

The Power of a Hero: Placement of Erotic Curse Tablets in Nemea Greece

Hero shrines (*heroöns*), a common phenomenon throughout Ancient Greece, were most often dedicated to a hero of local origins and importance, becoming legitimized through local customs and acts of cult reverence. The hero shrine to Opheltes in Nemea is no exception. As an essential hero in the creation of the Nemean games to honor Zeus, Opheltes is also intriguing because of the discovery of four erotic curse tablets found within his shrine, an extremely rare occurrence in the archaeological record. There is only one other instance where a curse tablet has been found in a hero shrine, namely that of Pankrates and Palaimon in Athens (Bravo 2006, 148). Because the shrine of Opheltes is an unusual place for the deposition of such curse tablets, this paper aims to illuminate the possible reasons behind choosing this specific location, and ultimately what this evidence can tell us about the shrine to Opheltes.

There are three phases of Opheltes' shrine; early Archaic, late Archaic and early Hellenistic (Abralde 1990, 104). Excavators from the University of California Berkeley place the four erotic curse tablets in the boundaries of the early Hellenistic Structure (late 4th c. BC), the phase of the shrine most visible today, and the one most likely to have been seen by Pausanias. This suggests that the tablets were either contemporary with the other activities occurring within the shrine in its final phase, or they were deposited there after the shrine went out of use. The discovery of large assemblages of pottery and other sacrificial or ritual materials in the same deposition layer as the curse tablets, serves as evidence for contemporary activity. The motivation behind depositing curse tablets only in the final phase of the *heroön*, centuries after its original construction, is also worth discussing. Jon D. Mikalson (2010, pg. 103) mentions that over time, the worship of heroes associated with the foundation of Panhellenic Games shifted from the general affiliation of the patron deities and their games to more of an

individualized cult practice. Essentially, this would have allowed more room for interpretation with regards to the use of Opheltes' shrine. Over time, this may have contributed to a change in the symbolic association and usage of the shrine, eventually incorporating erotic curse tablets.

In the ancient world, the graves of those that died violently ($\beta\alpha\iota\omicron\theta\acute{\alpha}\nu\alpha\tau\omicron\varsigma$) and young ($\acute{\alpha}\omega\rho\omicron\varsigma$), were seen as ideal candidates for magic (Bravo 2006, 121). Opheltes is known to have died as an infant, killed by a snake when negligently placed on the ground by his attendant. It is possible that the more violently the person died, the more violent the curses could be. To continue, the areas associated with chthonic deities were popular when choosing a place to deposit curse tablets, such as in the sanctuary to Demeter or even in springs or wells (Bravo 2006, 148). Such places provide contact with the subterranean world, while also calling upon the power of a deity. As stated previously, curse tablets were not normally deposited within hero shrines, however, it is quite possible that these elements became associated with the shrine of Opheltes, especially if the body was believed to be present; leading the Greeks to choose the shrine as an apt place to deposit their curse tablets.

Furthermore, the erotic nature of the curse tablets themselves are significant in that they are both binding and separation spells. The binding component is important in the perception of the hero shrine as a grave for Opheltes. Symbolically, the body of the deceased mirrors the proposed action of the curse, i.e. rendering their victims ineffective or incapacitated like the dead (Bravo 2006, 149). The curse tablets can also be classified as anatomical curses dealing with love triangles. Imbedded within the text are the inclusions of anatomical lists that essentially provide a symbolic portrait of the individual, providing power and authority to their curse. This paper connects the content of these erotic curse tablets to the reasons for depositing them in the shrine of Opheltes in Nemea Greece.

Bibliography

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