

## Curses, Folded Again! A Comparative Analysis of Greek and Roman Curse Tablets

Curse tablets have been found by archaeologists throughout the Greek and Roman world in graves, wells, and rivers. These tablets sought the aid of chthonic deities and ghosts to bind the writer's prey, whether they were court rivals, a hoped for lover, or a hated chariot team. These tablets have captured the attention of many scholars who have categorized the tablets by content, exploring how and why these tablets were created (Gager 1992; Ogden 1999), however no one has yet done a detailed analysis of these tablets in the context of their separate cultures. This is an area that must not be overlooked as the differences and similarities between the two cultures' curses in regards to manufacture, style, placement, formulas, and goals in these tablets reveal different world views possessed by these cultures and help to separate original Roman magic from the ideas they borrowed from Greece.

To analyze these differences I have compiled a list of twenty-five Greek curse tablets and twenty-five Roman tablets from "a Survey of Greek Defixiones," (Jordan 1985), *Defixionum Tabellae* (1904), and Solin (1968) which I have compared against each other. My study focuses on Greek tablets from the classical period and Roman tablets from the late imperial period and covers a range of sites from Attica to Bath. I have chosen these time periods because of the wealth of tablets they possess and extreme differences between them. As it appears that curse tablets originated from Greece, I decided to compare a sample from before Roman influence to one from after Rome had fully made tablets their own. In this analysis I have looked at the magical aspects of the tablets: formulaic language, the use of foreign deities and languages, *voces mysticae*, matrilineal identification, the invocation of deities and spirits, and the use of astrology, as well as the mundane aspects: the appearance, placement, and the purpose of the tablets, and professional versus self-written tablets.

Having analyzed these differences it is clear that the Greeks and the Romans did not possess the same views in regards to what was worth magical effort and how magic should be cast. Early Greek tablets are simple in form and language, mainly containing no more than a list of names and largely focus on litigation and trade curses. Romans, however, utilized more elaborate magical formulas, calling upon the aid of foreign deities to ensure victory for their favored teams and the return of stolen property (Ogden 1999). These differences help to illuminate the cultures' world views, their relationships with the divine, and the things that they valued. These curses tell us what the ancients thought were within their ability to control and felt strongly enough about to use magic on, yet did not believe that prayers alone, or at all, would gain them. The study of these tablets offers us a clear view into the deepest desires of the ancient Greeks and Romans.

#### Bibliography

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