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Aquatic Spaces as Contexts for Depositing *defixiones* in the Roman West¹

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to focus on the deposition of curse tablets in aquatic spaces, such as rivers, seas, fountains, or wells. This broad context has been traditionally treated as if it was a straight forward, coherent and confined category that was wholly separate from the other contexts in which *defixiones* were deposited. Nevertheless, the aquatic contexts are in reality among the most slippery to classify, not only because they intersect with other contexts, but also because the coherence of this category depends on the cultural meaning with which practitioners endowed it. By analysing the archaeological record from the Roman West, I argue that most of these contexts are often much better understood as sacred spaces, which were thought to be especially conducive to communicate with the invoked deities.

Keywords: curse tablets, *defixiones*, aquatic spaces, magical-religious practices, ancient magic

Throughout antiquity, *defixiones*, also known as curse tablets, provided an unofficial and illegal means of communicating with the supernatural world. As is well known, these texts were often inscribed on lead tablets and conformed to certain rules or guidelines. But writing a text was only part of a larger process: once the curse had been written, ‘the final stage of a tablet’s activation was its deposition’, as Daniel Ogden has put it.² Relying on literary and archaeological sources, traditional scholarship has differentiated between four main contexts in which *defixiones* could be deposited: necropolises, sanctuaries, aquatic environments, or areas close to the victim of the

1 University of Zaragoza, Grupo Hiberus, PI of the project ‘The Latin *Defixiones* from North Africa Revisited’ (DeLAR, with reference no. RTI2018–098339–J–I00). I would like to thank Dr. Ben Jerue for translating this paper from Spanish to English. The following abbreviations are used in this paper: *DT* (Audollent 1904), *PGM* (Preisendanz and Henrichs 1973²), *RIG* (Lambert 2002), *ThesCRA* (*Thesaurus Cultus et Rituum Antiquorum*. Los Angeles 2005), *TDCE* (Friggeri et al. 2012), and *SD* (Sánchez Natalías, forthcoming).

2 Ogden 1999, 15.

curse.³ Upon closer scrutiny, however, this traditional schema quickly shows itself to be rather simplistic and inadequate to the task, since it ignores two key factors: the possible overlapping of the various categories and the cultural meanings that they carried in antiquity. This paper explores the aquatic context in order to stress the shortcomings of our current classificatory system and to argue that it should, as a whole, be revisited.

Before jumping in, it will be useful to note two qualifications. First, the present analysis focuses on the *defixiones* and magical figurines discovered in the Roman West.⁴ Second, I will use the phrase ‘aquatic context’ in accordance with its normal usage to refer to any space that is composed of water, such as rivers, seas, fountains, wells, etc. With these two points addressed, we can now turn to the central issues at hand.

Even if scholars have traditionally analysed the broad category of ‘aquatic contexts’ as if it were straightforward and easily separated from the other contexts in which *defixiones* were deposited, it is, in reality, one of the more slippery to classify. This is not only because it intersects and overlaps with other contexts, but also because the apparent coherence of this category begins to dissolve when we pay more attention to the cultural meaning with which various aquatic contexts were endowed throughout the Roman West. A closer examination of the archaeological evidence will bear this point out. However, before carrying out such an examination, I would like to revisit the main theories that have so far guided our thinking about aquatic contexts as sites for depositing curse tablets.

Recently, the dominant trend among scholars has been to understand aquatic contexts as a fundamental ingredient of sympathetic magic, since the coldness of water can be tied to the desire to symbolically ‘freeze’ the curse’s victim. As Daniel Ogden has put it, ‘underground water was usually cold, and wells were normally used for refrigeration, so they were useful for “chilling” the tablet and its victim.’⁵ This theory is undoubtedly apt for describing curse tablets discovered in wells, such as those from the Athenian agora in which formula like the following are found: ‘as these names grow cold, so too let Alkidamos’ name and breath, impulse, knowledge, reckoning grow cold.’⁶ The use of this formula, as David Jordan has suggested, was

3 In general, cf. Audollent 1904, 90–97; Cesano 1910, 1587–1589; Preisendanz 1972, col. 5, V b and col. 20, IV; Gager 1992, 18–21; Graf 1995, 123; Ogden 1999, 15–25; Kropp 2008, 90–94; and Martin 2010, 25–28. Urbanová 2014 (translated into English in 2018) does not contain a section dedicated to the various contexts in which *defixiones* were discovered.

4 The tablets treated in the present paper are written in various languages. For the tight connection between curse tablets and magical figurines, see Ogden 2009², 245.

5 Ogden 1999, 23.

6 Translated by Jordan 1985, no. 6, ll. 27–31: ὡς ταῦτα τὰ ὀνόματα ψύχεται, οὕτω καὶ

meant to freeze the name and hence symbolically paralyse the curse's victim.⁷ Although this argument is perfectly valid for the Greek curses from the Athenian wells, it does not apply to those from the Roman West, because no such formulae have been attested there.

In a slightly different vein, authors, such as Margheritta Guarducci, Fritz Graf, and Michel Martin, have linked aquatic contexts to the underworld and Hades. Martin, for example, has argued that since water could arise from the depths of the earth and was in perpetual movement, it was thought to be linked to the chthonic deities who lived below the earth's surface.⁸

Scholars such as Richard Wünsch have offered a third reason for why aquatic contexts may have been popular. He has suggested that *defixiones* were deposited in aquatic settings because shipwrecked sailors resided in such settings.⁹ This interpretation is supported by those examples of the *Greek Magical Papyri* (hereafter *PGM*), that recommend depositing curse tablets in water.¹⁰ This idea draws on the widespread belief that the souls of drowned sailors wandered the bottom of the sea since they were unable to reach Hades.

The occasions on which spells in the *PGM* exhorts *defigentes* to use this method of deposition is illustrated by two *agōgai* (erotic spells). In the first, the practitioner is instructed to deposit a tablet in the Nile, since this was the place where one could find 'all who have drowned, have died unmarried, and have been carried away by the wind'.¹¹ In this instance, the river is equated with a funerary space, on the grounds that it was thought to be filled with those who died prematurely and with the *atēlestoi* or 'restless dead' (i.e., those who did not receive adequate funeral rites). These dead were summoned with the hope that they would act on behalf of the *defigentes*. The second noteworthy *PGM* recipe urges its audience to write the love spell on a tablet 'with a copper nail from a shipwrecked vessel',¹² so that it can later be thrown into the sea. In this case, the nail used to write the curse strongly links aquatic spaces with a broader funerary context.

⁷ Ἀλκιδάμου ψυχρίσθω τὸ ὄνομα καὶ ἡ ψυχὴ, ἡ ὀργή, ἡ ἐπιστήμη, ὁ λογισμός. The same *defigens* wrote five more tablets against athletes in which similar formulae are used.

⁸ Jordan 1985, 241, note f, where the author maintains that, in tablets discovered in the Athenian wells, the verb *καταψύχω* 'may refer to the chilling effects of the waters in the wells'.

⁹ On this, see Martin 2010, 27; Guarducci 1978, 242 and Graf 1995, 123.

¹⁰ Wünsch 1898, IV, col. 2, *apud* Audollent 1904, 117: *ut per quam via pateret ad manes eorum, qui naufragio perierunt*. Additionally, see Fox 1912 and Cesano 1910, 1589.

¹¹ Translations of *PGM* are taken from the edition of H. D. Betz (1986).

¹² *PGM* XV. 8.

¹² *PGM* VII. 466.

Sometimes, the *Greek Magical Papyri* offer even more details and specifications: a restraining spell recommends throwing tablets ‘into the river or into the sea before sunrise’,¹³ while yet another specifies doing so ‘late in the evening or in the middle of the night’.¹⁴ Another option was ‘(to) glue it to the dry vaulted vapour room of a bath’,¹⁵ or deposit it ‘where there is a stream or the drain of a bath’.¹⁶

Given the various theories about the importance of aquatic spaces in cursing practices, we must ask ourselves to what extent archaeological findings support such thinking. Unfortunately, these provocative theories are all difficult to verify archaeologically. If we want to support hypotheses concerning the value of aquatic settings in terms of sympathetic magic or the ability of these settings to summon the infernal gods or restless dead, we can only pass judgement by examining the textual remains of the *defixiones*. Among the current corpus of *defixiones* from the Roman West, however, only four tablets employ water imagery. One of these hails from the sanctuary of Sulis Minerva at Bath (*Aquae Sulis*) and was discovered in 1880 during excavations carried out in conjunction with the renovation of the bath complex. The curse denounces the theft of a *vilbiam* (perhaps a gouge) and asks Sulis Minerva that the thief ‘become as liquid as water’.¹⁷ The text concludes with a list of names in the nominative case – the usual suspects – so that the goddess can liquefy the robber until he or she disappears. In this instance, the text was undoubtedly influenced by its deposit context: like all other texts from this sanctuary, the piece was tossed in the sacred spring after being inscribed. Accordingly, the names of the suspects would be underwater, where they would vanish into obscurity along with the sinking tablet.¹⁸

The other three *defixiones* from the Roman West that deploy water imagery (though less explicitly) all come from the sanctuary of Isis and Magna Mater in Mainz. In 1999, archaeologists unearthed a collection of 34 curse tablets and three magical figurines made of terracotta.¹⁹ The three pieces of interest for our present purposes all date between the end of the first century CE and the second third of the following century. All of these curses rely on the same persuasive *similia similibus* analogy drawn from daily life: the way in which salt dissolves in water. Just as this mineral vanishes when mixed

13 PGM VII. 420.

14 PGM VII. 435.

15 PGM XXXVI. 75–76.

16 PGM VII. 436.

17 See Tomlin 1988, *Tab. Sulis* 4 = SD 206.

18 It is, of course, remarkable that of the 130 known tablets from Bath only this one employs water imagery.

19 See Blänsdorf 2012.

with water, so too should the victims, their possessions, or even their deeds decompose and disappear forever. Notably, this metaphor was not at all inspired by the place where the pieces were deposited. They were all thrown into the fire burning on the altars found behind the temple, where they were partially melted in the sacred flame.²⁰ These are the only textual evidence that attests to the value of water in terms of sympathetic magic.

For those who are willing to speculate, there are two other examples the depositions of which might further buttress arguments in favour of the sympathetic properties of water. In Leintwardine, two curses were deposited inside the small drain of the *frigidarium* at a bath complex.²¹ Was this, perhaps, a further means of symbolically ‘freezing’ their victims? While doubtlessly suggestive, the preserved texts, which both contain a list of names in the nominative, neither confirm nor deny the theory that water’s coldness could symbolically freeze victims. The magical figurines that were found in a sewer in Volubilis and depict a man and a woman with slightly twisted legs provide another tantalising example.²² While one could argue that the *defigens* sought to send the victims down to the underworld, the lack of any text that can provide clues precludes us from reaching any solid conclusions. At both of these sites (Leintwardine and Volubilis), the lack of any direct or explicit connection with the aquatic sphere contrasts with the more explicit curse from Bath.

Given that the texts do not tend to provide the reasons why *defigentes* chose to use aquatic contexts, it will be fruitful, if we hope to shed new light on the question, to start from a more archaeological (and less theoretical) perspective and to analyse the various contexts in which tablets have been discovered. Of the c. 840 curses and magical figurines that have been discovered in the Roman West, a third was deposited in contexts that can be termed aquatic. Some basic characteristics of the pieces in question have been summarised in the following table. In addition to giving the provenance and bibliographical references, I have also signalled in which specific contexts the various pieces were discovered.

20 In fact, *DTM 2 = SD 493* shows clear signs of damage along its lower edge resulting from contact with fire. Furthermore, Marion Witteyer, who directed the excavation, has noted that in this same altar archaeologists also found ‘remains of lead from the same features, melted into little lumps, [which] hint at the idea that originally they were also tablets, perhaps even figurines’ (Witteyer 2005, 116).

21 See *AE 1969–70*, 311 = *SD 347* and 348. In addition to the curse tablets from Leintwardine, Alfayé 2016 has reinterpreted the deposit contexts of another four British curses and argued that they were actually deposited in baths. Although suggestive, the proffered archaeological evidence is not conclusive and I have, accordingly, refrained from taking up her suggestions in the present article.

22 For a further discussion, see Faraone 1991, no. 25.

<i>Provenance (and references)</i>	<i>Archaeological Context</i>	
Italia	Altino (<i>AE</i> 2002, 556 = <i>SD</i> 104) Arezzo (<i>DT</i> 129 = <i>SD</i> 92) Roma (<i>TDCE</i> IX. 49.1–28 = <i>SD</i> 19–47) San Benedetto (<i>DT</i> 132 = <i>SD</i> 83) Sperlonga (Guarducci 1960 = <i>SD</i> 57)	Channel Fountain Fountain of Anna Perenna <i>Lacum Fucinum</i> Grotto of Tiberius (abandoned pool)
Africa	Cartago (Audollent 1933) <i>Volubilis</i> (Faraone 1991, no. 25)	Fountain ‘aux milles amphores’ Sewer (?)
Hispaniae	Alcácer do Sal (<i>AE</i> 2001, 1135 = <i>SD</i> 121) Ampurias (<i>AE</i> 2004, 834 = <i>SD</i> 137)	Sanctuary (pool) Beach (?)
Galliae	Amélie-les-Bains (<i>RIG</i> II.2, *L-97 = <i>SD</i> 150–155) Chamalières (<i>RIG</i> II.2, L-100 = <i>SD</i> 163) Dax (<i>AE</i> 2000, 925 = <i>SD</i> 164) Le Mans (<i>RIG</i> II.2, L-104 = <i>SD</i> 171) Montfo (<i>AE</i> 1981, 621 = <i>SD</i> 157) Rom (<i>RIG</i> II.2, *L-103 = <i>SD</i> 159)	Fountain ‘Le Gros Escalador’ Fountain ‘Source des Roches’ Fountain ‘Chaude’ Sanctuary (pool) Well Well
Britannia	Bath (Tomlin 1988 = <i>SD</i> 206–335) Brandon (<i>AE</i> 1994, 1112 = <i>SD</i> 449) Caistor St. Edmund (<i>AE</i> 1982, 669 = <i>SD</i> 441) Hamble (<i>AE</i> 1997, 977 = <i>SD</i> 451) Leintwardine (<i>AE</i> 1969–70, 311 = <i>SD</i> 347–348) London (<i>AE</i> 1987, 738 = <i>SD</i> 340) Uley (Tomlin 1993 = <i>SD</i> 354–440)	Sanctuary of Sulis Minerva Little Ouse river (metal detector) Riverbank (Tas River) Hamble’s estuary (metal detector) Thermal complex Riverbank (Thames River) Sanctuary of Mercury
Germaniae	Rottweil (Nuber 1984 = <i>SD</i> 479)	Fountain (?)
Pannoniae	Sisak (<i>AE</i> 2008, 1080 = <i>SD</i> 529)	Kupa River

Let us examine the various subcategories that have been identified in the archaeological record. To begin with, the context for which we have the most evidence, we have tablets deposited at sites where water played an important cultic function, such as the British sanctuaries of Sulis Minerva in Bath and of Mercury in Uley. In both of these complexes, the sacred space is marked by a *cella* and is surrounded by an ambulatory through which worshippers moved. Accordingly, in the sanctuary at Bath curse tablets were thrown directly into the sacred spring, located in the centre of the complex. In Uley, on the other hand, a small pool in the centre of the *cella* was the place that, in all likelihood, served as a deposit for curses.²³

23 On this, see Woodward 1993, 113.

Fountains provide another series of sites that fall into the same category. Whether monumentalised or not, since the Archaic period *fontes* had ‘una forte connotazione religiosa per la valenza sacrale attribuita all’acqua corrente’ and were considered a ‘luogo carico di numen e miracoloso punto di comunicazione con il mondo sotterraneo’, as Lucia Romizzi has put it.²⁴ In the Western Roman World, we know of five springs that were used as places for depositing curses. Of these, Chamalières, Amélie-les-Bains, and Dax were located in the *Galliae*, while two others have been discovered on the Italian peninsula, in Arezzo and Rome (the latter dedicated to Anna Perenna).

All of the examples from Gaul are thermal springs. The fountain at Chamalières was undoubtedly considered a sacred space, judging from the three thousand votive figures discovered inside the principal basin. Among these votives, a Gallic *defixio* was found that seems to have been deposited in what appears to be an arbitrary manner. The tablet invokes the god Maponos, to whom the sanctuary may have been dedicated.

Less is known about the cache of six *defixiones* found at Amélie-les-Bains, discovered in 1845 in the principal fountain of the thermal complex. The curses were found alongside coins dated to the first century CE, which may attest to the religious nature of the space. Finally, we have the so-called ‘Fontaine de la Nèhe ou Fontaine Chaude’ at Dax, which is Gallo-Roman in origin and can be dated to the Severan period. In this context, a 1976 excavation unearthed, among a series of coins dated between the late-fourth and fifth centuries, a curse that should probably be considered a so-called *defixio in fures*.

The two fountains in Italy are of great interest. Little is known about the first, located in Arezzo, which was surveyed in 1861 and described simply by Gian Francesco Gamurrini as a fountain ‘di acqua acidula minerale’. Inside, a *defixio* was discovered alongside coins from the reign of Antoninus Pius. It has been suggested that cult was paid to the nymphs, who are mentioned in the curse’s text where they are evoked with the following words: *vos aquae ferventes, sive vos Nymfas sive quo alio nomine voltis adpellari*. The second of these *fontes* was discovered in 1999 during an emergency excavation in Rome and is consecrated to the goddess Anna Perenna. The fountain was supplied by a spring, which was monumentalised with three epigraphs. Its cistern contained an extraordinary deposit that consisted of 549 coins, 74 lamps, 22 *defixiones*, 10 containers of lead or terracotta with curses, a *caccabus*, preserved organic offerings, and, finally, a variety of wooden plaques.

²⁴ Romizzi in *ThesCRA* IV, 242–244, *sub voce* ‘Fons (mondo romano)’.

All these materials provide evidence for the use of the site between the fourth century BCE and the sixth century CE.²⁵

Ritual wells formed yet another subset of sacred aquatic spaces. Three have been documented in Gaul. It is generally thought that ritual wells found in ‘Celtic’ areas²⁶ were considered to be access points to the underworld and to the chthonic deities who dwelled there.²⁷ These wells had been in use before the Roman conquest. The first one was excavated in 1975 and is located in the *oppidum* Montfo, which was inhabited from the sixth century BCE until the first century CE. At a depth of some 13.5 metres, excavations uncovered a deposit which included wooden objects (writing tablets, combs, and stakes), ceramics (among which were 11 well-preserved *kantharoi*), and the remains of animals which, according to the excavators, had probably fallen into the well. More interesting for our purposes is the lead tablet found in this well. Given that the curse dates to the first half of the first century CE, it would have been deposited when the well was still in use.

The well at Rome, discovered and excavated in 1887, is located next to the *praefurnium* of a Roman villa. At a depth of 20 metres, archaeologists found building materials, animal bones, and bronze coins. At a depth of 10 to 12 metres, some 40 lead tablets were discovered. Some of these were rolled up, while others were pierced. Notably, none of the lead pieces bore an inscription, but they have nevertheless been identified as curses. Just below this group, the excavators also found a sickle, a pick-axe, and more lead tablets. Of these, only one has been fully published: it is dated to the third or fourth century CE and has proven difficult to interpret. Despite the dearth of information that we currently have about this site, the discovery of this important group of lead tablets further suggests that this too was a space used to communicate with divine powers.

Besides these man-made aquatic sites, we must also mention the ‘natural’ sites that were important in ‘Celtic religion.’²⁸ We have uncovered five tab-

25 For one recent study with further bibliography, see Piranomonte 2015.

26 In the following pages, ‘Celts’ is used in a broad sense to refer to the peoples indigenous to Gaul and Britain before the arrival of the Romans. Admittedly, the term is an anachronistic modern construct and therefore problematic. Accordingly, scholars have questioned its utility. For a discussion, see Merriman 1987 and Fitzpatrick 1996; for a useful summary of debates about the term, see Webster 2015.

27 Green 1997, 224, *sub voce* ‘well’.

28 Again, the term ‘Celtic religion’ is a catch-all phrase that refers to broad commonalities found in the beliefs and rituals of the native peoples of Gaul and Britain. That said, we have to be careful not to draw misleading generalisations. As Jane Webster has put it, ‘the very phrase “Celtic Religion” is itself intensely problematic. In the last two decades, new archaeological work ... has undermined the belief that Iron Age Britain was populated by a single people with a shared ethnic identity and belief system: the Celts. At the same

lets from such natural aquatic sites: four of these have surfaced in Britain, while the fifth was discovered in Pannonia Superior. Two of the examples from Britain (from Hamble and Brandon), dated to the fourth century, were found by metal detector users in an estuary and river silt, respectively. This fact keeps us from knowing either piece's exact archaeological context. Even less contextual information is known about a curse tablet from London, found at a beach on the Thames River and so far undated. The curse from Caistor St. Edmund, which is also undated, was found on the banks of the Tas River. Only the tablet from Sisak, dated to the first or second century CE, was found during an archaeological excavation, which was conducted along the Kupa River in 1913.

Though we have a rather murky view of the natural aquatic contexts in which these pieces were found, it is likely that all were originally deposited in a flowing body of water and from there ended up embedded in banks, silt or beaches. This would jibe well with the divinities – such as Neptune, Niskus, and Savus – mentioned in the curses themselves, who all have a strong association with water.²⁹ In 'Celtic religions', water – in whatever state – was endowed with great significance. Indeed, it was an incredibly important substance for communicating with the divine,³⁰ since it was thought of as liminal: not only the fountain of life but also a means of entering into the underworld. Accordingly, it was used in a number of rituals. Among these, the practice of depositing metals in water is well known thanks both to ancient textual testimony as well as to archaeological discoveries. It appears that the deposition of *defixiones* became a part of this longstanding tradition during the period of so-called Romanisation.

Finally, let us turn to aquatic spaces that do not appear to have been consecrated to any divinity. The known examples include a canal (Altino), an abandoned pool in the so-called grotto of Tiberius (Sperlonga), the above-mentioned *frigidarium* in a bath complex (Leintwardine), and, perhaps,

time, many British archaeologists have come to see "religion" not as a discrete category of human experience in the Iron Age, but as largely embedded within, and inseparable from, the world of the everyday' (Webster 2015, 122). For the idea of Celtic religion, see also Fitzpatrick 1991.

29 Neptune is invoked in these four British curses, even though this deity was called 'Metunus' in the area around London (as Tomlin 1987, 360 has convincingly argued, this is probably a 'vulgar' form of the theonym). Niskus is evoked alongside *domino Neptuno* in the *defixio* from Hamble. Although the interpretation of this theonym has proven controversial, the idea that masculine Niskus should be connected to the 'Niskas' invoked in the curses from Amélie-les-Bains is quite suggestive. Finally, Savus was the tutelary deity of the river in which the relevant curse was found and in which the *defigens* hoped for the victims to likewise be 'deposited'.

30 On this, see Cunliffe 1988, 359–362 and Green 1997, 223–224, *sub voce* 'water'.

the 'Fontaine aux 1000 amphores' (Carthage). The lack of any invocation of a deity associated with water may allow us to deduce that such spaces were not considered sacred. That said, given that the overwhelming majority of curses from aquatic areas could also be thought to come from sacred contexts, it may be prudent to withhold final judgment. And in the cases of San Benedetto and Ampurias, the scant nature of the inscriptions (only containing two simple lists of names) and, more importantly, the dearth of information about the context in which they were discovered keep us from determining the motives for depositing these texts in aquatic contexts.

To conclude, I have sought to demonstrate that in the Roman West *defixiones* were not cast into wells, rivers, or the sea due to the concept of persuasive analogy, according to which the coldness of water would 'freeze' victims. Similarly, the nexus of imagery found in the PGM about drowning and shipwreck does not explain the deposition of curse tablets in aquatic contexts. Rather, it is more fruitful to see the use of such spaces as part of ritual practice and as a means for communicating with the divine. In short, such contexts are often better understood as sacred. The few exceptions that exist, such as the piece from Ampurias, which was found on a beach, do not overturn this general trend. Accordingly, it seems better to study these contexts as sacred rather than placing them in separate categories that do not properly account for the cultural and religious significance that aquatic spaces held in ancient religious practices. We are left to wonder whether the traditional category of 'aquatic context' really holds any water.

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