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The Use of Curse Tablets among Slaves in Rome and its Western Provinces[1]

Abstract

During the 1960s, in the hey-day of slave-studies, it was generally considered that in Roman antiquity slaves resorted to malign magic to curse their masters, using techniques learned from wandering astrologers who visited the household. This notion drew indirectly upon the Marxist discourse of class-struggle and also took for granted that there was a specific 'religion of slaves' that was significantly different from what was taken to be 'Roman religion'. More recently, it has been argued that recourse to writing curses by slaves should be understood in postcolonial terms as a form of group-resistance to the dominant power. A close analysis of surviving curse texts, however, suggests that neither of these positions is convincing. The present contribution focuses not on the motives that slaves might have had in writing a curse but, rather, on the access they may have had to this particular *dispositif*. The argument is that slaves resorted in this area to what they understood as local practice.

Keywords: Curse tablets, slavery, class conflict, interpersonal conflict, punishment, *ergastulum*, routinised practice

1 Introduction

One of the most engaging subjects in the sociological study of curse tablets in the classical world is that of the motives and interpersonal conflicts these objects reflect. However, synchronic analyses tend to obscure patterns of collective behaviour, as well as the dynamics of change and continuity. Social practices must be located within the parameters of space and time if we are to take account of local traditions, appropriations, innovations, or

1 I would like to thank Christopher Faraone for inviting me to contribute to the present issue of *RRE* even though I did not participate in the Symposium 'Blessings and Curses in Antiquity' at Lonato del Garda, Italy, 21–24 June, 2018. I also thank Richard Gordon for his meticulous editing. Apart from *DTM* (= Blänsdorf 2012) and *Tab. Sul.* (= Tomlin 1988), epigraphic abbreviations are taken from EDCS (Clauss/Slaby Epigraphic Database, online).

DOI 10.1628/rre-2019-0023
ISSN 2199-4463

assimilations. The social reproduction of a given practice involves the adoption of a pattern of behaviour taken to be appropriate in dealing with the types of situation that the practice is intended to tackle. My goal here is not to explore the motives that led slaves in late republican and early imperial Rome to use *defixiones*, but to examine the kind of access they had to the knowledge that was required in order to write such texts. This question was first raised in the 1960s, when the study of ancient slavery was at its peak, but has not been revisited in depth since then.[2] My aim is to offer a general overview, drawing mainly on examples from the city of Rome dating from the first century BCE onwards.

2 Slave religion, slave magic?

The publication in 1965 of the first edition of Joseph Vogt's *Sklaverei und Humanität* marked something of a caesura in the study of ancient slavery.[3] According to Vogt, slavery was the price that Greco-Roman civilisation paid in order to develop a cultural system as sophisticated as that of the *polis* within a hostile ecosystem.[4] By degrees, however, the classical world attempted to smooth the rougher edges of the institution by developing more humanitarian models of master-slave relations. This thesis provoked a sharp debate during the 1980s and the 1990s, mainly led, as far as the ancient world was concerned, by the Marxian GIREA group at Besançon.[5] Even if the 'golden-age' of slave studies seems to have passed, the controversy continues to resurface more or less regularly.[6]

One of the problems raised by this debate is the question of slave participation in Greco-Roman religion. In the case of the Roman world, the finding that public slaves were among the *publici sacerdotales* was considered by some as sufficient proof of their integration in the religious life of the city, while, for others, the fact that they could not officiate at ceremonies

2 Cf. recently Alvar Nuño 2017a.

3 Cf. Finley 1980.

4 Vogt 1965, followed by an enlarged ed. in 1972, and an *Ergänzungsheft* of later essays in 1983. The core thesis however was published already in Vogt 1953. Vogt himself, a die-hard antisemitic Catholic and long-standing member of the NSDAP during the Nazi-period, had retired from his chair in Tübingen in 1962 at the age of 67 before most of these publications appeared; see the very fair account by his former pupil Karl Christ (Christ 1989, 63–124).

5 On the variety of different stances adopted towards the study of ancient slavery in the twentieth century, cf. Finley 1980; Gamauf 2001; McKeown 2007.

6 Cf. Webster 2005; Dondin-Payre and Tran 2017.

suggested that they must have established a religion of their own, removed from public religion, which would have cemented the ties of class identity.[7]

Surprisingly, recourse to the use of curse tablets has been virtually sidelined in this debate. Although an analysis of curse tablets might have been a useful tool that could have shed some light on the debate, allusion to this kind of practice has been characterised by preconceptions about 'magic' that have required some strangely contorted arguments to render the researchers' theses compatible with the documentary evidence. The most prominent example here is Franz Bömer (1911–2004), whose massive work on the religion of slaves in the Greek and Roman worlds set out to determine whether there were significant differences between the religious activities of the free population and slaves.[8] His main conclusion was negative: it is not possible to distinguish between the two, since both slaves and citizens formed part of the same system of practices and beliefs – including magic – and indeed cooperated with each other.[9] On the other hand, he considered magic and popular beliefs to be the lowest form of religion: although they were not unaware of magic, members of the upper strata of society did not usually practice it, while the group of beliefs that he terms 'absurd' and 'naive' *(erstaunlich engstirniger Wunderglaube)* was the natural sphere of slaves, freedmen and the lower strata of the population.

In the absence of more effective means of mastering the vicissitudes of everyday life, members of the lower strata resorted to subterfuge and irrational beliefs such as magic. One could not expect those who used curses to have had a more sophisticated understanding of religion: everyday difficulties meant that they fell into 'spiritual torpor' *(geistige Trägheit)* and apathy *(Stumpfheit)*. Bömer's views concerning slaves' recourse to curses thus reproduced the conventional bourgeois views of his time concerning lower-class religiosity, epitomised in the German term *persönliche* (or *individuelle*) *Laienreligiosität*. Slaves may have collaborated in magic rituals with their

7 The most extensive work on slavery and religion in the Greco-Roman world is, without a doubt, that by Bömer 1958–1963, who defended Vogt's postulates and identified harmonious social cohesion between slaves and masters in the sphere of religion. Conversely, Štaerman 1961 and Štaerman 1969, 216–230, champion the thesis of a slave religion (for a synthesis of Soviet studies on ancient slavery, cf. Raskolnikoff 1980). More recently, Bodel 2008, 248–266 has suggested that, in the domestic sphere, slaves would have had their own *penates*, something that Van Andringa 2009, 217–244 denies. North 2012, 67–95 provides a good overview of the debate, along the lines proposed by contributors to the volume edited by Annequin and Garrido-Hory 1994. Cf. also Amiri 2016 and Peralta 2017.

8 Like Vogt, Bömer too sympathised with the Nazi regime and was a member of the NSDAP from 1937. After the war, he spent his entire career as a Gymnasium teacher in Hamburg, while also compiling substantial commentaries on Ovid's *Fasti* and *Metamorphoses*.

9 Bömer 1963 (vol. 4), 974–980.

masters, but at the same time were more inclined than the latter to resort to magic because they were of low social origins and were more susceptible to fraudulent religious practices and 'mumbo jumbo'. How did they acquire the necessary knowledge? Here a passage from Cato's *De agri cultura* of the mid-second century BCE seemed to offer an answer – an answer that has proved attractive to several researchers who were otherwise Bömer's ideological opposites – that slaves would have sought the services of itinerant magicians and seers and afterwards employed their techniques for their own purposes.[10] This might suggest that there was a specific procedure for casting a curse that could be transmitted, propagated, and reproduced over time. In other words, this perspective paved the way for analysing the use of curse tablets in the classical world from a diachronic perspective, examining the dynamics of change and continuity within a specific social and legal group, namely that of the slaves. Unfortunately, no one working on the topic in the Golden Age of slave studies chose to explore this possibility.

In contrast, the dominant paradigm until more or less the end of the twentieth century viewed magic as a unitary system of rituals and beliefs that were diametrically opposed to 'Roman religion', itself understood as the religion of the *Vrbs* that had been exported to and established in the various provinces of the empire as these became consolidated over the course of Rome's imperialist expansion. More recently, however, two major shifts have occurred. First, regional studies conducted from a postcolonial perspective have highlighted the diversity and importance of the indigenous component – including forms of resistance, hybridisation, and mimesis – in relation to Roman institutions, including religion.[11] Secondly, the category 'magic' has been assimilated into the more general category of 'religion'. Once the practice of writing *defixiones* came to be viewed as a form of religious expression, the incorporation of magic into research on slavery and religion became straightforward. In some quarters, this has led to the re-conceptualisation of magic as a form of resistance to official Roman religion.[12] This new approach allows that the use of curse tablets underwent a process similar to the provincial assimilation of Roman religion, with the

10 See Cato, *De Agri cultura* 5.4, followed by Columella, *De Re Rustica* 1.8.5–6 (60–65 CE), both cited by Bömer 1963 (vol. 4), 972; also, Maróti 1957, 91–102. Interestingly enough, Varro makes no reference to this advice in his *Rerum Rusticarum libri*, dated 37 BCE.

11 Cf., e. g., Pitts and Versluys 2015; van Dommelen 2014; Suárez 2011, 115–130; Hingley 2005; Webster 2001, 209–225; Woolf 1997, 339–350; Webster and Cooper 1996.

12 Some of the authors who have suggested that magic represented a form of resistance to the established order include: MacMullen 1966, 95–127; Phillips 1986, 2677–2773; Hidalgo de la Vega 2008, 27–43; Bradley 1989, 55–58. 74–76. 92–93. 107–108 interprets the magical practices of slaves as something essentially different from official religion. McKeown 2012,

same conflicting dynamics of syncretism, mutation, specificity and adaptation, but still views their use specifically by slaves as a form of resistance to the dominant order.

If this view is correct, it is legitimate to ask how slaves in the Roman empire created different forms of religious expression to those of their masters. Were slaves involved in propagating their native forms of religious expression throughout the Roman empire? Were the *vernae* – slaves born to other slaves – responsible for merging the religious customs inherited from their parents with the pantheons of their masters?

When formulating this type of question, it is tempting to compare ancient with American slavery, especially that practised on plantations in the Caribbean, the southern states of the USA, and Brazil. Analogies with American slavery have anyway been a constant in studies on ancient slavery since the 1980s.[13] However, in contrast to the case of New World slavery, there is insufficient evidence to affirm that slaves in the late republic and throughout the Roman empire practised their own form of religion (including the use of curse tablets as a sub-set of religious practice) different to that of the rest of society, although it is possible that they experienced limitations stemming from their status.[14]

Before proceeding further, it will be useful to take a brief detour in order to make clear to the reader the limitations of the sources. These limitations impose serious restrictions on the study of the use of curse tablets by slaves in the Latin-speaking West. On the other hand, some progress can be made by working around these limitations.

3 Limitations of the sources

One of the main problems encountered in a sociological study of curse tablets in Rome is the paucity of information in the sources regarding their authorship. In most cases, the person who performed or commissioned the curse is not named, and in the few instances where his or her name is included, there is no indication of social status and only very occasionally

279–308, however, acknowledges on p. 287 that 'the evidence on the degree of "resistance" reflected in slave use of magic is […] surprisingly ambiguous'.

13 Cf., e. g., Hodkinson and Geary 2012; Kleijwegt 2009; Webster 2005; Annequin 1985; Bradley 1984.

14 The only cases where clear comparisons can be made are the use of *obeah* as a source of charismatic power in Afro-Atlantic slave uprisings and the alleged supernatural powers of the leaders of the Roman slave revolts, such as Eunus. Cf. Rucker 2001, 94–100 and the account of Eunus in Diodorus Siculus 34/35.2.5.

is descent mentioned. Where it is mentioned, the problem is how to decide whether the indication of descent refers to the father or the master of the person named (whether the *defigens* or the *defictus*). Although it does not belong to the group of materials that I shall discuss here, the following example clearly illustrates the problem of descent in the names that appear in *defixiones*:

> Docilianus / (son/slave?) of Brucerus / to the most holy goddess / Sulis. / I offer the one who / stole my cloak / whether man or woman / whether slave or free […].[15]

In this case, the editors of the inscription have opted to consider the genitive *Bruceri* as a patronymic designating the father of Docilianus; however, it could equally refer to his master. It is worth noting that *Docilis* is attested as a slave-name ('docile one').[16] Moreover, the suffix *-anus* was in common use in Britain and was often used in slave names. Thus, in a curse from Leicester, where there is no doubt concerning the unfree status of the people cursed, names ending in *-inus* or *-anus* are frequent: *Venustinus, Calaminus, Vendicina, S[enic]ianus* …[17]

Alternatively, one might infer the social (or rather legal) status of the *defigens* either by reference to the status of the persons cursed in the text or on the basis of the motivation. A plausible example is a tablet from Ostia dated between the second and first centuries BCE, which lists a number of victims who, for reasons unknown, had offended the person (or persons) who commissioned the curse:

> Agatemeris, the slave of Man(i)lia. / Aquilea, hairdresser, slave of Fabia. / Caletiche, hairdresser, slave of Vergilia. / Hilaria, hairdresser, slave of Licinia. / Chreste, hairdresser, slave of Cornelia. / Hilara, hairdresser, slave of Seia. / Moscia, hairdresser. / Rufa, hairdresser, slave of Apilia. / Chila, hairdresser.[18]

The targets here are explicitly slaves who were working as hairdressers or ladies' maids *(ornatrices)* for female Roman citizens identified by their *nomen*. The legal status of the *defigens* is not absolutely certain, but the fact that slaves alone are cursed suggests that s/he was also a slave.

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15 *Tab. Sul.* 10 = Urbanová 2018, 517 no. 247: *Docilianus / Bruceri / deae sanctissim(a)e / Suli / deuoueo eum [q]ui / caracellam meam / inuolauerit si / uir si femina si / seruus si liber …*

16 Solin 1996, 60.

17 For a synthesis of onomastic studies on this question, cf. Dondin-Payre 2011, 16–20. The Leicester curse was published in Tomlin 2008 = *AE* 2008, 792 (not in Urbanová 2018).

18 *AE* 1911, 195 = Kropp 2008, 1.4.3/1 = Urbanová 2018, 432 no. 13: *Agathemeris Manliae ser(ua) / Ac]hulea Fabiae ser(ua) ornatrix / Ca]letuche Vergiliae ser(ua) ornatrix / Hilara Liciniae [ser(ua) orn]atrix / Chreste Corn[eliae] ser(ua) ornatrix / Hilara Seiae ser(ua) ornatrix / Mosc(h)is ornatrix / Rufa Apeiliae ser(ua) ornatrix / Chila ornatrix.* I take it that the *defigens* did not know the names of the owners of *Mosc(h)is* and *Chila*.

Besides descent, a Greek, Hellenised, 'eastern', African, or Celtic name could suggest servile status. One would expect that, in a city such as the imperial capital, names would frequently indicate at least the slave's origin, for example through a geographical reference, such as *Agathyrsus*, *Thraecida*, *Asiaticus*, *Galata*, *Nilus*, or *Araxus*.[19] After all, allusions to an exotic provenance would increase the slave's market value. However, in the case of *defixiones* in the city of Rome, only Latin or Greek names appear.[20] In the case of Greek names, the *nomen* might allude to a *peregrinus*, a slave or a freedman. Thus curses from Rome contain names such as *Helenus*,[21] *Danae*,[22] *Eutychia*,[23] *Rhodine*,[24] *Nicea*, *Nicê*, *Porista*, *Demô*, *Asclepiades*, *Timê*, *Philaia*, *Caletic(he)*, *Menotia*,[25] *Philocomus*, *Antioc(h)us*, *P(h)arnace(s)*,[26] and *Pol[itor]ia*.[27]

One possible explanation for the absence of a wider variety of names in *defixiones* from Rome, which would indicate the presence of slaves from all corners of the empire, is simply that the picture is incomplete and will remain so until new discoveries are made. Another possibility is that slaves brought from regions where *defixiones* did not form part of local custom did not resort to this kind of practice but instead used other means to resolve their interpersonal conflicts. At the time when the use of *defixiones* became popular in Rome, around the first century BCE, the origins of slaves sold on the market of the *Vrbs* were highly diverse.[28] Their numbers were regu-

19 On the 'barbarous' slave-names of the city of Rome, Solin 1996, vol. 3. In contrast, Celtic names are common in the corpus of *defixiones* from Bath and Uley, and in the curses from L'Hospitalet du Larzac (Lambert 1994, 160–172), although, since these are Celtic regions, they may refer to *peregrini* who adopted the use of *defixiones*. The corpus of *defixiones* from Mainz includes a curse indicating a conflict between slaves, two of whom have orientalising names (Lamixa and Zerita, in *DTM* 25).

20 I have excluded *defixiones* related to the amphitheatre and the circus from my analysis, since it has been demonstrated that this type of curse was not related to the resolution of interpersonal conflict, but was used by different interests as a strategy to optimise the expected result in sports betting. On this question, cf. Gordon 2012, 66–71 and Tremel 2004, 54–55.

21 *CIL* 15.6265 = *Def Tab* 137 = Kropp 2008, 1.4.4/1 = Urbanová 2018, 432 no. 15 (Rome).

22 See n. 48 below.

23 See n. 48 below.

24 *CIL* I² 1012 = *Def Tab* 139 = *ILS* 8749 = *ILLRP* 1144 = Kropp 2008, 1.4.4/3 = Urbanová 2018, 433 no. 17 (Rome).

25 See n. 49 below (I have here omitted some of the names).

26 *ILLRP* Suppl. 154 = *AE* 1988, 1146 = 2004, 1895 = Kropp 2008, 1.5.6/1 = Urbanová 2018, 442 no. 35 (possibly from Campania).

27 See n. 51 below.

28 This includes the curse from the Vigna Manenti necropolis on the Via Latina (see n. 23) and the group of *defixiones* from Porta Salaria ('Johns Hopkins': Fox 1912 = *AE* 1912, 40 = *CIL* I² 2520 = Kropp 2008, 1.4.48–12 = Urbanová 2018, 434–439 nos. 20–24).

larly replenished by military campaigns, such as those of Caesar in Gaul (58–51 BCE), whence he brought back a million slaves according to the information given in some sensationalist literary sources.[29] The supply was also maintained by other major markets or by individuals enslaved because of crimes committed, such as the *servi poenae* and the *dediticii*. In addition, although this aspect is difficult to quantify, the slave market was also self-sufficient to some extent, stocked largely by *vernae*, or neonates that had been exposed.[30] Despite the vast geographical dispersion of the slave trade, onomastic studies of slaves in Rome have shown that slave names were governed by fashions among the slave-owning class rather than designed to indicate provenance.[31] Thus, in the particular case of *defixiones* from Rome, the onomastics merely reflect the fashion for giving slaves Greek names, regardless of their place of origin,[32] which is interesting in itself since it shows that slaves internalised their new names and lost the identity conferred by the names they bore prior to being treated as merchandise.

Despite the limitations of the sources, therefore, it is sometimes possible to identify the presence of slaves in *defixiones* with a considerable degree of confidence. Greek names and especially specific indications that reveal the social status of the curse's intended target – such as the term *ancilla* used in a first century CE curse from the Vigna Aquari necropolis, beyond the Porta Latina,[33] or the reference to an *ergasterion* mentioned in a tablet probably found in a tomb on the Via Latina[34] – suggest that slaves also used such tablets, at least in some situations. If this is so, then the question arises as to whether they had access to and reproduced their own forms of curse, or whether they drew upon local custom.

4 Access to local custom

One of the aims of the editors of this issue is to underscore that the use of curse tablets did not correspond to a static model that spread throughout the Mediterranean region but instead reflected the specific cultural and histori-

29 For the contingents of slaves captured by Caesar, cf. Plutarch, *Caesar* 15.3; Appian, *Keltika* 1.2 with Velleius Paterculus 2.47.1. Although some modern researchers take these figures to be valid, they are generally viewed as exaggerations: see Scheidel 2011, 295–296.

30 Scheidel 2011, 293 and 306–308.

31 Cf. Solin 1996.

32 Scheidel 2011, 304.

33 See again n. 48 below.

34 See n. 51 below.

cal context of the areas in which they have been found.[35] Recourse to *defixiones* opened up a wide range of possibilities, from unmediated, direct use by an individual who decided to write a curse for whatever reason, all the way to sophisticated curse formulas that added ostensive and inferential elements of a technical nature that required specialist knowledge. With such a varied range of cases, it seems sensible to adopt a micro-historical approach and analyse the materials at the local level.[36]

Irrespective of the issue of whether or not curse-tablets were often, or sometimes, written by intermediaries, an analysis of geographical distribution can roughly establish the degree to which the practice had been institutionalised. The value of *defixiones* lay not so much in the fulfilment of the desires articulated by the *defigentes* as in the 'ontological security' they conferred.[37] The social reproduction of more or less established modes of conduct – such as writing a curse – in order to fulfil social needs offered a pragmatic recourse the very existence of which created faith in the efficacy of such forms of action; in other words, the routinised practice of *defixiones* guaranteed their efficacy. Consequently, resort to a written curse was in many places a pertinent option for mediating interpersonal conflicts. In the western Roman empire, resort to curse tablets as an institutionalised practice is clearly evidenced at the temples of Sulis-Minerva in Bath, of Mercury at West Hill above Uley in Gloucestershire, of Isis and Mater Magna in Mainz, the amphitheatres at Trier and Carnuntum, the well at Rom (dép. Deux-Sèvres), the sacred pool of Les Jacobins, Le Mans (pays de la Loire), the baths at Amélie-les-Bains in eastern Narbonensis (dép. Pyrénées Orientales), and in late antiquity the fountain of Anna Perenna outside the Aurelian Walls of Rome, to give but a few examples. Unfortunately, much of the corpus of *defixiones* was published between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, at a time when scholars were unaware of the importance of including the archaeological record when editing a text.

Disregarding the possible intervention of a mediator, there were always pressures that limited individual creativity. Just as utterance involves constant innovation, so too could a person modify the wording of the curse being written, but this did not necessarily imply the rejection of generally accepted codes of conduct or routine forms of action.[38] The motives for writing curses were variable but not vague: the cases of the *defixiones in*

35 Cf., e. g., Murano 2013; Marco Simón 2011, 45–58; Gordon and Marco Simón 2011; Marco Simón 2010, 293–304; Lambert 1987, 10–17.

36 See also the contributions to this issue by McKie and Gordon.

37 Giddens 1979, 198–214.

38 Cf. Giddens 1991, 35–47.

fures from Bath or the agonistic *defixiones* from Hadrumetum, Carthage, and Rome show that there were local norms. These examples come from major centres that legitimated the use of curse tablets for a variety of reasons, whether tradition underpinned by the repute of a temple or the existence of local *officinae magicae* where ritual professionals offered specialist work for specific purposes. There is no reason to think that simpler *defixiones* from isolated provenances departed from a customary local practice.

Having established that the use of curse tablets was a routinised practice dependent on local cultural horizons, with a degree of recognisable individual originality but conditioned by external factors, we can turn to the question of the degree of access that slaves had to the use of *defixiones*, and explore whether they transmitted practices that could be identified as specific to their social status (such as the Afro-Atlantic *obeah* in colonial America) or developed their own identifiable models. It is noteworthy, for example, that there are practically no cases in the entire corpus of *defixiones* of curses aimed at explicitly avoiding corporal punishment (e. g., whipping), forced labour, or imprisonment in an *ergastulum*, although these questions may lay behind some curses. I have suggested elsewhere that one of the purposes of writing a curse was to avoid the spreading of rumours that could end up in family councils or trials where the accused slave could be punished,[39] but there are only two cases among the 500+ published *defixiones* known from the Latin-speaking western Roman empire in which the immediate target is the owner of the slave.[40] Both are in Greek, and both from Rome.[41] The limitations of the sources mentioned earlier render it impossible to establish a consistent picture, but it is possible to identify with some certainty almost twenty *defixiones* authored by slaves.[42] Despite the paucity of the information they provide, they should be read against the background of the slave's perceived risk of punishments and harsh labour conditions: cursing a fellow slave might in these cases have been a way of

39 Alvar Nuño 2019. On the relation between narrative and witchcraft accusations in the Roman World see also Macrae 2018.

40 The Magdeburg digital data-base of curse-tablets, TheDeMa, founded by Martin Dreyer (which is in the process of being transferred to Hamburg under the direction of Werner Riess) lists 487 curse-tablets in Latin, to which we should add a limited number, mainly from Carthage and Rome, in Greek.

41 In one case (*SEG* 14, 615 = *AE* 1955, 74, but see Robert and Robert 1955, 290–292 no. 292), a curse tablet dated to the third century CE, the *defigens*, one of the assistants of a military doctor named Artemidoros, wants to return to his homeland after his brother's death and curses his master for preventing him from doing so. The other is the case of Pol[itor]ia discussed below.

42 Alvar Nuño 2017a, 108–114.

halting the gossip that might eventuate in a family trial while, at the same time, the practice of cursing was tolerated because it did not question the authority of the *pater familias*.

In other religious practices, such as divination, that reflect situations of anxiety and uncertainty and strategies to overcome these, one explanation that has been proposed for the absence of conflict between master and slave is that in essence, the concerns of slaves in the Roman world were typical of a petit bourgeois mentality *(kleinbürgerliche Mentalität)*.[43] However, this hypothesis has been shown to be simplistic and uncritical in its analysis of the sources, because it does not take into account the capacity of ritual specialists to articulate individual problems using socially-accepted formulas.[44] The same may be true of *defixiones*. Moreover, in the case of those produced through the mediation of a specialist, we should not underestimate the possible deterrent effect of Roman legislation, however erratically it might have been applied.[45]

Just as ritual specialists could establish the limits of their trade, curses written by the *defigens* were conditioned by local forms of expression of interpersonal conflict.[46] Here we may invoke as comparanda the (auto-)biographical testimonies of former American slaves. The oral histories of former masters and slaves from Oklahoma edited by George Rawick contain statements that show how slave magic was useless against white masters.[47] These examples demonstrate explicit recognition of the limited effectiveness of magical action, and the same was surely true of the use of curse tablets in the Roman world. The *defixiones* which seem to have been written by slaves have other slaves or freedmen as their targets, revealing a world of conflict between individuals of the same social and legal status that bears little relationship to the idea of class-consciousness. The following curses, both from Rome, illustrate this point:

For Danae, the new slave of Capito. May you accept this sacrifice and devour Danae. May you have (may you also accept) Eutychia, the wife of Sotericus.[48]

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43 Kudlien 1991, 155.

44 Annequin 1992.

45 Cf. *Pauli Sententiae* 5.21.3–4; Tertullian, *Apologeticus* 35.12.

46 To mention one case in which there was a clearly-established curse pattern, namely that of the temple of Sulis-Minerva in Bath, there do not seem to have been social or legal restrictions on the deposition of curses. However, the formulas and motives were similar for citizens, *peregrini*, and slaves, and were usually limited to claims for the return of a stolen object. Cf. Alvar Nuño 2017a, 130.

47 Genovese 1972, 222.

48 *CIL* I^2 1013 = *DefTab* 138 = *ILLRP* 1145 = Kropp 2008, 1.4.4/2 = Urbanová 2018, 432–433 no. 16, from the necropolis of the Vigna Aquari (first century CE): *Danae ancilla no(v)icia /*

I invoke the Manes gods so that they destroy (them). I invoke (them) against my enemies: Domitia Omonia (slave) of Menecrates; I offer others: Nicaea of Cyrus, Nice, Porista, Asclepiades, Time, Ce, Philaia, Caletiche, Menotia, and in the same way the adversaries of fewer years.[49]

These curses reflect the friction generated between slaves by the arbitrary manner in which the *pater familias* gave or withheld favour. Where hierarchies arose based on greater or lesser proximity to the head of the family, some slaves were permitted to form their own families, work could be better or worse depending on the slave's position within the *familia*, there might be possibilities of acquiring a larger or smaller *peculium*, and so on. Such an arbitrary system fostered rivalry between slaves and excluded any possibility of developing class solidarity. Hence, the slaves themselves might create situations of social isolation or rejection ('mobbing') that could spur someone to write a *defixio* in an attempt to control the fragile network of interpersonal relationships. In effect, the paucity of curses by slaves targeting their masters is a testament to the 'success' of the slave system in late republican and early imperial Rome.

5 A special case

But there is an exception to every rule. As mentioned earlier, there are two curses from Rome, both in Greek, that do provide evidence of a slave's attempt to oppose the master. One of them is the case of the doctor's slave-assistant cited above, whose master refused to allow him to return home on the death of his brother.[50] The other, probably from a necropolis on the Via Latina and dating from the fourth century CE, runs:

Side A: (4 lines of *charaktêres*) PHANOIBIKUX PETRIADÊ KRATARNADÊ, Lord Angels! Restrain Clodia Valeria Sophrone and let her be unsuccessful in buying Pol[itor]ia.

Side B: 'ARTHU LAILAM SEMISILAM BACHUCH BACHAXICHUCH MENEBAICHUCH ABRASAX. Oh Gods! Restrain the matron of the workhouse, Clodia Valeria Sophrone and do not let her drag Pol[itor]ia to the workhouse to suffer the fate of death (?).[51]

Capitonis hanc (h)ostiam / acceptam habeas / et consumas Danae/ne(n) habes Eutychiam / Soterichi uxorem.

49 Panciera 1968 = Kropp 2008 1.4.4/15 = Urbanová 2018, 440 no. 27, from the Palatine (first century CE): *D(i) Manes co(m)<e>ndo ut / perdant // in{n}imicos me<o>s com(m)<e>ndo Domitia / Omonia Menecratis alius trado Nicea / Cyrus Nice Porista Demo Asc<le>piades / Time Ce Philaia Caletic(he) Menotia it<e>m{m} / a<d>versar(ios) annor(um) menor(es).*

50 See n. 41 above.

51 Wünsch 1909, 37–41 no. 2 = Gager 1992, 169–171, no. 78 with Alvar Nuño 2017b: Side A:

In view of the deployment of *voces magicae* here, it is plain that Pol[itor]ia sought the services of a ritual specialist. The sequence of *voces magicae* on side B of the curse (in Greek: Ἀρθυλαιλαμ Σεμεσιλαμ / Βαχυχ Βαχαξιχυχ Μενεβαιχυχ / Ἀβρασαξ) is somewhat similar to one that appears in one version of the instructions for creating a magical ring in a papyrus from Egypt, which runs: *Arphool Lailam Semesilam Iaeô* (*logos*) *bakaxichuch Abrasax aô archômilak menesilam Iaeô ouô bakaxichuch Abrasax ôii*, 'stop (whatever your aim is)'.[52] It also resembles the sequence *afthu lailam semeseilam aeiouo bachuch bakaxichuch menebaichuch abrasax bazabachuch menebaichuch abrasax* that appears in a small group of *defixiones* from Carthage, likewise completely unrelated to master-slave conflict: in one, the goal was to hinder the economic activity of a bath-house while the other targeted a group of charioteers *(aurigae)*.[53] In each sequence, as was often the case, the ritual specialists responsible creatively varied the elements, so that none of them falls into the group listed by Preisendanz as (more or less fixed) *logoi* in his Index XI.[54] Other signs of specialist knowledge are the complex sequence of *charaktêres* on Side A and the invocation to the angels/messengers (κύριοι ἄνγελοι) in A5–6, who are frequently invoked in the late Porta S. Sebastiano group, as well as in the magical papyri.[55]

Φανχοιβικυξ Πετριαδη / Κραταρναδ[η] κατάσχετε, κύριοι / ἄνγελοι, Κλ[ω]δίαν Βαλερίαν Σω-/φρόνην [καὶ] μὴ Πωλ[ειτορ]ίας τυ-/χ(ε)ῖν. Side B: Ἀρθυλαιλαμ Σεμεσιλαμ / Βαχυχ Βαχαξιχυχ Μενεβαιχυχ / Ἀβρασαξ κύριοι θεοί, κατά-/σχετε τὴν [ἐργ]αστιλλαρί[αν] Κλω-/δίαν Βαλερίαν Σω[φρό]νην / καὶ μὴ ἀγέτω Πωλ[ιτορ]ίαν ἐ[ργ]ά-/στιλλ[ο]ν [καὶ] ἀψυχ[ία]ν [ἰδεῖν]. The name 'Politoria' is not listed in *LGPN (Lexicon of Greek Personal Names)*. Wünsch has also suggested Πωλχερία, *Pulcheria*, but I believe that Πωλειτορίας is a more correct reading, possibly from the ancient toponym Politorium in Latium (e. g., Livy l.33.1; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiq.* 3.37.4; 38.1 etc.), despite the fact that Pliny, *Hist. Nat.* 3.68 claims it was one of the Latin towns that had disappeared without trace *(sine vestigiis)*. On the other hand, it must be allowed that there are numerous alternative names of the required length in Latin beginning with Pol-.

52 *PGM* V 365–367 = Dzwiza 2014, 456: αρφοολ | Λαιλαμ Σεμεσιλαμ Ιαεω (λόγος) βακα|ξιχυχ Ἀβρασὰξ αω αρχωμιλακ | μενεσιλαμ Ἰαεω ουω βακαξιχυχ | Ἀβρασὰξ ωιι, κατάσχες τὸ δεῖνα πρᾶγμα. This version is said to be from the 'correct original'; a simpler version appears in l.349–350.

53 αφθυ λαιλαμ σεμεσειλαμ αεηιουω βαχυχ βακαχυχ βακαξιχυχ μενεβαιχυχ αβρασαξ βαζαβαχυχ μενεβαιχυχ αβρασαξ in a) *SEG* 9, 838 = Tremel 2004 no. 66 (circus); b) *SEG* 9, 839 = *AE* 1935, 234 and 235 (bathhouse of Falerius/Falernus).

54 Preisendanz 1941, 238–243.

55 Porta S. Sebastiano: Wünsch 1898 nos. 17; 18; 23; 24 etc. = *Def Tab* nos. 156 l.39; 157 ll.18–19; 162 l.22; 163 l.34 etc. Papyri: Preisendanz 1941, 48–49 s. v. ἄγγελος. Mastrocinque 2005, 45–59 has suggested that the *vox magica* Εὐλάμων comes from the Aramaic *alam* or the Hebrew *olam*, 'eternity'. Similarly, the collocation Βαχυχ Βαχαξιχυχ is very common in the Porta S. Sebastiano texts (see, e. g., Wünsch 1898, nos. 17 l.17–18; 20 ll.a 18–21, 36–40; b 18–25 etc.; cf. Audollent 1904, 506 and 514–515 [Index VII]); and at least once at the

This fourth-century curse is unusual not so much in its exemplification of the creative capacity of the ritual specialist as for its transgression of the implicit norms regarding the use of *defixiones*. Formally, it clearly draws on the Greco-Egyptian curse tradition,[56] but the social context for which it was used is completely new. This does not mean that there was a magical tradition used exclusively by slaves to solve their problems independent of the dominant system of collective beliefs and practices. Rather, it shows that individual ritual specialists, who of course were not limited to reproducing 'vernacular' curse-types, were capable of experimenting with the form. The curse against Pol[itor]ia seems to be roughly contemporary with the well-known group of well over 40 tablets, almost all in Greek but with a couple in Latin, from a mausoleum just outside the Porta S. Sebastiano at the beginning of the ancient Via Appia, most of which are directed against charioteers and beast-fighters. We might speculate that the person who wrote the curse for her was aware of the work of this practitioner in the context of public spectacles but transposed the model for a quite different purpose, namely to prevent Pol[itor]ia from being sold to Clodia Valeria Sophrone. The brevity of his text, though, reflects Po[litor]ia's likely lack of ready money.

However that may be, this specialist, like that of the Porta S. Sebastiano, seems to have been at home working in both Greek and Latin. The term [ἐργ]αστιλλαρί[αν] that appears in the side B, line 4 of the text is a neologism formed by fusing the Latin word *ergastulum* and the Greek ἐργαστήριον. Wünsch interpreted it in the Latin sense, a prison for rebellious (field) slaves. However, Hadrian is supposed to have banned the use of *ergastula* in Italy (*HA Hadr*. 18.10). This ban may often have been ignored,[57] but given the language it seems preferable to suppose that the Greek meaning of ἐργαστήριον has here modified the semantic meaning of *ergastulum*. If so, the possibilities range between a brothel and a textile mill, both of them usual places of work for slave women in late-antique Rome, often run by freed-women like Clodia Valeria Sophrone, the target of this curse.[58]

Fountain of Anna Perenna: *sacras sa(n)ctas a supteris et angilis* (*AE* 2008, 223 l.1 with Blänsdorf's commentary [2010, 239–240]).

56 This is surely due to its late date. This may also help explain its provision of more details regarding the motivation than we find in earlier *defixiones*.

57 E.g., Apuleius, *Apol.* 47.6; *Cod. Theod*. 7.13.8; 9.40.3. Socrates, *Historia ecclesiastica* 5.18 (Migne, *PG* 67, p. 611), recounts that the emperor Theodosius demolished an *ergastulum* hidden in a mill in the city of Rome.

58 On slave labour in the late-antique textile industry, Harper 2011, 128–143. On prostitution, Harper 2011, 304–314.

6 Conclusion

In general, then, slaves who resorted to curse tablets drew upon customary practice in their local contexts. Their behaviour regarding the use of curses did not vary substantially from that of any other member of society, which is one of the reasons why we cannot detect a specific cursing technique exclusive to slaves. Even if we can detect a degree of individual creativity in the pattern of writing a *defixio*, there were external factors that limited the individual's capacity to imagine radically new modes of conduct. Local customs were, thus, self-limiting and, in general, reproduced the social order rather than being deviant practices. In the event that slaves sought the services of a ritual specialist, this latter could reformulate the terms of the petition, refuse to provide a service that entailed a risk for their work, or, in a few isolated cases, agree to transgress customary practices for reasons unknown to us. Local specialists therefore exercised control over possible efforts to contravene the norms. The main point, however, is that when curse-tablets were used to resolve conflict between slaves, they were deployed in accordance with local custom: slaves who chose this option tended to respect social hierarchies and limit themselves to what we might call 'horizontal' conflicts, i. e., those between other members of the slave or libertine group, even if the source of these conflicts was the slave system itself. There is no convincing evidence for a specific or typical kind of 'slave magic', understood in terms of class conflict.

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