



Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World

JOHN G. GAGER

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Preface

This project arose initially from a desire to define a body of primary materials that might serve to illustrate the long and difficult debate about “magic” and “religion” in Western culture. It seemed clear to us that ancient *defixiones*—curse tablets and binding spells inscribed normally on thin metal sheets—offered a unique body of data. They are largely unknown, as much to general readers as to scholars; unlike the much more familiar spells written on papyrus and preserved in large collections of recipes for use by professional *magoi*, *defixiones* survived because they were actually put to use by individual clients; like ancient amulets on stone, they come to us largely unmediated by external filters; unlike ancient literary texts, they are devoid of the distortions introduced by factors such as education, social class or status, and literary genres and traditions. Most of all, they are intensely personal and direct.

Of course, we are not so naive as to believe that the *defixiones* were uninfluenced by cultural forces: their language is highly formulaic, and clients were often limited by the recipes that the local *magos* had available in his or her collection of recipes. One final advantage is that *defixiones*, for the most part, have been uncovered by modern archaeologists precisely where they were deposited by the ancient clients or their agents: in cemeteries, wells, or other appropriate sites.

For several reasons, we made the decision not to include the texts in their original languages. First, our intended audience includes not only—not even especially—scholars of Mediterranean antiquity but a broader range of students and general readers. Second, it soon became apparent that for many of these *defixiones* the published texts are not reliable. Indeed, in many cases, the tablets themselves are no longer available for inspection (for example, most of those published by Wünsch in DTA). The work of reexamining and reediting tablets published at the end of the nineteenth century (such as DTA) and early in

this century (such as *DT*, and Ziebarth, 1934) promises to reach far into the next century. Third, for those who wish or need to consult the texts in their primary languages, editions are readily available, along with more recent catalogues and inventories (for example, SGD for Greek tablets and Solin for the Latin ones). We have tried to provide exhaustive bibliographical references for each of the texts included in this collection; in addition, where individual words or phrases are crucial to interpretation, we have provided them in transliteration.

The principle of organization within each chapter is basically geographical: we begin with ancient Greece (an arbitrary starting point) and circle around the Mediterranean in clockwise fashion. The fact that we have included a few objects from beyond the Mediterranean, such as the bowls from Mesopotamia, indicates that we have not felt tightly bound by any of our categories.

A brief word about the treatment of foreign and especially Greek names is in order. In the texts themselves, we have not Latinized the letters of personal names: Greek *kappa* remains *k*, *upsilon* is rendered as *u* (rather than the more traditional *y*), *omega* becomes *ô*, and so on. But in the introductions, annotations, and discussions, we have used the Latinized conventions, especially with common and familiar names. Thus a name will not uncommonly appear in two forms: Sôkratês (in the text) and Socrates (in the discussion). *Voces mysticae*—those “words” or “terms” in a spell that do not represent ordinary language—we have rendered in upper-case letters. On some tablets it is difficult to decide where one of these *voces* ends and the next one begins. On others, separations are indicated by various scribal devices, for example, boxes drawn around the *vox*, suprascript horizontal lines and colons. With a number of tablets, we have attempted to format the translation so as to reflect the unusual ways in which the text was inscribed; we have also included a number of photographic reproductions that illustrate these techniques.

One of the features that distinguishes this book from other collections of ancient texts and documents—a feature that derives from our broad conception of how the world of the ancient Mediterranean must be studied and understood—is the extent to which its contents cross traditionally impervious barriers of language and culture. Thus we include material written not just in Greek or Latin but also in Hebrew, Aramaic, Coptic, and Demotic. Jewish, Egyptian, Greek, Roman, British, and Christian tablets appear side by side, often employing the same formulas, mysterious names, and drawings. On a geographical scale, our tablets range from Britain to North Africa, from Mesopotamia to Spain.

Behind this mix lies a conscious intention on our part to undermine the confidence with which cultural, geographical, and chronological labels are applied to ancient texts and traditions, as if they represented clear, distinct, and nonoverlapping categories.

This book has been a collective effort from start to finish. In addition to the primary contributors, I express my gratitude to those whose generous assistance has proven invaluable and in many cases decisive. First among these come Christopher A. Faraone and David R. Jordan, whose impact has been immeasurable. Next we wish to mention the following: Gideon Bohak, Nancy Bookidis, Edward J. Champlin, Valerie Flint, Elizabeth R. Gebhard, Martha Himmelfarb, John J. Keaney, Israel Knohl, Robert Lamberton, Evasio de Marcellis, Joshua Marshall, Stephen G. Miller, Susan Rotroff, Michel Strickmann, and Emmanuel Voutiras. We also acknowledge generous support from Dimitri Gondicas, the Committee on Hellenic Studies and the Dean of the Faculty, all at Princeton University.

In the initial stages of this project, each of us translated and annotated a discrete set of texts. But in subsequent stages, translations and annotations relied on the collective wisdom of all. Thus we have decided not to indicate the initial translator of each text. As the volume editor, I assume full responsibility for the results.

Princeton
May 1992

J. G.

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Abbreviations and Conventions

AIBL	Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres
AJA	<i>American Journal of Archaeology</i>
AM	<i>Mitteilungen des deutschen archäologischen Instituts, Athenische Abteilung</i>
ANRW	<i>Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt</i> , ed. Hildegard Temporini and W. Haase
ARW	<i>Archiv für Religionswissenschaft</i>
B.C.E.	before the common era
BCH	<i>Bulletin de correspondance hellénique</i>
BE	<i>Bulletin épigraphique</i>
Bibl.	Bibliography
Bonner, <i>Amulets</i>	C. Bonner, <i>Studies in Magical Amulets, Chiefly Graeco-Egyptian</i> (Ann Arbor, 1950)
CAF	<i>Comicorum Atticorum Fragmenta</i> , ed. T. Kock
C.E.	of the common era
CIL	<i>Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum</i>
CMRDM	<i>Corpus Monumentorum Religionis Dei Menis</i>
Davies, <i>Families</i>	J. K. Davies, <i>Athenian Propertied Families. 600–300 B.C.</i> (Oxford, 1971)
Delatte and Derchain	A. Delatte and Ph. Derchain, <i>Les intailles magiques gréco-égyptiennes</i> (Paris, 1964)

DTA	<i>IG</i> , vol. 3, pt. 3, Appendix: "Defixionum Tabellae" (Berlin, 1897)
DT	<i>Defixionum Tabellae</i> , ed. A. Audollent (Paris, 1904)
Dubois	L. Dubois, <i>Inscriptions grecques dialectales de Sicile</i> (Rome, 1989)
Faraone, "Context"	C. A. Faraone, "The Agonistic Context of Early Greek Binding-Spells," in <i>Magika</i> , pp. 3–32
GMP	<i>The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation Including the Demotic Spells</i> , ed. H. D. Betz (Chicago, 1986); translation and new edition of <i>PGM</i>
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
IG	<i>Inscriptiones Graecae</i>
JEA	<i>Journal of Egyptian Archaeology</i>
Jeffery	L. H. Jeffery, "Further Comments on Archaic Greek Inscriptions," <i>The Annual of the British School at Athens</i> 50 (1955): 69–76
JOAI	<i>Jahreshefte des österreichischen archäologischen Instituts</i>
Jordan, "Agora"	D. R. Jordan, "Defixiones from a Well near the Southwest Corner of the Athenian Agora," <i>Hesperia</i> 54 (1985): 198–252
Jordan, TILT	D. R. Jordan, "Two Inscribed Lead Tablets from a Well in the Athenian Kerameikos," <i>AM</i> 95 (1980): 225–39
JRS	<i>Journal of Roman Studies</i>
Kropp	A. Kropp, <i>Ausgewählte koptische Zaubertexte</i> , vols. 1–3 (Brussels, 1930–1931)
LSJ	<i>A Greek-English Lexicon</i> , 9th ed., ed. H. G. Liddell, R. Scott, H. S. Jones (Oxford, 1968)
MAMA	<i>Monumenta Asiae Minoris Antiqua</i>
Magika	<i>Magika Hiera. Ancient Greek Magic and Religion</i> , ed. C. A. Faraone and D. Obbink (New York, 1990)

Martinez	D. G. Martinez, <i>P. Michigan XVI. A Greek Love Charm from Egypt</i> (P. Mich. 757) (Atlanta, 1991)
Naveh and Shaked	J. Naveh and S. Shaked, <i>Amulets and Magic Bowls. Aramaic Incantations of Late Antiquity</i> (Jerusalem, 1985)
PA	<i>Prosopographia Attica</i> , ed. J. Kirchner (Berlin, 1901/1903)
PDM	spells in Demotic, often with Greek; part of the collection in GMP
Peek	W. Peek, <i>Kerameikos, Ergebnisse der Ausgrabungen</i> , vol. 3 (Berlin, 1941), pp. 89–100
PG	J. P. Migne, <i>Patrologia Graeca</i> (Paris, 1857–89)
PGM	<i>Papyri Graecae Magicae</i> , vol. 1, ed. K. Preisendanz (Stuttgart, 1928); rev. ed., A. Henrichs (1973); vol. 2, ed. K. Preisendanz (1931)
PL	J. P. Migne, <i>Patrologia Latina</i> (Paris, 1844–64)
Preisendanz (1930) and (1933)	“Die griechischen und lateinischen Zaubertafeln,” <i>Archiv für Papyrusforschung</i> 9 (1930): 119–54, and 11 (1933): 153–64
Preisendanz (1972)	“Fluchtafel (Defixion),” <i>RAC</i> 8 (1972), cols. 1–29
RAC	<i>Reallexicon für Antike und Christentum</i>
RB	<i>Revue biblique</i>
RE	<i>Paulys Realencyclopädie der klassischen Altertumswissenschaft</i>
RM	<i>Rheinisches Museum</i>
Robert, Froehner	L. Robert, <i>Collection Froehner, I: Inscriptions grecques</i> (Paris, 1936)
Sepher ha-Razim	<i>Sepher ha-Razim. The Book of Mysteries</i> , ed. M. A. Morgan (Chico, 1983)

<i>SEG</i>	<i>Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum</i> . References are by volume number and number of inscription within the volume, such as <i>SEG</i> 14.3.
SGD	D. R. Jordan, "A Survey of Greek Defixiones Not Included in the Special Corpora," <i>Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies</i> 26 (1985): 151–97.
Solin	H. Solin, <i>Eine neue Fluchtafel aus Ostia</i> (Helsinki, 1968), esp. pp. 23–31: "Eine Übersicht über lateinische Fluchtafeln, die sich nicht bei Audollent und Besnier finden"
s.v.	<i>sub voce</i> , under the heading/word
<i>SuppMag</i>	<i>Supplementum Magicum</i> , vol. 1, ed. R. W. Daniel and F. Maltomini (Cologne, 1990)
<i>TAPA</i>	<i>Transactions of the American Philological Association</i>
Tomlin	R. S. O. Tomlin, "The Curse Tablets," in <i>The Temple of Sulis Minerva at Bath</i> , vol. 2: <i>The Finds from the Sacred Spring</i> , ed. B. Cunliffe (Oxford, 1988), pp. 59–277
Wilhelm	A. Wilhelm, "Über die Zeit einiger attischer Fluchtafeln," <i>JOAI</i> 7 (1904): 105–26
Wortmann	D. Wortmann, "Neue magische Texte," <i>Bonner Jahrbücher</i> 168 (1968): 56–111
Wünsch (1900)	R. Wünsch, "Neue Fluchtafeln," <i>RM</i> 55 (1900): 62–85 and 232–71
Wünsch, <i>Antike Fluchtafeln</i>	R. Wünsch, <i>Antike Fluchtafeln</i> (Bonn, 1912)
<i>ZAW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
Ziebarth (1899)	E. Ziebarth, "Neue attische Fluchtafeln," <i>Nachrichten von der Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen, Phil.-hist. Klasse</i> (1899)

Ziebarth (1934) E. Ziebarth, "Neue Verfluchungstafeln aus Attika, Boiotien und Euboia," *Sitzungsberichte der preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Phil.-hist. Klasse* (Berlin, 1935): 1022–50

ZPE *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*

* An asterisk indicates *voces mysticae* discussed in the glossary.

IAO All non-standard words or terms, that is, the *voces mysticae*, have been printed in upper case.

. . . Spaced dots indicate a series of unreadable letters in the original text; in general we have not specified the exact number of missing letters.

() Parentheses indicate interpretive expansions or clarifications of the original text.

[] Square brackets are used to enclose letters not legible but believed to have been in the original text.

{ } Braces are used occasionally to indicate words or letters mistakenly repeated in the original text.

< > Angle brackets indicate letters or words mistakenly omitted by the ancient author.

7 × 8 cm. All measurements of *defixiones* give width first, followed by height, both in centimeters.

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Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World

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Introduction

Defixiones, or *katadesmoi* as they are called in Greek, reveal a dark little secret of ancient Mediterranean culture.¹ At present the total number of surviving examples exceeds fifteen hundred.² Everyone, it seems, used or knew of them, yet only sporadically have they received serious attention from modern students.³ One reason for this persistent neglect stems surely from the potentially harmful character of these small metal tablets—not so much the real harm suffered by their ancient targets but the potential harm to the entrenched reputation of classical Greece and Rome, not to mention Judaism and Christianity, as bastions of pure philosophy and true religion.

The Materials

David R. Jordan describes these curious objects as “inscribed pieces of lead, usually in the form of thin sheets, intended to bring supernatural power to bear against persons and animals.”⁴ Other materials could also be used—ostraca or broken sherds of pottery,⁵ limestone,⁶ gemstones,⁷ papyrus,⁸ wax⁹ and even ceramic bowls¹⁰—but lead, lead alloys, and other metals remained the primary media for expressing a desire to enlist supernatural aid in bringing other persons (and animals, in the case of racehorses) under the control of the person who commissioned or personally inscribed the tablet. In fact, the vast majority of surviving tablets is made of lead or lead alloys.¹¹

The preference for lead over other metals presents a complicated and revealing set of problems. First, analysis of the remarkable tablets from the spring of the goddess Sulis Minerva at Bath (England) has revealed that only one-fifth of the tablets contained as much as two-thirds lead.¹² The rest consist of alloys of lead and tin, sometimes fused with copper.¹³ Perhaps this alloy was peculiar to England, a by-product of local pewter

industries, but these results should raise doubts about earlier claims that most tablets were made of pure lead. Second, the preference for lead seems due largely to its low cost and ready availability, whether as a by-product of silver mining in Greece or of pewter industries in England. Also, recipes for *defixiones* recommend “borrowing” (stealing?) lead from water pipes, presumably in the public domain.¹⁴ Third, as Tomlin notes, “it was quite easy to make a tablet” by pouring hot lead into a mold and then rolling, hammering, or scraping the sheet to obtain a smooth surface.¹⁵ Thereafter the sheet could be cut into smaller pieces to make individual tablets. Fourth, lead was a common medium, perhaps one of the very earliest, for writing of any kind, including private correspondence.¹⁶ Fifth, certain obvious features of lead (it was cold, heavy, and ordinary) came to be seen, at a later time, as particularly suitable for the specific task of conveying curses and spells to the underworld. A tablet from the Athenian Agora pleads that “just as these names are cold, so may the name of Alkidamos be cold”¹⁷; others seek to render one’s personal enemies as heavy as the lead¹⁸; and several early Greek tablets make use of what seems already to have become a formula: “Just as this lead is cold and useless, so let them (my enemies) be cold and useless.”¹⁹ But these formulas do not appear on the earliest tablets and probably represent a later stage of reflection.

The Inscribed Messages

Contrary to what one might expect, the process of inscribing metal tablets posed no great difficulty. The preferred instrument was a bronze stylus (*PGM* VII, lines 396ff.). In some cases, the letters are lightly scratched on the surface, but in others they are more deeply incised, with a clear buildup of metal visible at the end of the stroke. Tomlin notes that “a practiced scribe could write on the soft metal surface as easily as on wax.”²⁰ Of course, the real issue here is to know who actually inscribed the letters, a professional scribe or the private individual seeking to enact the spell. We may begin with three observations. First, the range of skill exhibited on tablets is quite broad, with large, awkward letters on one extreme and fluent scripts on the other.²¹ Second, professionals may have played a more important role in the Roman period (first to sixth centuries C.E.) than in classical and Hellenistic times, although Plato already indicates the presence of professionals in the fourth century B.C.E. who prepared *katadesmoi* for a fee.²² Third, in most cultures the business of making spells has been an activity entrusted to specialists.

The tablets themselves suggest that it was not uncommon for individuals to turn to professionals, whether *magoi* or scribes. The work of professionals is evident in a tablet like DTA 55, whose hand is described as a *scriptura elegantissima* reminiscent of public monuments,²³ or in the “skillful, elegant, fluent semicursive” texts of the third century C.E., excavated from wells in the Athenian Agora.²⁴ The “clerical” characteristics of numerous tablets from the find at Bath suggest the presence of scribes, even though no two tablets appear to be by the same hand.²⁵ Also, highly formulaic texts, which cannot have been invented on the spot, must have been copied from formularies of the sort preserved in *PGM* and similar recipe collections used by professionals. Finally, several large caches of tablets found in one place clearly reflect the work of a local “cottage” industry. Common sense seems to point us toward Tomlin’s cautious conclusion that we should expect to find “a mixture of professional and amateur scribes,”²⁶ but on balance the scales would appear to favor professionals, at least in the Roman period, both for inscribing the tablets and for providing the formulas.

Next we must ask what these scribes wrote on their tablets. In large part, the translations that follow in this collection will answer that question, but some general observations may serve to create a sense of broad patterns and of changes through time. The general rule is that the earliest examples are also the simplest: most of the early tablets from Sicily and Attica (fifth to fourth centuries B.C.E.) give only the name of the target, with no verb of binding and no mention of deities or spirits; some do include both a verb (usually a form of *katadein*) and the name of a deity (in Attica usually Hermes or Persephone).²⁷ Special forms of writing include either scrambling the names of the targets²⁸ or writing them, and sometimes the full text of the spell, backwards—that is, from left to right but with the individual letters facing in the proper direction. Such techniques clearly express a symbolic meaning like that attributed to the lead of the tablets themselves, that the fate of the targets should turn backward or be scrambled, just like their written names. We also find here yet another example of the way in which quite ordinary habits became “mystified” in time, gathering a significance and power quite unthinkable at earlier times.

With few exceptions, “mystical” words or formulas do not appear in Greek tablets of the classical and Hellenistic periods, in contrast to the richly variegated language of tablets in the Roman period (first century C.E. onward). But these exceptions are interesting and important. The first involves a set of six terms, called *ephesia grammata*, first attested in a fragment of Anaxilas, a comic poet of the fourth century B.C.E.: “(an

unnamed person) . . . carries around marvelous Ephesian letters in sewn pouches.”²⁹ These terms (*askion*, *kataskion*, *lix*, *tetrax*, *damnameus*, and *aision/aisia*) were believed to possess the ability to endow those who wore them (especially boxers, so it seems) with great power, both defensive and aggressive.³⁰ They remained well known for centuries, appearing in several later spells and charms. The Christian writer, Clement of Alexandria (ca. 200 C.E.) not only lists the terms but calls them “famous among many people.”³¹ More significantly, they appear in at least one lead amulet from the Hellenistic period and thus clearly establish the use of “mystical” terms (*voces mysticae*) long before their widespread circulation from the first century C.E. onward.³² This folded tablet from Crete, dating to the fourth century B.C.E., must have been carried as a protective amulet (line 20 speaks of protecting the wearer against hostile spells); it contains several of the *ephesia grammata*: *aski* and *kataski* (lines 9–10), *lix* (lines 5 and 10), forms of *tetrax* (lines 5, 11–12), and *damnameneus* (line 16).³³ A second exception is a curious stone monument from Greece, dating to the late fifth century B.C.E., which Jeffery takes to be a thank offering by an unnamed person for the successful punishment of a personal enemy.³⁴ She offers the following tentative reconstruction of the text: “The Ephesian vengeance was sent down (?); first Hecate injures (??) the possessions (??) of Megara in all things; then Persephone already is reporting all the (prayers?) to the gods.”³⁵

The significance of this evidence for the development of *defixiones* from those of the classical and Hellenistic periods to later Roman types cannot be exaggerated. As even a brief comparison of any early and late tablet from the following collection will reveal, the differences are real and many:

1. in some of the late Roman examples (esp. fourth to fifth centuries C.E.), *voces mysticae* and other forms of “unintelligible” writing can take up as much as 80 to 90 percent of the tablet, whereas in the amulet from Crete discussed previously, the *ephesia grammata* occupy no more than a line or two;
2. the names and invocations of the gods and spirits are notably longer, more complex, and aggressively international in the later examples;
3. drawings of human and animal figures, along with the probably astrological *charaktêres*, become omnipresent;
4. a general increase in Egyptian elements occurs, reflecting the fact that most of the surviving formularies were produced and copied in Egypt and thus reveal the fusion of Greek, Egyptian, and other cultures

typical of Egypt from the first century C.E. onward; among these Egyptian elements, one of the most notable is the use of threats against the gods.³⁶

And yet we must not overemphasize these differences, as earlier interpreters have done, out of a desire to protect ancient Greek culture, even in its “lower” forms (such as the *defixiones*) from comparison with the “degenerate syncretism” of late Roman “magic” and “superstition.” For underneath these differences, we can also detect clear lines of continuity.

For example, the earlier *ephesia grammata* continue to appear in the later texts³⁷ and may now be regarded as forerunners of the more elaborate *voces mysticae* so characteristic of them. Indeed, already on the early Hellenistic amulet from Crete, the originally impersonal *ephesia grammata* are addressed as powers in their own right: they have become the names of supernatural entities, just as the later *voces mysticae* come to function as the secret and powerful names of the gods invoked in the spells.³⁸

Also, the relatively simple forms of the earlier tablets may be explained by the strong likelihood that the commissioning and depositing of tablets with simple written formulas were accompanied by *oral* prayers, invocations, and incantations. Gradually, with the growth of written language in Greek culture, these oral accompaniments were written down and took their place on the tablet alongside the traditional elements (the names of the targets and the deities and the verbs of binding).³⁹

While the evidence for the use of *charaktêres* and engraved figures on earlier tablets is virtually nonexistent, the stone monument discussed previously does incorporate, in the midst of its text, the head of a ram. In this regard, it may also be worth noting that the use of dolls or figurines with early *defixiones* may provide another instance in which an originally separate item (the figurine) eventually moved onto the tablet itself (as a drawing of a human figure).

Still, there can be no mistaking the more elaborate forms of speech in tablets of the Roman period; in general, they are the most certain indicators of a late date. A partial catalogue of these nonstandard forms of speech would include the following:

1. palindromes;
2. *charaktêres* (see Figure 1);
3. vowel-series⁴⁰;
4. triangles, squares, “wings,” and other geometric shapes made up of letters;

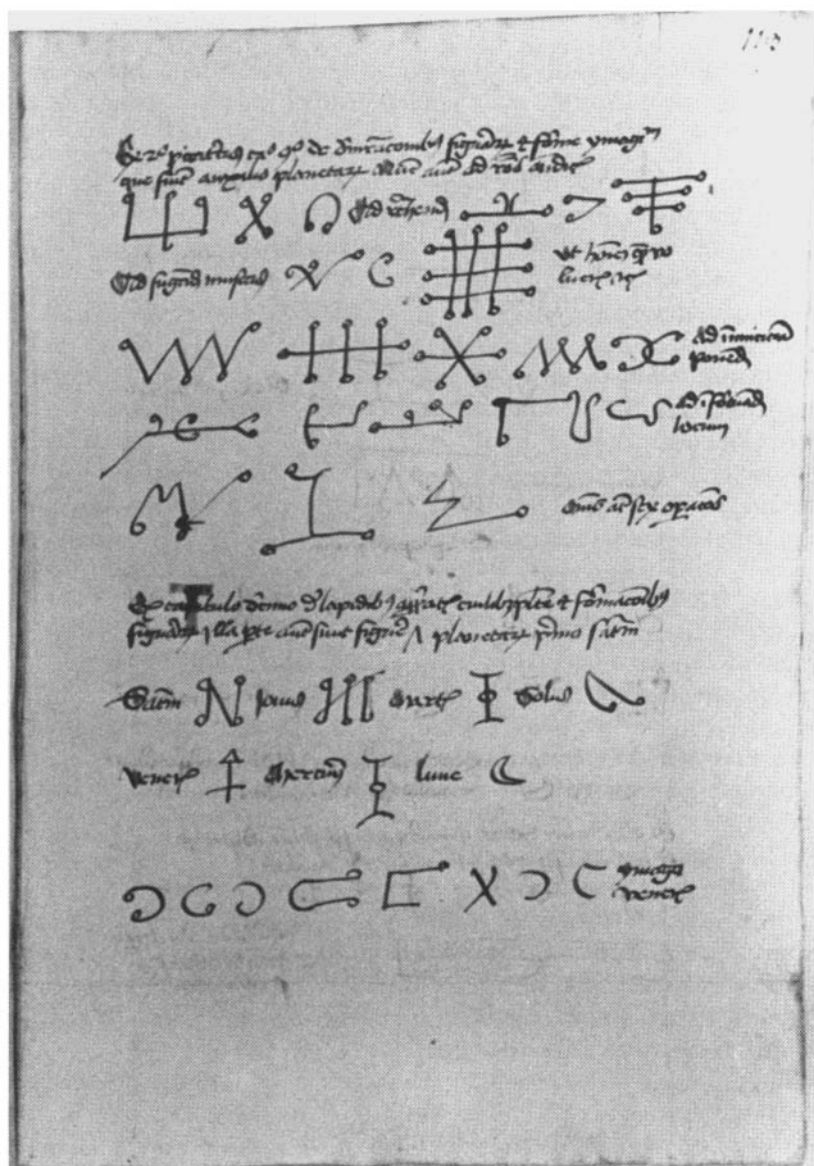


FIGURE 1. *Charaktères* from a medieval Arabic manuscript of the *Ghayat al-Hakim* or *The Aim of the Sage*. Translated into Latin, it was known as the *Picatrix*. This elaborate treatise on celestial powers and their practical application develops a theory of correspondences between the celestial forces, especially the signs of the zodiac, and a set of written signs or symbols, that is, these *charaktères*. (Österreichische Nationalbibliothek: Cod. 3317, fol. 113v. By permission.)

5. names ending in *-êl* and *-ôth*, clearly built on Jewish and Hebrew models;

6. *voces mysticae*—words not immediately recognizable as Greek, Hebrew, or any other language in common use at the time;

7. recurrent formulas (called *logoi* in *PGM*) consisting of several *voces mysticae*; these are often abbreviated in recipes, for example, “the abc-formula.”

Traditionally, these “unintelligible” forms of speech have been treated as meaningless gibberish or nonsense. To be fair, such interpretations are not modern inventions but reach back to ancient critics. In his satire on such practices (*Philopseudes/Lover of Lies*, chap. 10), Lucian of Samosata has his protagonist protest: “Unless you can show me how it’s physically possible for a fever to be frightened or a swelling to be scared away from the groin by a holy name or a word in some foreign language, the cases you quote are still only old wives tales.” On the other hand, the Neoplatonic philosopher Iamblichus (ca. 300 C.E.), in his passionate defense of the same practices (he calls them “theurgy”), argues that *charaktêres* and foreign names,⁴¹ when used properly, convey to the theurgist the powers of the gods. He adds that names lose their theurgical power when translated into Greek.⁴² In the long run, however, the view of Lucian has prevailed and impressed itself on Sir James Frazer and his successors. Only recently have efforts been made to reverse these effects, efforts directed at understanding the foundations of such beliefs, without slipping into Iamblichus’s posture of defending them as true.⁴³

At the center of these efforts lies the work of the anthropologist Stanley J. Tambiah. His 1968 essay, “The Magical Power of Words,” though written with no apparent knowledge of ancient Mediterranean *defixiones*, presents a definitive repudiation of the “gibberish theory” regarding *voces mysticae*.⁴⁴ For our purposes, we may concentrate on one aspect of Tambiah’s argument, his analysis of special languages in Sinhalese spells employed to invoke demons of illness. In this case, where the healer is conscious of addressing a “foreign” audience of supernatural spirits, it would be entirely inappropriate to use one’s native, human, ordinary language. Thus the mysterious language of spells does not violate the basic rule of speech communication, that the parties involved must understand one another, because the *voces mysticae* represent “the language the demons can understand.”⁴⁵ Along similar lines, P. C. Miller and R. T. Wallis have recently shown in separate essays that in the culture of late antiquity it was precisely the use of unintelligible forms of speech that signaled the passage from the lower mundane

realms into the sphere of true spiritual conversation with higher orders of being.⁴⁶ The words of the Christian philosopher Clement of Alexandria (ca. 200 C.E.) represent a wide consensus that normal human language was not appropriate in addressing gods or any higher beings: "Plato assigns a special discourse (*dialektos*) to the gods and he reaches this conclusion from the experience of dreams and oracles but most of all from those possessed by *daimones*, for they do not speak their own language or discourse but rather the language of the *daimones* who possess them."⁴⁷

Of course, this is not to say that either those who commissioned *defixiones* or those who prepared them understood the *voces mysticae*. That was not the point. What mattered was the belief that these invocations and secret names were understood by the spirits themselves. Just as in ordinary human encounters, the key to success was to address these superior beings by their proper names and titles. In this sense, although it is interesting to note that many of the *voces* have turned out to be "real" words borrowed and frequently distorted from other "real" languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, Persian, and various forms of ancient Egyptian and Coptic), this finding is quite irrelevant to understanding the attitudes of those who purchased the tablets. For the anxious client, what mattered was the belief that the *magos* possessed the special knowledge to get these names and titles right. But as the many variants reveal, we can see that even they did not always copy the *voces* with total accuracy. We should also consider the likelihood that there was an element of status enhancement for professionals in maintaining a core of "unintelligible" discourse, for this left the client with little choice but to assume that the specialist alone, through superior wisdom, understood the meaning and significance of this higher language. There is much more to Tambiah's essay, but on the single issue of "unintelligibility" he has pulled the rug from under smug interpreters who have, it turns out, vainly contrasted the benighted irrationality of superstitious and ignorant primitives with their own modern rationality.

Charaktêres occupy a special place in the symbol system of ancient spells, for their omnipresence—though not earlier than the second century C.E.—as well as for the scant attention they have received. They appear on amulets,⁴⁸ *defixiones*,⁴⁹ a private divination apparatus from Pergamum,⁵⁰ in recipes (including Greek, Hebrew, Coptic, and Arabic collections) for *defixiones* and other spells,⁵¹ and in treatises of ancient Gnostics.⁵² In addition, they appear in a public inscription on the wall of the theater at Miletus, where each of seven *charaktêres* is associated with two sets of vowels: under each set of *charaktêres* and vowels appears the

following request, “Holy One, protect the city of Miletus and all its inhabitants,” and under the full set of seven columns follows a one-line prayer, “Archangels, protect the city of Miletus and all its inhabitants.”⁵³ Clearly, these *charaktères* were seen as signs and sources of great power. They embody the classic definition of a religious symbol as embodying and transmitting power from the divine realm to the human. But what precisely did they represent—traditional gods, archangels, planets, or something else? No doubt, like other special forms of writing on *defixiones*, they were taken to be mysterious and powerful, which means that their “real” origins were not understood at all. Among competing interpretations regarding their origin, the most promising would appear to be astrological—that they symbolized various planetary powers, powers that were in turn commonly identified with angels and archangels by late Roman astrologers.⁵⁴ But whatever their origins, their presence as the sole powers invoked on tablets from Apamea (“most holy” and “lords”), Beth Shean (“fearsome”), and Hebron tells us that they had taken on a life of their own and were seen as personifying, representing, and embodying great power.⁵⁵

A good number of the *defixiones*, most gem amulets, and many of the recipes in formularies also include drawings of human beings, animals, or mixed creatures (for example, the famous “Anguipede” figure of a human torso with head of a rooster and snakes for legs). In general terms, the meaning or function of these figures is obvious: like the *voces mysticae* which they represent, they embody and make present the reality of the various actors mentioned in the spell (the human target and the supernatural beings, rarely the client). Here again, and in contrast to early views, we can see that the function of figures on the tablets is by no means unique or distinctive to them. For, as André Grabar has noted in his study of early Christian iconography, images in late antiquity “seem to have been used more frequently than at other historical periods and that an extraordinary importance was attributed to them. . . . [T]he portrait of the sovereign replaced the sovereign. . . . [P]ortraits of persons of such rank (i.e., Roman magistrates and Christian bishops) have the value of judicial testimony or of a signature.”⁵⁶ On the role of images in Jewish and Christian settings, he notes that “images were intended to do more than recall events of the past: they were intended in some sense to perpetuate the intervention of God . . . just as the sacraments did.”⁵⁷ In line with these observations, we may conclude that the drawings of mummies, dismembered bodies, and figures wrapped about with straps or snakes were intended to anticipate and enact the desired outcome of the spell itself, to bind or in some other way harm the target. But like

many other features, these drawings have been little studied. A. D. Nock's plea of 1929 for a study of these drawings and their iconographic bearings remains largely unheeded.⁵⁸

Gods, *Daimones*, and Spirits of the Dead

The role of images and figures as mediators of power brings us finally to the names of deities and other spiritual entities on *defixiones*. In discussing these names, it is essential to keep in mind three fundamental characteristics of the "spiritual universe" of ancient Mediterranean culture: first, the cosmos literally teemed, at every level and in every location, with supernatural beings; second, although ancient theoreticians sometimes tried to sort these beings into clear and distinct categories, most people were less certain about where to draw the lines between gods, *daimones*, planets, stars, angels, cherubim, and the like; and third, the spirit or soul of dead persons, especially of those who had died prematurely or by violence, roamed about in a restless and vengeful mood near their buried body.

It has long been customary to distinguish ancient *defixiones* from other areas of ancient culture—that is, to separate magic from religion—by pointing out, as does H. Versnel, that the gods named in them "invariably either belong to the domain of death, the underworld, the chthonic or are reputed to have connections with magic."⁵⁹ But such observations tell us precious little, for the supernatural beings named in *defixiones* appear also in what we otherwise call ancient religion, where virtually every god or spirit reveals some connection with death and the underworld. In short, when Jewish (and later Christian) elements (angels, archangels, and the figure of IAO, the god of Israel) are taken into account, they will be seen to have almost no chthonic ties. In short, the presence or absence of chthonic deities offers no hope for a satisfactory differentiation between "religion" and "magic."

Once it became customary to write down, rather than recite, the names of the gods to whom the spells were addressed, a clear order of preference became apparent: Hermes is by far the most common; he is followed by Hekate, Kore and Persephone, Hades (also known as Pluto), Gê/Gaia, "the holy goddess" (at Selinus in Sicily), and finally Demeter (often cited together with "the gods with her"). Others addressed include Zeus,⁶⁰ "all the gods and goddesses," Kronos, the Mother of the gods, and the Furies (Erinyes).⁶¹ On Latin tablets, the most common names are the Manes (spirits of deceased ancestors), Jupiter, Pluto (the Greek Hades), Nemesis, Mercury (the Greek Her-

mes), and various water nymphs. Now the 130 or so tablets from Bath, dedicated to the goddess Sulis (also called Minerva) must be added at the top of the list. Finally come those highly syncretized spells, primarily from North Africa and Egypt in the third to sixth centuries C.E., where gods, *daimones* with secret names, personified words (for example, EULAMON), *voces mysticae* containing elements of foreign deities (IAO, ERESCHIGAL), and especially a variety of Egyptian deities come together to form the rich international blend that is so characteristic of late antique culture in all of its dimensions. Among the Egyptian contributions, the most prominent are Thoth (commonly identified with Hermes), Seth, and Osiris. In addition to contributions from Egypt, one finds significant elements from Jewish sources, from Persia, and at a later date from Christianity. In general, two factors seem to have governed the selection of gods and spirits and their names: first, local customs and beliefs; and second, the recipes available through the formularies owned and used by local experts. In this sense, we may use what we read on *defixiones* as a reasonably accurate measure of prevailing beliefs at particular times and places.

Like other forms of human speech with which they show close similarities (legal,⁶² cultic,⁶³ epistolary⁶⁴), the language of *defixiones* is highly formulaic.⁶⁵ Various schemes have been proposed for organizing these formulas, most recently by C. Faraone. He proposes a simple yet comprehensive threefold division of styles or types, although he emphasizes that all three could be used at one and the same time, even on a single tablet⁶⁶:

1. the direct binding formula ("I bind X!"): Faraone calls this a performative utterance, designed to operate automatically, through the effective force of the words themselves and without intervention from any supernatural source; here it should be recalled, however, that gods may have been invoked *orally*, when the tablet was either commissioned or deposited;
2. prayer formulas that appeal directly or indirectly for supernatural assistance ("Restrain X!");
3. persuasive analogies in which the client expresses the wish that the target should take on the characteristics of something mentioned in the spell ("As this lead is cold and useless, so may X be cold and useless!"); this, too, must have been regularly coupled, even if orally, with an appeal for divine assistance.⁶⁷

To these basic types we may add a partial list of recurrent features in the language or discourse of the *defixiones*: repetition, pleonasm, metaphor