

DTA 87: A view into the “Business of Magic”
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The world of Greek magic is a rare point of Classical studies which has not been explored to its full potential. This is partly due to the unfortunate circumstance of the lack of extant sources; scholarly interest, too, until recently, has waned. Extant materials have been divided neatly into fixed categories. This has been the case especially with curse tablets, which have perhaps gained the most interest of any other topic of Greek magic. Much work has been done on the possible authors and the plausible recipients of these curse tablets. Yet one category of interaction has yet to be explored: that of the relationship between magicians, and how this relationship might appear in our sources. Thus another look at a few curse tablets which have been neatly placed in a set context may provide us with a new vision and insight into the process of their production and the practitioners behind the scenes; that is, the “business of magic.”

The text upon which comes the focus of this paper is *DTA 87*, a curse tablet from the region of Attica. It is dated by Wünsch¹ to the 4th C B.C., where the context seems to be one tavern-keeper cursing another. The text of the tablet leads Faraone² to categorize it in the context of “binding” spells, often seen in a clearly competitive retail context. Many scholars have agreed, and the general consensus has thus been to assign this curse tablet to a business context in which one tavern owner has cursed another in hopes of destabilizing the production and profit of the mentioned sellers.

The professional aspect of the Greek magical practitioner is noted in several Greek texts, such as Plato’s *Republic* and Gorgias’ *Encomium of Helen*, where magicians are described as having *technê*, or a special skill in a particular art. Just as a sculptor would have used his expertise in creating a statue, an ancient magician was considered to have used their skill in the production of materials such as spells, curse tablets, and figurines. In any specialized art there is bound to be rivalry, and there is much evidence from texts such as Lucian’s *Philopseudes* that indicate a stark competition between magical practitioners.

With further study of the profession of the Greek magician and the competitive nature of their craft, it is possible to begin to suggest nuanced translations of the terminology of *DTA 87* using comparative sources such as Galen and John of Damascus. Alternative references to important words translated by Gager³ as “tavern” and “tavern-keeper,” in addition to other variations of terminology within the tablet, might lead to a better understanding of the true competitive context of *DTA 87*. These alternative translations indicate the possibility that both the author and the object of the curse are in fact magicians. This tablet does not exist in isolation, and taken with other examples, such as *DTA 109* and *97*, a greater picture of the “business of magic” can perhaps be painted.

¹ R. Wünsch, *Defixionum tabellae [Atticae]*, IG iii.3 (Berlin 1897) no.87.

² C. Faraone, “The Agonistic Context of Early Greek Binding Spells,” *Magika Hiera: Ancient Greek Magic and Religion* (ed. C. Faraone and D. Obbink) New York 1991.

³ J. G. Gager, *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World* (Oxford 1992) 157.