

Cursing Democracy: The Magic of Binding Spells and Athenian Law Court Procedures
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This paper challenges the present scholarly consensus that the violence inscribed in fourth-century BCE curse tablets is minor. A fresh reading of the sources indicates that at least ten percent of the extant tablets were meant to be lethal, and further investigation suggests that the violence expressed in these curses was more severe than scholars have surmised so far. In addition, this paper will connect binding magic with Athenian democratic principles. It will become clear that binding magic reflects and even is parallel to some cultural practices of Athenian democracy.

According to C. Faraone, early binding spells were merely protective. A re-evaluation of the extant 270 curse tablets, however, reaches different conclusions. Notwithstanding the highly formulaic texts, some tablets display a more violent language than others. These are not prayers for justice, a category of curses established by H. Versnel, in which the expression of brutal sentiments was more common than in mainstream binding spells, but ordinary binding curses. Archaeological remains, such as the burying of a figurine in a little coffin or the placing of a tablet into the right hand of the corpse, provide additional evidence of intended violence. A new interpretation of the *similia similibus* function, the transference of a quality to the victim (“X is to become like lead”), the dedication of a victim to the gods (the Greek verbs used correspond to the *devotio* in Latin, which was always meant to be lethal), and a more comprehensive translation of the preposition *pros*, which occurs twenty six times in the corpus and denotes a downward movement toward the gods of the underworld, strongly suggest that the curses were more malevolent than hitherto thought.

Particularly striking are the many analogies between binding magic and the law court system, and thus Athenian democratic practices in general. I shall focus on one example: the semantics of binding and imprisonment are one and the same. The criminals bound in Athens and handed over the Eleven were *kakourgoi*, mostly killers and robbers. They were either immediately executed or put into prison to face trial and execution. The curse victims awaited trial in a twofold sense. Judicial curses were deposited before real trials took place. Moreover, the victims were bound, metaphorically, to be judged in front of the invoked gods of the underworld. With the curser representing the plaintiff in court, the gods standing for the judges, and the dead symbolizing the subordinate position and functions of the Eleven, the whole process of cursing was analogous to the system of law.

Beneath the seemingly harmless texts on the tablets there are hidden structures of underlying aggression encapsulated within the broad semantics of binding. Since the violence perpetrated through magic was mediated violence, it was acceptable even under the stipulations of the amnesty of 404/3 BCE. Binding spells were safety valves not only for disconcerted individual temperaments, but also for a whole society under the pressure of avoiding open violence. In this sense, the curse tablets were a psychological, social, and political necessity under the refined conditions of post-amnesty democracy.

Faraone, C., “Binding and Burying the Forces of Evil: the Defensive Use of Voodoo Dolls in Ancient Greece,” *CA* 10, 1991, 165-220.

Faraone, C., “The Agonistic Context of Early Greek Binding Spells,” in C. Faraone – D. Obbink (Ed.), *Magika Hiera: Ancient Greek Magic and Religion*, Oxford – New York 1991, 3-32.

Versnel, H., “Beyond Cursing: The Appeal to Justice in Judicial Prayers,” in C. Faraone – D. Obbink (Ed.), *Magika Hiera: Ancient Greek Magic and Religion*, Oxford – New York 1991, 60-106.