“I bind the local shopkeeper”: The Role of Place in Greek and Roman Commercial Curses

Fraught relationships between living people lie at the heart of the hundreds of curse tablets that have been discovered from across the Mediterranean world (Eidinow, 2007, p. 140), and the circumstances that drive an individual to this particular form of problem-solving generally involve some kind of intimacy between the curser and the cursed. In the case of curses categorized as “erotic,” this intimacy has been thoroughly explored (e.g. Faraone, 2009), but less attention has been paid to more platonic kinds of intimacy in these texts, though evidence for such relationships abounds. This paper, taking commercial curses from both Greek and Roman contexts as its focus, analyzes connections between cursers and those they hoped to bind, noting the, at times, highly specific details that these brief texts deem worthy of inclusion. These details are often preoccupied with accurately locating particular places, both as a means to accurately identify their intended victim and, as I argue, as a means of expressing ownership over a place that, in the curser’s point of view, rightly belongs to them. Taking this line, especially in connection to the scholarship that has already been done on the physical deposition of these objects (e.g. Lamont, 2015), I argue that curses represent one of the strategies merchants had at their disposal to control the physical space in which they plied their trade.

Bibliography
