

Untimely Death, *Schadenfreude*, and a Prayer for Justice on a 1<sup>st</sup> century C.E. Epitaph

(*CIL* VI 7898)

*CIL* VI 7898 is a late 1st century C.E. epitaph from Rome that tells of the untimely death of a young girl named Caecinia Bassa. It closes with a warning (lines 12-13): “If anyone by chance rejoices over my unjust death, may Ceres be unjust to this person and destroy him with hunger” (*si quis forte mea gaudet de morte iniqua, | huic sit iniqua Ceres perficiatque fame.*) This paper seeks to classify *CIL* VI 7898.12-13 more precisely in relationship to other kinds of extant curses. Although this distich has previously been interpreted as a curse (Limón 2012, 554-555), it is more representative of a specific type of forward-looking prayer for justice that seeks divine intervention against individuals who rejoice over the suffering of others (*Schadenfreude*), of which there are only a few parallels in Greek and Punic. In addition to categorizing this curse more precisely, this paper will also consider the implications of mocking the dead and explore the reasons why someone might have felt the need to include a curse on this epitaph in the first place. Although forward-looking prayers for justice appear in Latin inscriptions, including examples from graffiti and metrical Latin funerary epitaphs, *CIL* VI 7898.12-13 represents a rare example in the Latin epigraphic corpus of a curse concerned with *Schadenfreude*.

In examining *CIL* VI 7898.12-13 this paper will explore the following lines of argument: (1) *CIL* VI 7898.12-13 shares common traits with prayers for justice (Versnel 1991, 68 and 2010, 279-280) in that it cites the petitioner’s name, provides an argument in defense of the petitioner’s action, and employs a term referencing (in)justice. Although prayers for justice usually invoke non-chthonic deities, it is not uncommon to find deities like Mercury and Demeter being addressed. *CIL* VI 7898.13 invokes Ceres, most likely as a funerary goddess. Despite the fact that Caecinia threatens to have Ceres destroy anyone who rejoices over her unjust death *with*

*hunger* (which speaks to her role as goddess of agriculture), artistic representations of Ceres in early imperial Rome link her to chthonic deities (Spaeth 1996, 56, 64 and fig. 19), and in *CIL VI* 7898 she appears alongside Pluto (line 9) and the Parcae (line 10). Ceres also appears in *CIL IV* 9202, a graffito curse from the peristyle of the Villa of the Mysteries in Pompeii. (2) Prayers for justice concerning *Schadenfreude* appear on *defixiones* and epitaphs from the Mediterranean region and there are a number of reasons why the deceased or the deceased's family might have employed such a curse (Versnel 1999, 125-129). The one who delighted in another's misfortune was often associated with having had a hand in it. Moreover, the family of the deceased might have been trying to avoid the adverse effects of any slander, gossip, and mockery on their reputation. An additional possibility is that the inscription on the tomb was merely intended to keep away unwanted ritual activity, especially since Caecinia Bassa died an untimely death. (3) *CIL VI* 7898.12-13 is a curse that inscribes itself in the tradition of prayers for justice, but as an elegiac couplet, distinguishes itself in that it is one of a handful of curses in the tradition of metrical Latin funerary epitaphs. The Latin epigraphic corpus offers a handful of parallels for forward-looking curses in verse (e.g. *CIL VI* 6497 and IV 1645), but none that specifically curse someone for rejoicing over a petitioner's misfortunes. There also do not seem to be any direct parallels from the Latin epigraphic corpus of *defixiones*. A related genre of cursing might be found in a prayer for justice from Uley in which the petitioner curses those who think ill of him (Kropp 2008, 3.22/32.1-4).

## Bibliography

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