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The Medium Matters: Materiality and Metaphor in Some Latin Curse Tablets

Celia Sánchez Natalías

Introduction

Though 'materiality' has been around for well over a century (Knappett 2013: 4702), it has only been in recent years that the term has transfixed the archaeological community and has arrived to other areas of study, such as ancient magic. While I am persuaded by Bremmer's (2015: 12) provocative argument that our interest in ancient materiality is linked to trends in our own consumerist society, the increasing focus on the power and agency of objects also provides a needed opportunity to re-examine long-held assumptions about the relative importance of text over material that have, in my opinion, hindered our understanding of magical practices. As Knappett's (2013: 4702) definition of materiality underscores, 'the on-going dynamic of human-artefactual relations' is central to these practices and we need to 'downplay the duality between mind and matter.' As we shall see in the following pages, in the realm of magic, mind and intention become inextricably linked to matter.

Materiality, therefore, addresses the relationship between objects and living beings, a multidirectional and dynamic connection that plays an exceedingly important role in the sphere of magic. In this field, the human-artefactual relationship is expressed through the creation and/or the treatment of things as agents (Gordon 2015: 136). Thus, materiality can be analysed in at least two different directions: first, from the perspective of an apparently innocuous object that, thanks to the transference of agency from the practitioner, becomes itself a powerful agent encoded with a completely new significance (i.e. a simple lead tablet that develops into a *defixio*; or a piece of stone that becomes an amulet). The second direction comes from the victims' perspective: in other words, his/her reaction to uncovering a magical object (= an agent) nearby. A classic example is the deterioration of health that Germanicus suffered when human remains, spells and lead tablets inscribed with his name were discovered at his home (Tac. *Ann.* 2.69). Another good, though less well known, example is the relief and immediate healing of Libanius when a mutilated chameleon was found in his lecture room, which finally offered an explanation for his mysterious muteness and immobility (1.243–250). As these two examples show, discovering a magical object can have drastic effects, either for good or bad. As Bremmer suggests, the use and even simply the existence of objects like amulets, *defixiones*, antidotes, gems, or magical books were 'agents that influenced the lives of those around them as long as they were part of their social or magical imagination' (Bremmer 2015: 12).

Of all these objects with the potential to shape and mould lives and experiences, this article examines the corpus of curse tablets (also known as *defixiones*) from the Roman West in an attempt to analyse the materiality of magic by stressing the significance of the physicality of objects. In other words, I place special focus on the connection between a particular spell and the material on which it was inscribed to throw into relief how different media used in Roman magic concretely demonstrated (sometimes through loquacious metaphors) a specific materiality: the relationship between a spell and its victim. With this purpose in mind, and after addressing the definition of a *defixio*, I tackle a series of questions surrounding different media and analyse the importance of the physical object in creating a connection between a curse and its target.

Defining Curse Tablets

We owe the standard definition of a *defixio* to Jordan (1985: 151), who describes them as 'inscribed pieces of

lead, usually in the form of small, thin sheets, intended to influence, by supernatural means, the actions or welfare of persons or animals against their will.' The same author revisited this definition some years later, adding that there is 'no reason to exclude tablets on material other than lead' (2001: 5–6). And indeed, there are, as we shall see, other media employed including papyrus, marble, and terracotta. The use of these various materials was by no means meaningless, but rather was always directly linked to the aim of successfully carrying out the ritual. Taking lead for granted, then, is a dangerous misstep.

Another common perception surrounding *defixiones* deserves brief mention, namely that they are thought of as private texts. Some of the reasons these texts are considered private do make good sense in light of legal proscriptions against the act of cursing that were in place by the fifth century B.C. (*XII Tables,* VIII A). In addition, curses are comprised of secret content, were intended for a restrictive audience (supernatural beings), and they were often deposited in isolated and inaccessible places meant, in part, to avoid the possibility of someone interfering with a spell. Judged from this perspective, *defixiones* do indeed fall under the larger umbrella of private inscriptions (Beltrán 2015a: 90, 105).

It is necessary, however, to highlight another fundamental aspect of these texts that marks a key difference between *defixiones* and some other types of private texts, namely their 'expiration date'. While the majority of private inscriptions communicate something ephemeral and fleeting (Beltrán 2015a: 89), curse tablets are meant to endure by creating a lasting bond with their victims (Piccaluga 2010: 13–14, 16). Given that writing itself, according to the logic of ancient magic, was considered potentially dangerous (Poccetti 2002: 15; Faraone and Kropp 2010 on the verb *vertere* and a text's *ordinatio*), the connection established by a *defixio* was thought to endure simply through the inscription of the victim's name. In some cases, the expiration of the curse could coincide with the positive resolution of a problem (like the return of the stolen property, as in *Tab. Sulis* 32); in other cases, however, the curse seems likely to endure forever, since the *defigens* demands something impossible (such as in *Tab. Sulis* 100, where the victim is asked to sell a bushel of cloud and a bushel of smoke in exchange for forgiveness). Furthermore, the lasting nature of the bond created by a *defixio* is at times made explicit through certain formulas, like those that ask the gods to prolong the spell's power until the victim's death ('*(ad) diem mortis*' *AE* 1991, 1167; or '*quandius vita vixerit*' *DTM* 5), or renewing expressions such as '*rediviva*' (*RIB* I, 306) that seek to perpetuate the power of the curse.

Explicit comparisons between the act of writing and a spell's durability, however, are omitted in the majority of texts, quite possibly because the author of a given curse was well aware of the long-lasting nature of spells. This is perhaps the defining characteristic of a *defixio*: the practitioner – whether or not a professional – imbued the object with a nearly inexhaustible agency. As Gordon has maintained (2015: 139), the resulting agency was 'a social construction in which practitioners, patients, victims and witnesses all have an interest'. As Gordon goes on to suggest, this agency was usually recognised *a posteriori* when a victim manifested symptoms of an illness that was thought to have a magical origin (2015: 139).

To take Gordon's insight a bit further, it seems likely to me that this agency would have already been anticipated by the author of a text before any sign of a curse's efficacy surfaced. As the *Greek Magical Papyri* (*PGM*) make clear, the spell could be reinforced with the recitation of formulas meant to increase either its potency (*PGM* 4.332 and ff.) or longevity (*PGM* 7.453ff.). Accordingly, it seems reasonable to suppose that a practitioner was well aware of this transference and also mindful of the best ways of increasing his *defixio*'s potency.

All of these attempts to increase and prolong a curse's power complicate the association of *defixiones* with the larger corpus of private texts, which are often considered ephemeral in nature. Perhaps the case of *defixiones* shows how such a distinction between public and private epigraphy can be unhelpful. Like in public inscriptions, curse tablets were meant to endure and last, at the very least, until the *defigens* obtained the desired outcome. When studying *defixiones*, therefore, the traditional public/private distinction does not quite fit.

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'Certes l'aspect de ces modestes documents importe beaucoup moins que leur contenu. Il n'est cependant, en plus d'un cas, nullement négligeable.' With these words dating from 1933 (31), Auguste Audollent – though somewhat dismissive himself – signalled the lack of attention that specialists paid the media used in the creation of curse tablets. This gap in the scholarship has recently been addressed in works like Bevilacqua's 2010 volume, as well as in some articles which focus on curse tablets from Athens (Curbera 2015) or *defixiones* from the Roman West (Sánchez Natalías 2011). The latter corpus, comprised of texts written in Latin, Oscan, Etruscan, Phoenician and Celtic, contains over 600 items that will serve as a basis for this paper. We will analyse them following the structure that I have previously put forth (Sánchez Natalías 2011), which distinguishes between specific media (i.e. materials normally employed in writing) and atypical media (i.e. materials not usually inscribed with curses), and also between perishable and durable media.

In the following paragraphs, we will examine some of the various materials used in the manufacture of curse

tablets, while comparing archaeological evidence with written sources (mostly the *PGM*) when useful. We will pay particular attention to the media whose link to the targets was reinforced through the employment of analogies or metaphors.

Specific Media

By 'specific media', I mean objects one of whose primary functions was to serve as writing media, and which were created deliberately for that purpose. For obvious reasons (preservation, weather, etc.), perishable materials have left their traces for the most part in the *PGM*, where papyrus is specially recommended for love spells of attraction (which constitute curses as well, as Faraone 2001 41–54 explains). Interestingly enough, according to the *PGM* (5.304–305), in a curse levelled against an enemy or a woman, either papyrus or lead could be used, which shows that in certain circumstances both materials were considered equally effective.

Regarding specific and durable media, we can distinguish between stone and metal. Although the *PGM* contains no instance of the first, there are three surviving artefacts, all of which date to the imperial period. Two of these texts are plaques, one of slate from Pompeii and a marble one from *Emerita Augusta* (Elefante 1985; *CIL* 2.462), while the third was inscribed on the backside of a funerary altar (*CIL* 6. 20905). The use of such media here should be understood as a reflection of monumental epigraphy, which was reaching its heights in the period in question (if we take the so-called 'epigraphic habit' into account (Beltrán 2015b)). In addition, the employment of these materials may reflect the *defigentes'* desire to display their curses publicly. If so, this would bring further infamy upon adversaries. This type of invective would certainly place these *defixiones* among public inscriptions, functioning as a type of anti-encomium. Open display, however, also reveals some potential setbacks that the *defigens* could encounter, such as the high cost of the materials used as well as potential legal backlash for taking part in illegal magical practices. Fully aware of these possible legal perils, these three *defigentes* attempted to navigate potential dangers through mechanisms like 'anonymity' and/or the camouflage of curses as poems, epitaphs, or votive inscriptions (further discussion in Sánchez Natalías 2016: 74–6).

Even if it is well known that among the different media for writing a curse lead reigns supreme, it is worth stressing that there is literary and archaeological evidence for the use of other metals, such as tin and copper. The *PGM*, for instance, recommends the use of tin tablets for agonistic and love curses among other things (*PGM* 4.2212 and 7.459). Although tin is not commonly employed, metallurgical analysis of the 130 curse tablets discovered in the sacred spring of the sanctuary of Sulis Minerva in Bath (ancient *Aquae Sulis*) has shown that pure tin was used at least in two cases (and another six contain more than 90% tin). Given that tin visually resembles lead and that the curses from Bath were written by 'amateur' *defigentes*, perhaps the metals were confused and hence used indiscriminately. As for copper, Jerome in a controversial passage (*Life of Hilarion,* 21) claims that this metal (*aeris Cyprii lamina*) was used for a love charm in Gaza. Again, the archaeological record backs up the literary sources: two *defixiones*, found in the fountain of Anna Perenna in Rome and dated to Late Antiquity, were inscribed on pure hammered copper tablets and deposited within lamps in the place of the wick (Blänsdorf 2012a and 2012b). Although it is not clear why the magical practitioner chose this metal given the fragmentation of the text and the absence of parallels in the *PGM*, it seems quite possible that the redness of the copper evoked the flame of the lamp. Ultimately, and as we shall see with this paper's final example, this would have allowed for a very appropriate association between the target, light and life.

Before looking at lead, it merits mention that, as far as I know, neither silver nor gold curse tablets have been found. There are no literary or archaeological sources that attest the use of them for such a 'dark' purpose. On the contrary, these precious metals are often employed in the production of amulets, such as a probably Roman-period golden *lamella* from Carthage (*DT* 262) engraved with magical signs and the term '*mareamar*', which at one point was thought to be a *defixio*, until Kotansky's re-examination (Kotansky 1994: 374, no. 63).

It is a well-documented fact that in Antiquity lead was one of the most ubiquitous writing materials, because it was common, cheap and easy to inscribe (Poccetti 1999: 545–61). According to Faraone (2012: 117), this metal became popular in the late fifth to fourth centuries B.C. in Athens because it was a by-product of the purification of silver. Despite that, at first, the connection between lead and the practice of cursing was incidental in the long term it became inextricable. As Graf (1995: 129–30) has pointed out, magical practices embraced this metal, imbuing it with several connotations that turned it into the perfect medium for cursing. Linked to Saturn, lead was cold and heavy just like a corpse. Even Aristotle (*apud* Plin., *HN* 11.114, 275) suggested that if a person's skin had a leaden hue, he was going to die. Given this existing nexus of connotations, lead's harmful properties were thought to be transferred to a curse's victim through his/her name (which was considered intricately connected to the person), due to the magical notion of *similia similibus* or persuasive analogy, which is that like provokes like.

The transference of these properties from material to victim is already attested in the *PGM*, which in one case (7.925–926) recommends 'a metal lead tablet from a yoke for mules' for two restraining spells, where the thought may

be that just as the lead controls the animals, so it should subjugate the *defigens*' enemies. Other recipes tell readers to 'take lead from a cold-water pipe and make a lamella' (*PGM* 7. 397–398) or to use 'a sheet of lead from a cold-water channel' (*PGM* 7.432), or even 'hammered out while cold' (*PGM* 36.1–2), since it was believed that lead would symbolically freeze the victim. But the connotations of lead were not only used in line with a Roman culture of common sense: at times, they were elaborated in the form of loquacious metaphors.In this regard, Tilley (1999: 16) has argued: 'metaphor is not so much a matter of language in general, and literary use of language in particular, but a matter of thought.' Metaphors can help us to connect concrete and abstract thoughts, shaping ideas that otherwise would appear disconnected from reality, and that is what our *defigentes* (or the professionals who were assisting them) tried to accomplish through lead-based metaphor.

Interestingly enough, the same concepts documented in the *PGM* about the coldness of lead are attested in some Greek curse tablets from Athens, whose objective was to freeze the victim to the point of becoming inanimate (*DTA* 105 and 107). Nevertheless, while references to the idea of coldness do surface in some Latin curse tablets (such as *DTM* 2 or *AE* 2011, 378), these texts do not exploit this physical aspect of lead, alluding instead to other features of this metal, such as its weight and density.Accordingly, one *defixio,* discovered in the amphitheatre at Petronell (ancient *Carnuntum*) and dated to the second or third century A.D., reads, '*... quom]od<o>i[l]<l>e(!) plu<m>bus(!) po<n>dus h<a>bet sic et/ [E]ud<e>mus h<a>beat v[o]s iratos ...*': 'Just as this lead has weight, in this way may Eudemus have you [the gods], angry [with him]' (*AE* 1929, 228). The text, with its somewhat strained repetition of *habere,* clearly connects the weight of the tablet to the level of the gods' anger against the victim: as the tablet cannot lose its weight, so Eudemus cannot escape the ire of the gods.

In addition to referring simply to the properties of lead, there are other occasions in which parallels are drawn between the use of lead in the ritual and the desired outcome for the victim. These metaphorical references principally draw their comparisons from the act of deposition in specific places. In the case of *defixiones*, there are four main types of deposition: in sanctuaries, aquatic settings (rivers, fountains, wells, etc.), necropoleis, and finally sites close to a victim (a house or place of work). The act of depositing a tablet was considered a fundamental stage in the ritual since the spell could take effect only after this final step was complete. A first-century A.D. text found at Montfo (*Gallia Narbonensis*) bears this out. The tablet opens with an interesting analogy, '*Quomodo hoc plumbu(m) non paret et decadet, sic decadat aetas, membra, vita, bos, gran⌜u⌝(m), mer(x), eorum qui mihi malu(m) dolum fecerunt ...*' (*AE* 1981, 621). This analogy compares the way the lead will fall into the well with the desired outcome, both the physical and economic downfall of the victim. In other words, the act of deposition itself demonstrates what ought to be done. And while the law of gravity ensures that any item dropped into a well will eventually reach the bottom, the weight of the lead remains important here: the tablet would fall quickly and directly, perhaps indicating that the victim should also suffer a sharp and unavoidable turn in fate. Unsurprisingly, this curse was discovered among other offerings at the bottom of a well, a sacred place for communication with the gods according to Celtic belief (see Bacou and Bacou 1975: 17–22). Its discovery in such a place clearly indicates that the text itself was carefully planned, that is to say that the author was thinking in advance about the ritual performance that was going to be carried out. Deposition was no afterthought.

Two texts found at the sanctuary of Isis and Magna Mater in Mainz provide further examples of how the manipulation of lead during the deposition of a tablet is reflected in the text of the curse. In this sanctuary, which has been dated to the first through third centuries A.D., 24 *defixiones* were discovered in the back of the building. In that area two altars were built where the curse tablets were put alongside other typical offerings (Witteyer 2005: 116; Blänsdorf 2012c: 1–6, 39–40). Of this larger ensemble, two *defixiones* will hold our attention for the time being. Both of the texts compare the way that the lead tablets were melted in a sacred fire to the way in which the *defigens* wanted the limbs of the victim to turn into liquid: '*… sic illorum/ membra liquescan(t)/ quatmodum hoc plum-/bum liquesce t…*' and '*… qu[omo]di hoc liquescet/ (...) [sic co] llum membra/ me[du]lla ...*' (*DTM* 11 and 12; McKie 2016: 24). In a similar way to the previously mentioned case of Montfo, this deposition actively enacted what the *defigens* wanted to happen: the lead tablets, which represented the victims themselves, would have melted in the sacred fire, and so the victims mentioned in the text would themselves subsequently dissolve bit by bit.

The third and final example engraved on lead that I would like to examine also comes from the sanctuary of Isis and Magna Mater in Mainz, although it does not mention the deposition of the tablet. The curse, certainly the most finely elaborated of the Mainz corpus, was inscribed on a perfectly square lead tablet and written in beautiful capital letters. It was directed against a women called Prima Aemilia, a lady (maybe still in her youth) who is compared to the tablet itself: '*… ⌜q⌝ qu)omo(do) haec carta/ nu ⌜m⌝ quam florescet/ sic illa nu ⌜m⌝ quam/ quicquam florescat ...*' (*DTM* 15). As pointed out by the editor, the use of the verb *floresco* ought to be taken as a poeticism, referring to the *defigen*s' desire to deprive *Prima Aemilia* of her prosperity. But which type of prosperity? Given that the victim was a woman, we can conjecture that one of the purposes of the curse was to make the victim infertile: since lead is associated with death and coldness, the medium of the curse provides a good illustration of what Prima Aemilia should be reduced

to. And indeed, infertility is an expressed outcome in some curse tablets (Varone 1998; *Tab. Sul*. 10).

Whatever the case may be, all the examples discussed above clearly show how the textual metaphor attested in these curse tablets depends on the physicality of lead and/or a specific ritual deposition to make sense. In addition to the well-known analogy between the coldness of the metal and the hoped for cadaverous frigidity of the target, the magical practitioner used its heaviness to speak about the anger of the deities against *Eudemus*. In other cases, the metaphor involved a carefully planned procedure, since the *defigentes* knew exactly how to deposit the tablet to complete the practice of cursing. At the bottom of the well or melted by the sacrificial fire, their words would reach the invoked deities without interference, and so the victims of their curses would suffer the expected turn in fate.

Atypical Media

Now I would like to turn to atypical media, in other words, all those objects that were used for writing a curse, although they were originally created for other purposes. Sometimes, we can think of these as recycled or appropriated items, which were imbued with a new significance by the magical practitioner (whether professional or not).

Within this group, the *PGM* prescribes different sorts of perishable materials for love spells of attraction, such as the wings of a living bat (*PGM* 12.376–377). This perishable medium is quite apt, since the spell seeks to plague its victim with insomnia 'until she consents': the bat, after all, is the nocturnal animal *par excellence* and hence well linked to unwanted wakefulness.

When it comes to durable materials, the *PGM* recommends the use of sea shells and magnetite as surfaces on which to write love spells of attraction (*PGM* 7.467 and ff.; 4.1723–1724, respectively). The choice of neither object is casual, since shells are common symbols of Venus and magnetite was well known for its properties of attraction (as stated by Plin. *HN*, 36.127), which will bring the beloved person to the *defigens*' arms in no time. Unfortunately, the archaeological record does not preserve any of these items discussed in the *PGM*, where indeed a large variety of atypical media used in aggressive magic is discussed.

Among these items we find quotidian objects that have been (used or) reused, such as tiles, clay jars, a pendant and a pewter plate etc.. As is the case with some of these objects (Sánchez Natalías 2011: 86–7), the brief and elliptical nature of the inscription, which at times is little more than a list of names, precludes any in depth analysis of the relationship between a curse and its medium. Perhaps practitioners resorted to these items since they were believed to possess the *ousia* (substance) for which certain spells call. Generally, the *PGM* considers things like pieces of fabric, hairs or finger and toenails that belong to the victim to comprise *ousia*. Since these items hailed from the victim, they were believed to reinforce even further the bond between a victim and curse. Hence, they were often put inside of a lead tablet to increase a spell's power (for some good examples see Bevilacqua *et al.* 2012: 236). While this theory offers one compelling reason that everyday objects (perhaps purloined?) were used in the creation of these curses, the lack of any surviving organic material and the above-mentioned brevity of the texts defy any absolute conclusion (further discussion in Sánchez Natalías 2011: 87; *Tab. Sulis* 18 and 30).

Fortunately, other, more elaborate *defixiones* provide us with additional clues. A second century A.D. piece discovered in a necropolis just off the Via Appia in Rome, for example, makes explicit the relationship between an atypical medium and its curse. The object in question is a (sort of 'mass produced') terracotta votive that depicts the busts of two adults and a child (Mancini 1923: 37–9) and presumably represents a family. Thus, we can state that this votive was never created with a magical purpose, but rather re-appropriated by the *defigens*, and so it will fit into the category of curses written on 'atypical' media discussed here. That said, and despite the fact that this object is not a 'typical' magical figurine, it has been generally grouped with the figurines rather than *defixiones* simply because of the anthropomorphic shape (Faraone 1991: no. 21; McKie, this volume). Recently, however, scholars have been eager to warn against any rigid divide between these figurines and *defixiones*, since both groups of objects have the same function, were made with the same purposes and only differ in shape (Ogden 2009: 245). For these various reasons, I have included this curse in the present discussion.

The object boasts two inscriptions: the first is a so called *ante cocturam* stamp that was applied to the piece in the workshop where it was produced. The second inscription, which was etched into the object after the terracotta had been fired (hence, *post cocturam*), is what will hold our attention here. The inscription, whose text and meaning have been contested, begins with the formula,' ⌜*Q*⌝*uomodo isti non cumbe(re) inter se* ...' after which follows another fragmentary formula and a series of names, undoubtedly those of the intended victims. If *cumbe(re) inter se* can be taken as a synonym of the compound *concumbo*, the inscription could contain a sexual connotation (see *OLD*). Following this hypothesis, it would be possible to understand that the magical practitioner established an analogy between the figurines on the votive and the victims of the *defixio*. As the sculpted group is by definition rigid and cannot move, so it appears that the *defigens* asks for his victims to become as brittle and immobile as a piece of terracotta so as to avoid any sexual relationship.

Another *defixio* deserving attention comes from an unknown archaeological context, though the piece, according to its first editor, must have come from Rome or thereabouts

before making its way into the Museo delle Terme di Diocleziano in the 1930s (Muzzioli 1939: 42–3). What makes this text stand out (and currently unparalleled) is the fact that it was painted on the internal surface of cinerary urn. Dated to the fourth or fifth century A.D., the curse asks the Holy Angels to see to it that 'just as this spirit enclosed within [this urn] is held and constrained and as it does not see light and does not have any reprieve, in this way may the spirit, the mind and the body of *Collecticius* whom Agnella bore remain, burn, and melt forever' (… *quomodo (ha)ec anima intus in-/ clusa tenetur et angust{i}atur/ et non v⌜ī⌝ de(t) neque lum⌜e⌝n{e} ne<que> aliquem/ refrigerium non (h)abet sicut anima/ mentes corp⌜u⌝s Collecticii quem peperit Agnella// teneatur ardeat destabescat usque …* (*AE* 1941, 138)). As this text suggests, the desired outcome for the victim of the curse is compared to the remains of a previously deceased individual who was placed in the very urn that serves as the medium for the curse. Hence, the curse makes use of both the urn as well as the ashes, which serve as the subject of the comparison for the *defigens*' magical desires.

While some *PGM* recipes call for the use of skulls or bones, this way of reusing a cinerary urn is unique in the Roman West. There may be, however, a partial parallel from the fountain of Anna Perenna at Rome, where recent excavations have uncovered (amongst other objects) a series of lead cylindrical containers which contained *defixiones* and magical figurines (Piranomonte 2016). As I have argued elsewhere (Sánchez Natalías 2011: 87–9), these containers likely represent cinerary urns in miniature and they would employ the same logic and tropes that are made explicit in the painted curse from Museo delle Terme di Diocleziano.

The final example that I would like to discuss of 'atypical media' is dated to the first century A.D. and like the abovementioned cinerary urn comes from an unknown archaeological context, though it is thought to have come from Rome where it later became a part of the Museo Kircheriano (Vallarino 2010: 66). Also, like the previous example, this text was painted, but this time on a lamp. Unfortunately, the lamp is now missing and we do not know its formal characteristics, though the text has been recorded (*CIL* 15. 6265). The use of a lamp as the medium for a curse is unparalleled in the Roman West, though there is a parallel that comes from fourth-century B.C. Athens, which contains a list of six names written from right to left. As Thompson noted (1958: 159), this direction of writing places the Athenian lamp squarely in the context of aggressive magic, since this technique is employed in many Greek curse tablets. Accordingly, the names on the Athenian lamp provide the names of a series of victims.

Mastrocinque (2007) has connected this Athenian lamp to several lamps discovered in the abovementioned fountain of Anna Perenna. Inside of at least three of these lamps (there are 74 in total), *defixiones* were put in the place normally occupied by a wick (Blänsdorf 2012a; 2012b; 2012d and Mastrocinque 2007: 96). Mastrocinque has fruitfully emphasised the symbolism surrounding light in various strands of ancient thought (Christian, Roman, etc.) and has usefully collected literary sources that connect light and mankind. He reaches the surprising, though compelling, conclusion that in the realm of magic 'the offering of a lamp could substitute for the offering of a man' (2007: 96). He has, however, overlooked an object that makes his conclusions all the more secure, namely the lamp mentioned at the beginning of the previous paragraph. It reads, '*Helenus · su⌜u⌝m · nomen · {e}i⌜n⌝feris/ mandat · stipem · strenam · lumen/ su⌜u⌝m · secum · defert · ne quis · eum / solvat · nisi · nos · qui · fecimus*'. The curse draws an analogy between the lamp's light and the life of the victim. A person's light, like their name, serves as a metonymy for their life and being. By mentioning all three together, the *defigentes* are strongly emphasising the damnation of the victim. We can even speculate that during the ritual deposition of this curse, the lamp would have been lit and then extinguished to reinforce the spoken and written word of the spell.

Again, and regardless of the type of material employed for cursing, both the literary and archaeological examples discussed in the last section demonstrate how the analogies established between curses and targets draw heavily on media to work. The use and/or reuse of these objects show that the practitioners planned every detail of the ritual, and this planning allowed them to establish creative and durable links between matter and victim. The materiality of that connection could take different forms, at times appealing to the *ousia* (substance), to the physical features of the objects, or to the ideas that these items represented. Indeed, in the eyes of the *defigens*, the very rigidity of a sculpture, confinedness of a urn and obscurity of an extinguished lamp could help them imagine dire scenarios for their targets.

Conclusions

As highlighted in the introduction, materiality can be defined as the complex and multidirectional relationship between an object and living beings. In this environment, the object, in this case a *defixio*, sets into motion a nexus of relations that involves at least three subjects. Once the relationship between the object and the magical practitioner was established, the invoked power(s) and the victim(s) of the curse were thought to be (almost) immediately affected. Obviously, the types of bonds that a *defixio* had with these beings were different in terms of duration and character: the practitioner would endow the object with his or her human agency from manufacturing to depositing the artefact. From this point on, the evoked powers and then the victim(s) are compelled to undertake a relationship with the *defixio,* whose agency manifests itself in still different ways. The invoked powers are compelled to respond as quickly as possible before being freed from their duty. For the victims,

on the other hand, the relationship will continue in the form of illness and symptoms until the resolution of the situation or maybe even their death. Thus, the agency would be perceived in terms of duty by the invoked power(s), while it would take the form of symptoms and pathologies in the eyes of the victims.

The present contribution has sought to provide an analysis of the relationships that *defixiones* were believed to set into motion with a special focus on how the physicality of the object was evoked to strengthen the curse's efficacy. In this regard, *defixiones* stand apart from many other genres of epigraphy. With this objective in mind, I have laid particular emphasis on the media of *defixiones* from the Roman West, classifying the different examples attested. Although lead was by far the most common and widely used medium, practitioners were presented with an array of options ranging from materials often used for writing (papyrus, marble, etc.) to objects seldom used (or reused) as a surface to be inscribed (parts of living animals, magnetite, shells, and everyday objects). It should be stressed that, as is the case with religious rituals, magical practices followed a specific protocol in which no step could be omitted. The choice of material, then, was never random, since it was one of the keys for a successful ritual.

In light of the evidence analysed, we can state that materiality and metaphor were concepts that operated simultaneously during the process of manufacture of the pieces. As we have seen, some of the texts discussed above evoke the physical features of the media used, at times through metaphorical language, to reinforce a very specific materiality: their relationship with the targets. It seems clear that, in these curses, metaphors were used at least with three different purposes: 1) to reinforce the link between victim and spell; 2) to allow the author of the text express his desires in a more detailed and creative way; and 3) to 'help' the readers of the curses (supernatural entities) to accomplish their mission(s). In many cases, metaphors were drawn from the properties of the materials employed, binding (even more) target and *defixio*. The practitioners were well aware of the interrelation between these two and that is why stressing their link could be only aide in the 'happy' ending of a spell.

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Abbreviations

AE = L'Année Épigraphique, Paris 1888.
CIL = Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum. Berlin.
DT = Defixionum Tabellae (see Audollent 1904).
DTA = Defixionum Tabellae Atticae (see Wünsch 1897).
DTM =Defixionum Tabellae Mogontiacenses (see Blänsdorf 2012c).
OLD = Oxford Latin Dictionary. Oxford.
PGM = Papyri Grecae Magicae (see Betz 1992).
RIB = Roman Inscriptions of Britain (see Collingwood and Wright 1965).
Tab. Sulis = Tabellae Sulis (see Tomlin 1988).