them.[7]

We should stress, however, that the advent of such curses in written form does not correlate with the invention of the genre, because, at least

[6] The speech acts found on these binding spells include the performative 'I bind so-and-so!', the wish 'May so-and-so be bound!', and the prayer, to a usually chthonic deity, 'You, O Hermes, bind so-and-so!'. See C. A. Faraone, 'The Agonistic Context of Early Greek Binding Spells', in C. A. Faraone and D. Obbink (eds.), *Magika Hiera. Ancient Greek Magic and Religion* (Oxford, 1991), 3–32; C. A. Faraone, 'The Typical and the Outlier in Ancient Greek Cursing: Prayers for Justice, Erotic Curses, and Other Important Categories', in K. Beerden and F. G. Naerebout (eds.), *Coping with Versnel. The Contribution of Henk S. Versnel to the Study of Ancient Religion* (Leiden, forthcoming).

[7] H. S. Versnel, 'Beyond Cursing', in Faraone and Obbink (n. 6). These tablets are often publicly displayed in sanctuaries, name the petitioner, and aim at the divine punishment of the alleged perpetrators or at the return of stolen property.

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at Athens, we have literary evidence that the oral forms of binding incantations preceded the written form. The 'binding song' that the Erinyes use in Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, for example, closely reflects the Athenian use of binding curses against litigants in forthcoming trials, a practice that only begins to show up on curse tablets a half-century after the play was first performed.[8] Conversely, as Lamont shows in the second article, the earliest extant curse tablets from Sicily do not passively record earlier oral versions of such curses, but rather seem to be a kind of scribal invention, in which the act of writing itself seems to be the primary act of cursing.

The modern study of these artefacts began more than a century ago, with two large and important corpora published by Richard Wünsch in 1897 (*Defixiones Tabellae Atticae* = *DTA*) and by Auguste Audollent in 1904 (*Defixiones Tabellae* = *DT*).[9] These publications set the stage for the study of curse tablets primarily as epigraphic texts arranged according to the geographical place of their discovery, but with far less attention to their archaeological context, which in many cases was unknown. Aside from a small group of scholars interested in the history of Mediterranean religions, these tablets were for a long time unwelcome in the academic study of the ancient Greeks and Romans – Wünsch, in fact, ignored clear signs of the late classical date of most of the Athenian tablets in his collection, because he could not bring himself to believe that the generation of Plato and Isocrates could have composed such texts.

[8] See C. A. Faraone, 'Aeschylus' *Hymnos Desmios* (*Eum.* 306) and Attic Judicial Curse Tablets', *JHS* 105 (1985), 150–4; and C. A. Faraone, 'An Accusation of Magic in Classical Athens (Ar. *Wasps* 946–48)', *TAPA* 119 (1989), 149–61. The latter discusses accusations that curse tablets were used to bind the talented orator Thucydides, the son of Melesias, in a high-profile political trial of the 440s BCE.

[9] Historically there has been a problem with the precise terminology to be used in discussing these curse tablets. In all of the *Curses in Context* volumes we have followed the precedent of using 'curse tablet' as the genus of all curses inscribed on lead, and then the following terms for the two major species or subdivisions: (i) *katadesmos*, *defixio*, or 'binding curse' to describe those used to restrain rivals or enemies in the future; and (ii) 'prayer for justice' for those used to punish malefactors for past offences. The equation *defixio* = 'curse tablet' is an old one, enshrined by the two giants in the field, Wünsch and Audollent, who published their corpora in Latin and naturally used a convenient Latin term. In the end, however, this was an unfortunate choice, because the etymology of *defixio* (i.e. a curse that 'nails down') makes it suitable for those curses that are indeed rolled up, nailed, and aim at 'restraint', but confusing when applied to other curses, where revenge or restitution of a stolen object is the goal (for example, the Cnidian curse tablets in Audollent's collection). For the sea change in thinking about this problem, see the introduction to David Jordan's survey 'New Greek Curse Tablets (1985–2000)', *GRBS* 41 (2000), 5–46, where he explains his change of mind and decision to call the wider category 'curse tablets' rather than *defixiones*.

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After the deaths of Wünsch and other scholars interested in curse tablets, during and after the First World War, the study and publication of these artefacts essentially slowed to a trickle, and it was not until the 1980s – and thanks to the painstaking epigraphical work of the late David Jordan, Roger Tomlin, and others, and to the analyses of Versnel, Gordon, and Graf – that curse tablets began to be appreciated as widespread, numerous, and often easily dated texts reflecting both the personal concerns of their authors and the general context of competition or revenge that led to their production. These new studies, however, were usually based on the texts published in the two earlier corpora, augmented by Jordan's important surveys of new finds in 1985 and 2000, and canonized to some extent by the influential collection of English translations published by John Gager in 1992.[10] As a result, they tended to stress the similarities that the curses shared with one another, rather than the differences that arise from the specific era and region of a tablet's deposition.

Indeed, until recently it was commonplace to treat curse tablets en masse as easily comparable data to give us general insight into the personal lives of '*the* Greeks' or '*the* Romans'. But we now have far more and far better archaeological data, and a greater appreciation of the local variations one finds in the data. The recent publication of the late classical effigies from Keos and Paros, for example, calls to mind the previously discovered caches of lead and bronze effigies from Hellenistic Delos, suggesting a regional practice in the Cyclades.[11] And the ongoing excavation of the classical cemetery in Olbia and the storerooms of Black Sea collections continues to unearth curses inscribed on both lead and pottery, many of which have carefully preserved archaeological contexts.[12] And then there are the lead tablets of Hellenistic date recently excavated from a well in the Kerameikos of Athens, the forty-six curse tablets found in a grave in Himera, all pierced with the same nail, and the small cooking pot inscribed with

[10] D. R. Jordan, 'A Survey of Greek Defixiones Not Included in the Special Corpora', *GRBS* 26 (1985), 151–97; Jordan (n. 9); John Gager, *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World* (Oxford, 1992).

[11] See the appendix to J. Curbera, 'A Tablet Without Context: Wünsch's "Tabella Melia"', in Faraone and Polinskaya (n. 4); for parallels, see also C. A. Faraone, 'Binding and Burying the Forces of Evil: The Defensive Use of "Voodoo Dolls" in Ancient Greece', *ClAnt* 10 (1991), 165–205; C. A. Faraone, 'Animals-Effigies in Ancient Curses: The Role of Gender, Age, and Natural Behavior in Their Selection', *MediterrAnt* 22 (2019), 289–315, esp. 311–12.

[12] See I. Polinskaya, 'Inscribed Ceramic Bowls and Other Curses from Classical and Hellenistic Olbia', in Faraone and Polinskaya (n. 4).

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more than fifty names and buried under the floor of a shop in the Athenian Agora; the pot, moreover, contained the head and feet of a chicken and was covered by the head of a large nail which had been driven down through the bottom of the pot and into the soil below.[13] On the Latin side, of course, there are the spectacular finds from the fountain of Anna Perenna at Rome and from behind the temple of the Magna Mater in Mainz, as well as the continuing discoveries from the sanctuary of Mercury at Uley in Britain.[14]

This fourth and final collection of essays from the 'Curses in Context' project begins with Radcliffe Edmonds' return to an old problem: the lack of violent language in the binding curses of classical Athens. He sets the restrained language of these curses in a new light by contrasting them with another type of curse used by the Greeks in oaths or to protect their property. He calls these curses 'contingent' because they take the form of a condition, under which the curse will automatically spring into action, if a person violates their oath or steals a grave plot or some other personal object. Edmonds shows that, unlike the usually laconic binding curses, these contingent curses are filled with extensive and violent predictions of what will happen to the conditionally accursed person. He argues that these differences in language are generated by the differences in the implied audiences for these curses: a divine audience on a vertical axis for the binding curses, which seem to be private messages for the eyes of the gods alone, and a human audience on a horizontal axis for the contingent curses, which were by design recited publicly by the oath takers or were publicly inscribed on gravestones and other pieces of personal property for human eyes, rather than divine.

In her essay, Jessica Lamont deals with the curse tablets from Selinous and Himera, which began to appear just before 600 BCE. She demonstrates in great detail, and quite unexpectedly, that the earliest curse tablets in the Greek world are in fact the ones that show the greatest signs of written literacy, in the consistent use of verbs of writing (such as *engraphein* and *apographein*), in the distortion of the victims' names as text, and even in

[13] *Kerameikos*: J. Stroszeck, 'The Archaeological Contexts of the Curse Tablets in the Athenian Kerameikos', in Faraone and Polinskaya (n. 4). *Himera*: S. Vassallo, 'Le necropoli di Himera: gli spazi, le architetture funerarie, i segni della memoria', in S. Adroit and R. Graells i Fabregat (eds.), *Arquitecturas funerarias y memoria. La gestión de las necrópolis en Europa occidental (ss. X–III a.C.)* (Madrid, 2017), 167–80. *Agora*: J. L. Lamont, 'The Curious Case of the Cursed Chicken: A New Binding Ritual from the Athenian Agora', *Hesperia* 90 (2021), 79–113; and J. L. Lamont, 'Cursing in Context: Athenian Pyre Curses', in Faraone and Polinskaya (n. 4).

[14] For recent bibliography, see the essays of Gordon, Scheid, and Sánchez Natalías in this volume.

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the signs of professional scribes at work – all features of cursing that we associate with later scribal production. Her conclusions fly in the face of the conventional approach to early Greek writing, which argues that writing primarily reflects the traditional oral speech-acts that precede it.

Philip Venticinque, in turn, focuses on the curses used to bind rival craftsmen and merchants in classical Athens, one of the premier manufacturing and commercial hubs in the Greek world in that period. Reacting to Eidinow's suggestion that we reject the category 'commercial', because the targets of some of these curses are too numerous and varied, Venticinque shows, with the help of literary and papyrological evidence from beyond Athens, that these curses aimed at wider networks of commercial activity, including large numbers of suppliers and clients. In addition, they reveal the overlap of household and shop and the tendency of similar merchants or craftsmen to band together to form social or business networks, to live in the same neighbourhoods, and therefore to be cursed together as a large and diverse group.

In his essay, John Scheid examines the ritual contexts of two recent and important discoveries of *materia magica* in complex and carefully excavated archaeological sites, and then situates the Latin prayers found there in the wider context of traditional Roman religion. Both the texts discovered in the '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 magical rituals migrated east to west across the Mediterranean and then up into western Europe, Scheid shows how these two early caches of magical texts in fact reflect the pattern and style of early Latin votive formulae, as well as traditional prayers (like those of the Arval Brethren) and rituals (like those of the Compitalia).

Similarly, Celia Sánchez Natalías, in her essay on the Latin curses against thieves found in Britain, pushes back against the traditional understanding that Greek curses from the East were the model. Pointing out that individual curse tablets have their own biographies, which reflect the local context of their creation and deposition, she contrasts the later Latin curse tablets with their alleged late Hellenistic models by focusing tightly on a peculiar local feature of these British curses: the cession to the god of only part of the value of the stolen object, a feature that seems entirely absent in the Greek materials. These British curses against thieves, she argues, not only translate a Greek model into Latin, but also synthesize and transfer

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elements from different spheres of Roman provincial life and various kinds of Roman discourse, such as vows or legal terminology, to constitute a new regional version of a traditional technology.

In his contribution, Fritz Graf clarifies the terminology that modern scholars use to describe ancient Greek curses by providing a detailed historiography and by surveying the language used by the Greeks themselves, albeit with a great emphasis on the epigraphical sources. He organizes his inquiry by contrasting two ancient Greek words, *ara* ('curse') and *katadesmos* ('binding curse'). On his reading, these two Greek terms are mutually exclusive: *arai* are public or private curses, in which an unlawful aggressor against public order is handed over, in one way or another, to the gods, and which can only be undone by purification or by public confession; *katadesmoi*, on the other hand, are private, secret weapons used to gain an advantage in an asymmetrical situation of competition, which can be undone or recalled simply by unburying, unfolding, or removing the nails from the lead tablet upon which it is inscribed.

Last but not least, Greg Woolf reconsiders the history of curse tablets more broadly in the ancient Mediterranean world as the history of a technology, one marked by episodes of innovation and appropriation. He suggests that attempts to write such a history in terms of diffusion or the spread of ideas or of rituals have failed to convince, and argues instead that, if human and object agency are both taken into account, it is possible to explain the discontinuities in the history of curse tablets and also the shape of their nearly thousand-year-old history in a different manner. His thesis is that curse tablets, like coins, emerged as a flexible technology, the affordances of which allowed it to be put to many uses in many different social locations, each formed by the complex and shifting cultural contours of antiquity.

This last collection of essays closes our 'Curses in Context' project with some more general insights and answers to specific questions on the use of curse tablets in antiquity. We hope that the publication of the project's five volumes, with almost forty essays on these fascinating objects and texts, will open further questions and generate even more interest in the future.

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