Fearing the Gods? The Self-Presentation of Practitioners in Curse Tablets from Britannia

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Abstract

After some introductory remarks on current approaches to curse tablets, this paper focuses on the *defixiones* from Britannia, analyzing the main features of the corpus to demonstrate how the island's inhabitants adopted and adapted this inherited technology. Then, I turn to the curses in which the name of the practitioner is clearly stated. Previous scholarship has interpreted this particular feature as a sign of trepidation on the author's part who was asking for something just and, consequently, had no reason to fear the invoked divinities. Instead, I argue that such a self-presentation should be interpreted differently in light of the context in which texts with this feature were deposited and the rituals that took place in that space. Within this framework, a practitioner's perception of a deity's omniscience influences what elements are included in a given curse.

Key-words: curse tablets, *defixiones*, *defixiones in fures*, prayers for justice, *defigens*, divine omniscience, Britannia, Bath, Aquae Sulis.

1. Introduction[1]

[1] This article was written as part of the project "Las *defixiones* latinas del África romana: una reedición" (DeLAR; reference RTI2018-098339-J-I00). Special thanks to E. Eidinow and I. Salvo for their comments and suggestions, which have greatly improved this paper, the content of which remains my sole responsibility. I am also thankful to B. Jerue (Universidad de San Jorge) for translating this paper from Spanish into English and for his insightful comments. This contribution is part of a broader research on curses against thieves, part of which has been presented at the conference *Curses in Context IV: 'Curse Tablets in the Wider Realm of Execrations'* (Chicago, 2019) whose proceedings will be referred to as Sánchez Natalías 2022a. Throughout this paper, the terms '*defixio*' and 'curse tablet' will be used as synonyms, and so will 'practitioner' and '*defigens*' (i.e., the person who wrote or commissioned a curse; pl. *defigentes*). In addition, the following abbreviations will be used: *DT*= Audollent 1904, *PGM*= Betz 1986, *RIB*= Collingwood and Wright 1965, *SD*= Sánchez Natalías 2022b and *Tab. Sulis*= Tomlin 1988.

Curse tablets, also known as *defixiones*, are 'inscribed pieces of lead, usually in the form of small, thin sheets, intended to influence, by supernatural means, persons or animals against their will.'[2] Besides their telltale material features, these texts are characterized by their desire to manipulate, harm or even kill their targets.[3] Written in response to what a practitioner perceived to be an inflicted wrong or misfortune, curse tablets constitute a form of 'individual justice' for those who did not have the knowledge, power or legal/economic resources to obtain justice through the established means for so doing. The history of this magical-religious technology is as long as it is rich since their use is attested across the Mediterranean for over a millennium.[4] So far, the oldest evidence has been dated to the sixth-fifth centuries BCE and comes from the Sicilian sanctuaries of Selinunte and Morgantina.[5] A scholarly consensus has emerged that, like other cultural practices and technologies, the praxis of writing curses migrated beyond Magna Graecia following Greek colonization routes and then appeared in very distant geographies, from the Black Sea and Macedon to North Africa and the Iberian peninsula.[6] Then, and precisely through the Oscan populations (who had also developed their own form of cursing), this practice reached Roman culture.[7] From there, the spread of curse tablets disseminated even further, to the areas that would eventually became *provinciae* under Roman rule. The picture of this process is not completely clear, but we can think -among other key factors- of the movement of population, the existence (and circulation) of magical handbooks and formularies or the itinerant professional practitioners, not to mention the oral transmission of the cursing rituals within local communities.

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[2] Jordan 1985: 151. On curse tablets in general, see the recent works by Chiarini 2021 and Sánchez Natalías 2022b, with further references.

[3] The very violent nature of curse tablets has been stressed by Riess 2012: 164-234 and, more recently, by Watson 2019: 73.

[4] On curse tablets as a magical-religious technology, see Sánchez Natalías 2022a: 89 and ff., 2022b: 6 and Woolf 2022.

[5] For these tablets, see Curbera 1999a: nos. 22-33 and 56-64, respectively. For Selinunte, see also Bettarini 2005: 95-154. On the Sicilian corpus of Greek curse tablets, see Sommerschield 2019 (with further references).

[6] Eidinow 2007: 141, Lamont forthcoming.

[7] For understanding this process, the work of Poccetti is fundamental (especially 1993: 80, 1999: 555 and 2015). In addition, see McDonald 2015: 137-141, Eidinow 2019: esp. 363-364, Marco Simón 2019 and Vitellozzi 2019.

Far from being static, the practice of writing curse tablets was constantly adapted by the different cultures and populations that employed this technology[8]. Just to give an example, we can think of the corpus of *defixiones* from the sanctuary of Mater Magna in Mogontiacum/Mainz (Germania Superior), which dates from between 70-130 CE: for their deposition, these curses were thrown into the sacrificial fire located in the back of the temple, a deposit which has no parallels in the Roman West. Jürgen Blänsdorf, the editor, says of these texts: 'It is the lack of standardisation, the resourcefulness of imagery, and the elaborate language and style that distinguishes most of the Mainz texts from both the eastern and the western traditions of written curses'.[9] All that is to say that, in front of a similar practice, such as writing curse tablets, local communities found their own ways to adapt the ritual, as is evident from the rich range of deposit types,[10] invoked divinities[11] or even the sorts of problems that the practitioners hoped to address through inscribed curse tablets.[12]

Given the ability of *defixiones* to change and meet the needs of different populations or subgroups within a larger community, the importance of curse tablets for glimpsing the diversity of ways that individuals could conceive of religion, the divine, and their own connection to it is undeniable. In short, an examination of *defixiones* across time and cultures can elegantly show the myriad ways of interacting with the gods and understanding their nature, powers, and intentions. But as this essay aims to show, there are even meaningful variations of understanding the divine within a single community over a relatively short period of time. In other words, we must resist the temptation to deduce larger, ready-made patterns about how people lived and experienced religion and, hence, should be wary of imposing the logic or

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[8] See note 4.

[9] Blänsdorf 2010: 165; for the *editio princeps* see Blänsdorf 2012. On this cache and the sanctuary, see also the remarks of Veale 2017.

[10] In addition to the curses from Mogontiacum/Mainz, see also the various cultural valences for certain spaces such as the amphitheater (cf. Sánchez Natalías 2020: 73-74, and 2022b: 50-52) or the aquatic spaces (cf. Sánchez Natalías 2019 and 2022b: 41-48).

[11] On the emergence of local deities otherwise unattested through public epigraphy, see Marco Simón 2010. More generally, on indigenous deities in curse tablets from the Roman West, see Sánchez Natalías 2022b: 65-66.

[12] The prevalence of certain issues in specific areas is not only seen with the curse tablets against thieves discussed in this essay, but also with the agonistic curses, which were extremely popular in North Africa (on these, see Gordon 2012 and Tremel 2004).

assumptions of any one example onto broader communities. This general approach to the religious experiences of ancient individuals has recently been theorized by scholars working under the umbrella of 'Lived Ancient Religion', such as Jörg Rüpke and, for the case of curse tablets, Richard Gordon or Stuart McKie[13]. This approach questions institutionalized religious practices to focus on the agency of the individual practitioners, who shaped their religious experiences, choosing among a broad spectrum of options and adapting them to their specific needs. This essay intends to follow such a conceptual framework, given that curse tablets offer direct evidence for the ways in which individuals could communicate with the supernatural world. Indeed, these artifacts provide a window onto the emotional landscape of ancient lives, allowing scholars to peer at a range of emotions, from love and desire to anger and desperation.[14]

As we have seen so far, some recent approaches to *defixiones* have attempted to move away from thinking of these artifacts in homogeneous terms, putting the focus not only on the role of individual agents but also on larger regional variations.[15] And yet we do not want to lose sight of larger and shared human needs and experiences that generally made curse tablets an important part of ancient religion. Indeed, as Jesper Sørensen has claimed about the meta-theoretical principles that guide the cognitive approaches to religion, 'only the underlying mechanisms and processes are universal, whereas the emergence of a specific phenomenon at a particular time and place depends on other, contextual factors.'[16] According to this principle, it is fruitful to avoid establishing direct parallels between different corpora that appear in distant contexts, often separated by centuries. Even when they share some thematic or formulaic commonalities, it is important to remember that these corpora emerged in their own cultural contexts, addressing specific and local needs.

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[13] On this approach, see Rüpke 2016, Gordon 2015, Gordon *apud* Albrecht *et al.* 2018: 8-9, McKie 2017 and 2022.
[14] On these emotions, see Winkler 1990, Faraone 1999, Salvo 2012 and Eidinow 2007 and 2016, among others.
[15] See, for instance, Urbanová 2018 chapters 7-12, where she analyzes the archaeological evidence from the Roman West); also see McKie 2019 and 2022 for the case of the Roman North-West; Vitellozzi 2019 and Gordon 2019 for the Italian peninsula.
[16] Sørensen 2005: 469.

2. Curse Tablets in Roman Britain

As was the case with other innovations, curse tablets made their way to Britain thanks to conquest and the processes of 'Romanization'.[17]As Roger Tomlin has explained, 'it looks as if the language, like the concept of curse tablets for theft, was introduced to Britain during the first century of Roman rule'.[18] In fact, it was not only the curse tablets themselves that arrived in Britannia by the first century CE but also a rudimentary knowledge of the purposes, methods of manufacture, and rituals surrounding the use of *defixiones* more generally. It is worth stressing that, at the time when this practice reached Britain, contemporary 'continental' curses were what Gordon has called 'vernacular' texts, meaning that they were produced by individuals who had a basic knowledge of cursing rituals and not by religious professionals.[19] As a result, these texts did not include all the 'sophisticated' features that were later imported from Greco-Egyptian magical traditions and that flourished in various contexts in Late Antiquity (e.g., magical symbols [*charaktêres*], magical names or iconography).[20] As the remarkable archaeological finds at the sanctuaries of Sulis-Minerva (Bath, Aquae Sulis) and Mercury (Uley) in the final third of the twentieth century have demonstrated,[21] the lack of Greco-Egyptian elements in no way hindered the success of these artifacts in Roman Britain. At the time this essay was written, there were 256 documented curses from Britannia, which happens to be the largest known corpus from any Roman province (in all likelihood, future excavations will unearth even more tablets). As we shall see and as I have argued in more detail elsewhere,[22] the success of these tablets in Roman Britain can be explained by

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[17] For the scholarship on the problematic and loaded concept of 'Romanization', see Beltrán Lloris 2017, with further references.

[18] Tomlin 1988: 73.

[19] For the idea of 'vernacular' texts here, I follow Gordon 2020: 193-194. On the distinction between 'vernacular' texts and those written by professionals, see Faraone and Gordon 2019: 320.

[20] With the exception of a fourth-century CE tablet on which we find the symbol of Chnoubis (the triple barred S. On this, see *SD* 446).

[21] On these *corpora*, see the magisterial editions by Tomlin 1988 (= *Tab. Sulis*) and 1993 (with the additions in the journal *Britannia*; a full edition of the curses from Uley is being completed by Tomlin himself).

[22] See Sánchez Natalías 2022a: 95-97.

their ability to address some basic religious and legal needs of people living on the frontier. In what follows, I analyze the manner in which the authors of these British curses presented themselves. Before doing so, it is worth reviewing some of the salient features of the *defixiones* from Britannia, namely their archaeological context and shared characteristics of the texts.

2.1 The Archaeological Contexts of British Curse Tablets

Generally speaking, scholars have identified four main contexts for depositing curse tablets: necropolises, sanctuaries, aquatic spaces and places close to the victim of the spell (such as houses or workplaces).[23] In the case of Britannia, nearly all the curses were deposited in either monumental sacred spaces (such as sanctuaries) or natural spaces that were sacred to divinities (such as rivers).[24] This pronounced preference for depositing curses in sacred spaces rather than other contexts is one of the corpus' most salient features. Indeed, in other provinces, curses were frequently deposited in necropolises,[25] but there is only one known example of this context from Roman Britain: the curse from Clothall, which also stands out for having been written right-to-left and having been pierced five times before being placed in a cremation grave.[26] This contrast between Britain and the rest of the western Roman world provides us with an important piece of information about how inhabitants of this province conceived of the use of *defixiones*: in the British context, curse tablets do not seem to have been closely associated with various types of spirits, such as the 'restless dead,' whereas this connection was exceedingly productive in the Mediterranean provinces, such as Roman Africa, the Italian peninsula, or Hispania.[27] Instead, curses in Roman Britain seem to have been a common feature of sacred spaces.

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[23] On this, see Sánchez Natalías 2022b: 37-52.

[24] Among the natural spaces, aquatic ones were one of the most important. On these and for a revaluation of the concept of 'aquatic spaces', see Sánchez Natalías 2019.

[25] These tablets come mostly from major cities in Italy and North Africa (such as Rome, Carthage, and Hadrumetum). On this, see Alfayé and Sánchez Natalías 2020: 47-50.

[26] Cf. *SD* 345.

[27] In fact, we know of many instances in which the practitioner invokes the spirit of the dead in whose tomb the curse tablet was deposited (see for instance the series *DT* 286-291). Another curse tablet, from Rome (cf. *SD* 2), compares the victim of the text to the corpse in whose tomb the *defixio* was deposited; it reads: *quomodo mortuos qui istic sepultus est nec loqui nec sermonare potest seic Rhodine apud M(arcum) Licinium Faustum mortua sit nec*

2.2 The British Curse-texts: Some Remarks on Their Content and Authorship

About a third of the British curses (86 of 256) were written in response to a theft[28]. To fully contextualize this number, we must underscore that we cannot decipher the reasons for which practitioners wrote any of the other remaining British curses. This is due to the lack of information included in the texts, which are often too fragmentary or contain only a list of names, while the other details related to the curse would have been recited orally during a ritual. Of the 86 curse tablets against thieves, most (62) come from the sanctuaries of Sulis Minerva (AquaeSulis, Bath) and Mercury (Uley), while the rest (24) were discovered in different settlements located in the southern third of the island. If we put this last number (24) in perspective, it is impressive since in the rest of the Roman West there are only twenty known *defixiones* written in response to a theft.[29] In short, the available evidence all points to the conclusion that in Britannia curse tablets were largely used for addressing this particular issue.[30]

We are left to wonder why this would be the case and ask ourselves whether these texts responded to a specific need that otherwise went unmet. Some scholars have answered the second question affirmatively. For Soazick Kerneis, the arrival of curse tablets to Britain coincided with profound social changes in which the rise of a monetary economy encouraged the accumulation of goods.[31] As part of the process of 'Romanization' and in light of the growing importance of material accumulation, theft became a serious societal problem that could not fully or satisfactorily be controlled through other, more traditional means.

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loqui nec sermonare possit ('Just as the dead man who is buried here can neither speak nor hold a conversation, so may Rhodine be dead, not speak to or hold a conversation with Marcus Licinius Faustus…).

[28] There has been (and still is) a long debate among scholars on how to categorize the different types of ancient Greek and Roman curses, and especially, curse tablets against thieves (which have been labeled '*defixiones in fures*' by A. Audollent [1904: LXXXVIII], 'prayers for justice' by H. Versnel [1991, 2010 and 2012] or '*defixiones criminales*', by M. Dreher [2012]). In my view, the use (and abuse) of taxonomies with which traditional scholarship analyzes the curses against thieves has been taken too far. Instead of establishing hard boundaries between the different categories of curses, we should think of them from a more *emic* perspective, paying attention to them as magical-religious artifacts that evolved over time and space and were adapted by different societies that employed them. On this, see McKie 2019: 445 and Sánchez Natalías (2022a: 88-92 and 2022b: 59-62).

[29] Elsewhere in the Roman West, we find another 20 texts that come from Hispania, Raetia, Pannonia, and Italy.

[30] As we shall see momentarily, there are parallel texts from other parts of the ancient Mediterranean. That said, the number of texts and lack of other types of curses in Britannia remains extraordinary and should not be overlooked.

[31] On this, see Kerneis 2014: 41-42.

It was the emperor who oversaw the administration of justice, and the resolution of such crimes was supposed to be reached through officially sanctioned processes. Or at least that is how it worked in theory: the difficulties that plagued legal proceedings in the Roman world were many (not to mention problems of those who were unable to rely on the legal system in the first place). In fact, slaves, women or children who had been robbed had to rely on the *pater familias* (the male head of a Roman family) to take legal action on their behalf, since according to Roman law their possessions belonged to him.[32] Given these difficulties, sanctuaries came to function as a sort of stand-in court in which everybody, but especially those without recourse to the legal action could at least ask for divine justice.[33]

This equation, in which 'Romanization', the accumulation of goods, and increases in theft come together to create the conditions for the flourishing of curses against thieves, may appear somewhat bold or speculative, given the state of evidence. As explained elsewhere,[34] and putting aside larger processes like 'Romanization', theft and catching thieves were ubiquitous problems in Antiquity, for which there were a range of solutions employed across the ancient Mediterranean. Curse tablets were one of them, as it is made clear by the British curses as well as several much earlier texts, such as those discovered in the sanctuary of Demeter at Cnidus (Caria, modern Turkey, second-first centuries BCE).[35] The Cnidian texts, which have several features analogous to those found in the British curses, have been often compared with the so-called 'confession stelae' (Lydia and Phrygia, modern Turkey, second-third centuries CE), in which the guilty party publicly confesses their crime.[36] Furthermore, this *topos* of the 'public confession' is also found in two recipes for catching a thief in the Greek Magical Papyri.[37] In short, Graeco-Roman

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[32] See McKie 2017: 131 (with further references) and also Rodger 1990: 158-159.

[33] Kerneis 2014: 28.

[34] Sánchez Natalías 2022a: 92-97.

[35] See Newton 1863: 382f; 719-745 and Versnel 1991:72-74, Faraone 2011: 27-37, Eidinow 2016: 215-218 (who deals instance when women are accused of malevolent activities) and Sánchez Natalías 2022a: 92-94 and Sánchez Natalías 2022b: 61.

[36] On these stelae, see Versnel 1991: esp. 75-79, Chaniotis 2004 and 2009, Gordon 2016.

[37] *PGM* V, which has been dated to the third/fourth century CE contains two recipes. In brief, the first one (*PGM* V, 70-95) recommends that the practitioner paint an eye on a wall and then smack it with a hammer made of the wood from a gallows while reciting the formula "Hand over the thief who stole it. As long as I strike the eye with this hammer, let the eye of the thief be struck and let it swell up until it betrays him". The second recipe (*PGM* V, 182-

societies in different places were racked by the same basic problem (how to catch a thief) and found various solutions that arose organically across the ancient world. Needless to say, even if the curse tablets from Cnidus and those from Britannia bear some commonalities, these similarities result from a common sense of justice and desire for punishment that practitioners felt after facing the anxiety and frustration of suffering a wrong.

When confronted with a wrong or an injustice, some practitioners took the initiative to (try to) fix their problems by appealing to the deities through different mechanisms (namely curse tablets, confession stelae or specific rituals such as the ones described in *PGM*).[38] Within this framework, *defixiones* were just one of the multiple expressions of 'instrumental religion,' which was meant to help individuals when facing personal crisis, crimes, (perceived) wrongs or misfortunes.[39]

2.2.2 Who Wrote Curse Tablets in Britannia?

The question of the authorship of these texts has long been a thorny one, since it is nearly impossible to discern whether the *defigens* (i.e., the person who curses) was the one who actually inscribed the text. In certain contexts, like Roman North Africa, palaeographic, linguistic, and iconographic analysis have allowed us to conclude that certain curses were indeed written by the same (professional) practitioner.[40] This contrasts with the situation in Britannia, where almost every known curse tablet was written by a different individual. The diversity of hands and styles strongly suggests that there were not professionals writing curses in Roman Britain; instead, people would have by and large produced their own curse tablets, relying on their linguistics skills and knowledge of cursing practices. In fact, we currently know of just one curse tablet that was inscribed by a third party. The text, written as a response to the theft of a

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212) recommends offering cheese and wheat to the suspects of a theft, while invoking Iao. Those who will not swallow the food are the thieves.

[38] On the causal mechanisms underlying the different manifestations of religion, see Sørensen 2005: 468-469 with further references. On the specific rituals described in *PGM*, see the preceding footnote.

[39] Gordon and Marco Simón 2020.

[40] Some of the best-known series come from Hadrumetum (modern Sousse). One of them invokes the demon *Baitmo Arbitto* (for which see *DT* 286-291 and Gordon 2005); also see *DT* 276-285, which use the same series of magical signs, *charaktêres* and palaeography (cf. Németh 2011).

mule (among other things), begins with the expression '*Nomine Camulorigis et Titocunae*,' 'in the name of Camulorigis and Titocuna.' While the evidence does not let us conclude whether the inscriber of this text was a professional scribe, we can say with more certainty that (s)he was a third party with the requisite knowledge and skills to write on behalf of the wronged individuals, who presumably were unable to do this for themselves.[41] There are two other pieces of evidence that stress the great variety of hands attested in the British corpus when compared to other geographies. Only two of the 130 tablets discovered in the sacred spring at Bath seem to be written by the same hand (*SD* 300 and 301, which merely contain two lists of names). Furthermore, there are only two other documents that seem to have been written by the same individual, even though they come from different sanctuaries: the first, discovered at the spring of Sulis, was written in response to the theft of a hooded cloak,[42] while the second, which comes from the sanctuary of Mercury at Uley, targets two individuals who are accused of making a domesticated animal ill.[43] As Tomlin observes, both pieces betray palaeographical similarities and use a very similar and noteworthy expression: *maximo letum adigat*/ *maximo leto adigas* (from Bath and Uley, respectively; trans. 'drive them to the greatest death'). If both curses were written by the same individual, we can see how cursing was seen as a flexible and effective tool that could be used to confront different types of adversity.

The (almost exceptional) cases discussed above attest to the great number of curse-writers on the island and suggest that cursing was a sort of DIY practice. Indeed, the high number of practitioners shows that there was common knowledge about how to manufacture and deposit a curse tablet in Roman Britain. The evidence allows us to go even a step further, since we know of c. 50 lead tablets that were not inscribed but were nevertheless yet deposited in similar ways to inscribed texts.[44] This suggests that even those who did not possess the requisite literacy skills for writing a curse were still aware of the practice of cursing, being able to manipulate a lead tablet and (presumably) deposit it along with an oral incantation. Putting

[41] *SD* 350.
[42] *SD* 215.
[43] *SD* 361.
[44] Most of them come from the sanctuary of Mercury in Uley (cf. Woodward 1993). To these, we could also add the so-called pseudo-inscriptions from *AquaeSulis*/Bath (cf. *SD* 317-321).

the blank texts aside, the vast majority of curse tablets from Britain was inscribed and deployed a repertoire of formulae. These formulae included expressions to describe thieves, to dictate the terms of their punishment, to lay out procedures for the return of the stolen objects and expressions used for the self-presentation of practitioners.[45] It is this last group on which we will focus next.

3. The Self-Presentation of Practitioners in Roman Britain

Generally speaking, ancient Greek and Roman curse tablets do not include the names of the practitioners, except for love spells, where the author, who may be the lover or writing on his/her behalf, wants to ensure that a god sends the beloved running to the correct arms.[46] In other words, all precautions are taken to avoid that the god sends the desired to the wrong person. This is an interesting feature of these curses since it reveals something about the practitioner's faith in divine omniscience: will the gods remember or even know to whom they are supposed to send the victim? The level of specificity in these curses could lead us to think that practitioners could have their doubts on the matter.[47] A similar tension is at play in the British curses written in response to theft. Unlike the rest of the curses against thieves from the Roman West in which *defigentes* tend to avoid identifying themselves, among the British texts a sizable number of individuals unambiguously give their name.[48] That said, self-naming is certainly not a required feature of this type of curse, even in the British corpus: just over 40% (36 of 86 to be exact) of these texts include the author's name, meaning that we can observe two distinct and well-documented practices in terms of self-identification in the corpus.

In the cases where authors do identify themselves, the *defigentes* do not include full names, but instead they usually write their *cognomen* (a type of nickname used in Rome). As pointed out by McKie, this can

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[45] On these standard formulae, see Tomlin 1988: 63-74.

[46] To these, we could also add some juridical curses in which the name of the principal is stated, such as a curse tablet from Celti/Peñaflor (cf. *SD* 131), whose text reads: 'May Valerius Marcellus fall silent and unable to speak against C. Licinius Gallus. Just as a frog without a tongue is mute and silent, so may Marcellus be mute, silent, enfeebled, against Licinius Gallus' (translated by Marco Simón 2019: 389).

[47] On the wide range of possibilities between full anonymity and an overabundance of personal detail given by the *defigentes* in their texts, see Chiarini 2021: 50-95.

[48] See, among others, *SD* 210, 215, 236-237, 259-260, 441, 451, 456-457 and 205.

be understood as a reflection of the intimacy between practitioners and divinity that the cursing ritual involved, in which the first chose to present themselves in a closer, more intimate manner (i.e., by using their most affectionate name).[49] In some instances, we can find *cognomina* in the nominative case, such as in a second/third century CE curse from the sanctuary of Bath (AquaeSulis) that reads: 'Lovernisca [gives] him who, whether [man] or woman, whether boy or girl, ‹who› has stolen (her) cape.'[50] In other instances, the name of the practitioner appears in the genitive to show to whom a stolen item rightfully belongs, as seen in a curse from the same sanctuary dated to the second/third century CE: 'To the goddess Sulis. If anyone has stolen the bathing tunic of Cantissena...'[51] While in the first scenario the practitioner directly addresses the god, in the second case, Cantissena is relegated to a less prominent position, merely being identified as the owner of the stolen object.

At times, the name of the author is qualified with additional information. To date, we know of a handful of cases in which the practitioner identifies him/herself with a patronymic or, in one instance, a matronymic. In a third/fourth century CE curse tablet from the sanctuary of Bath/*Aquae Sulis*, Annianus, the son of Matutina, reports to Sulis-Minerva the theft of six silver coins.[52] The inclusion of the mother's name in this text seems odd, especially if we recall that when a matronymic appears in a curse tablet it is usually used to identify the *victim* in the most precise way possible. According to Jaime Curbera, the presence of the matronymic in later Greek magical texts should be understood as an imported practice from the Egyptian world which became popular amongst magical practitioners in order to distinguish cursing practices from the Greek official practice (where paternal lineage was the common usage).[53] Within the Latin curse tablets, and although the inclusion of the matronymic is mostly attested in curses from North Africa and the Italian peninsula,[54] we know of another three British curses in which it is

[49] McKie 2017: 204 and McKie 2022: 124.
[50] *SD* 266. Translated by R. Tomlin.
[51] *SD* 268. Translated by R. Tomlin.
[52] *SD* 303.
[53] On this, see Curbera 1999b, Ogden 1999: 61 and Poccetti 2002: 36.
[54] It appears frequently with the formula *quem peperit*, such as several curses from Hadrumetum (cf., for instance, *DT* 263-268) or Rome (cf. *SD* 16 and some texts from the Fountain of the goddess Anna Perenna, such as *SD* 20).

included for the same purpose (i.e., to identify the victim of the text).[55] On the contrary, Annianus is employing it here to make his own identity even clearer. We are left to wonder why. Two hypotheses could explain his choice. A) Perhaps because he thinks that Sulis needs additional information to know who he is. Consequently, we should ask whether Annianus was a common name in Roman Britain. According to the available evidence, this was not the case in Britannia, although it is a well attested *cognomen* in other provinces.[56] B) Annianus strayed from the more usual formula, in part because he was not an expert in cursing, but just an individual who adapted more standard practices either intentionally or by mistake.

The final example that I would like to discuss in this context is a fourth-century piece from the sanctuary of Mercury at Uley, in which Saturnina, identified as a *muliere* (sic), denounces the theft of a linen cloth.[57] Here, the fact that the practitioner defines herself using the word *mulier* is unparalleled, though she is not the only female *defigens* from Roman Britain. If translated as 'a woman', as the text's editors prefer, this detail apparently does not furnish any additional information to the god, who should know the obvious (i.e., that Saturnina is a woman's name). For this reason, it seems more likely that Saturnina wanted to make clear her status (i.e., that she was 'a wife'), since the Latin word *mulier* could also be used in opposition to 'a maid'.[58] Perhaps in this case, Saturnina was trying to underline her maturity and status in order to bolster the seriousness of her appeal to the deities. We are still left, however, with a more basic question: why did these *defigentes* choose to identify themselves to the deity with their names in the first place?

Answering this question has proven somewhat controversial: Roger Tomlin argues that, by including their name, practitioners demonstrate that they do not fear the deity. Similarly, for Henk Versnel, who thinks of

[55] One of them comes from the sanctuary of Sulis Minerva in Bath (cf. *SD* 235); another was discovered at the sanctuary of Mercury in Uley (*SD* 360); the last comes from Silchester (*SD* 454).
[56] Cf. *OPEL*, s.v. Annianus. This *cognomen* is mostly attested in Hispania, Dalmatia and the Narbonensis. Also, a quick search in the Clauss-Slaby epigraphic database comes up with 71 entries for this name, which was popular in Italia, North Africa and Gallia.
[57] *SD* 356.
[58] On this, cf. L&S, s.v. II.

these texts as 'prayers for justice' rather than curse tablets,[59] the inclusion of their name is explained by the fact that the practitioners are asking for something that is just, and hence their request would be beyond reproach.[60] This logic, however, would imply that the many *defigentes* who do not provide their names must have been afraid of the gods and were not asking for something just. What is fair or deserved, of course, is a rather subjective matter, and presumably most--if not all--practitioners thought of themselves as asking for something fair and reasonable.[61] Instead of explaining the presence or absence of a name in terms of a *defigens*' fear, I propose analyzing it as a choice not only influenced by the sacred context in which these texts were usually deposited but also as a reflection of different *defigentes*' personal conception of a deity's omniscience, as was the case with the North African practitioners mentioned at the beginning of this section.

A close analysis of the 36 curse tablets against thieves in which the name of the practitioner is included reveals that only five were deposited in (apparently) non-sacred spaces.[62] The rest of the documents come from spaces that were consecrated to a deity, such as the sanctuaries of Sulis Minerva (Bath/AquaeSulis), Mercury (Uley) and Nodens (Lydney Park).Two additional curses were discovered in aquatic spaces (a riverbank and an estuary) that were likely consecrated to Neptune, the deity invoked in these texts.[63] Especially when tablets were deposited in monumentalized sanctuaries, it seems likely that the practice of cursing was to some extent influenced by the votive rituals and practices that were carried out at these same sites, some of which have left a trace in the epigraphical record. As Mckie has correctly stressed, votives and curse tablets have traditionally been studied separately as different genres of objects, although

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[59] On this taxonomy, cf. note 25 above with further references.

[60] Cf. Tomlin 2002: 168, where the author states 'the writer is asking for justice, and is not afraid of giving his name,' and Versnel 2010: 323, where he argues that 'Prayers for justice are presented as legitimate actions, and justified by the fact that the principal has been wronged. For that reason, they were often put up where they could be seen or read, and were sometimes even "signed" by the author.'

[61] On this, see Chiarini 2021: 287-299.

[62] More specifically, I refer here to the texts from Ratcliffe-on-Soar (discovered under unknown circumstances; see *SD* 349 and 350), Leicester (found in the patio of a *mansio* dated in the second-third centuries CE; on these tablets, see *SD* 456-457) and Kelvedon (discovered inside an oven dated between the third and the fourth centuries CE, in a domestic context; see *SD* 346).

[63] Cf. the texts from Caistor St. Edmund (found in a riverbank, see *SD* 441) and the estuary of Hamble (see *SD* 451; on which see also note 63).

these artifacts come from the same archaeological contexts and were closely connected, by means of ritual practice as well as the use of certain formulae.[64]And the curse tablets under consideration do indeed deploy a repertoire of 'giving' formulae through which the suspected thief was often consecrated to the invoked deity.[65] Despite the fact that some of these formulae have been linked to those commonly found in votives,[66] as far as I know, no scholarly attempt has been made to argue for a connection between the presence of practitioners' names in the curse tablets against thieves and in those found on votive offerings. In the case of votives, like in the curses, the presence of a petitioner's name cannot be taken for granted: many of votives were not even written, but rather were dedicated to the deity through (presumably) oral means.[67] Nevertheless, sometimes dedicants decided to leave an epigraphical trace of their gift. This practice was especially common when an offering was meant to fulfill a previous vow and thus served as a sign of pride in the successful communication with a deity, a process which Rüpke has labelled 'religious accomplishment'.[68] Good examples of such accomplishments have been recorded in the sanctuaries of Bath/Aquae Sulis, Uley, and Lydney Park, all sites where many of the curses under discussion have been found, and where dedications and altars containing the dedicant's name were displayed.[69] In other words, these curses were found in a context where many, but not all, individuals registered their names in different acts of communication with the divine. Within a reduced and specially marked space, the conventions of one type of ritual could have had some influence on the way that another one was practiced.

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[64] Cf. McKie 2019: 443.

[65] See, for instance, the curse tablet from the Hamble estuary (*SD* 451), which reads: 'Lord Neptune, I give you the man who has stolen the *solidus* and six *argentioli* of Muconius…' ('*domine Neptune t<i>b<i> d<o>no (h)ominem qui <so>l<i>d'um` involav[it] Muconi et argenti[olo]s sex*…', transated by R. Tomlin 1997: 455); or the *defixio* from Bath/Aquae Sulis (*SD* 239), in which the stolen money is given to the goddess Sulis Minerva: 'Docca to the goddess Sulis Minerva. I give to your divinity the money which I have lost, that is five *denarii*…' ('*deae Suli Minervae Docca dono numini tuo pecuniam quam [-c.5- a]misi id est (denarios) (quinque)*', translation by R. Tomlin, *apud Tab. Sulis*).

[66] See Kiernan 2004, Lambert 2004, Sánchez Natalías 2022a: esp. 101-102.

[67] In fact, many of the votives thrown at the sacred spring of Bath/Aquae Sulis were not inscribed: on these see Henig (*et al*.) 1988: 5-21.

[68] Rüpke 2009: 36.

[69] See, for instance: *RIB* 145 (from Bath/AquaeSulis), *RIB* 3056 (from Uley), *RIB* 305 (from Lydney Park).

That said, these votive texts were produced as part of the fulfillment of a vow, whereas in the case of our curse tablets the name of the practitioner was registered beforehand, at the time of the request. This difference in timing for registering a petitioner's name is crucial. In the case of *defigentes*, the presence of their name should also be analyzed in terms of personal perception of a divinity and their powers. In other words, different self-identification practices can also reflect different beliefs or attitudes towards the concept of divine omniscience.

If this seems rather hypothetical and theoretical, a look at the texts may make things more concrete. Since the oral utterances that accompanied the deposition of any particular curse tablet have been irrevocably lost, let us assume, for argument's sake, that the information preserved in the inscribed curse is an accurate reflection of the overall ritual. In this case, we can observe a diversity of detail between individual acts of cursing. For some practitioners, registering only the essential information of the crime was sufficient for the deity to find the stolen property, suggesting a faith in the god's omniscience and ability to ferret out an anonymous thief without any real clues with which to work. A good example of this would be a curse tablet from Bath/Aquae Sulis, which reads: 'The name of the culprit who has stolen (my) bracelet (is consecrated to the goddess)'.[70] In this scenario, the practitioner does not reveal his/her name nor does (s)he know who stole the bracelet. However, (s)he is aware of a name's importance and dedicates the wrongdoer's identity to the deity (remember that in magical practices, a name is conceived of as a fundamental part of the individual).[71] In this case the practitioner seems to trust in the powers and knowledge of Sulis Minerva to discover and punish the thief and there is no need for the *defigens* to provide additional clues or context. However, this is not always the case.

Other practitioners give additional data about the robbery, reporting all the relevant facts and known details. Such a choice, I argue, reflects an attempt to facilitate the deity's task and increase the chances of reaching a successful resolution. Although practitioners could not reveal the thief's identity, which remained unknown to them, the *defigentes* could add their own name as a starting point to help the god

[70] *Nomen rei qui destrale involaverit.* Cf. *SD* 220. Translation by R. Tomlin, *apud Tab. Sulis* 15, slightly modified.
[71] In magical practices, the name is existentially linked to the person to whom it belongs (in a kind of magical adaptation of the proverb *pars pro toto*). On this, see Ogden 1999: 10.

get on the thief's track. A curse tablet from the sanctuary of Mercury in Uley provides a good example of this: 'Honoratus to the holy god Mercury. I complain to your divinity that I have lost two wheels and four cows and many small belongings from my house. I would ask the genius of your divinity that you do not allow health to the person who has done me wrong, nor allow him to lie or sit or drink or eat, whether he is man or woman, whether boy or girl, whether slave or free, unless he brings my property to me and is reconciled with me. With renewed prayers I ask your divinity that my petition may be immediately fulfilled (and that it become obvious) that I have been avenged by your majesty.'[72] Here, the practitioner provides much more information to Mercury: in addition to including his name in the curse tablet, he also lists and quantifies the most valuable stolen items (two wheels and four cows) and also mentions the place where the robbery occurred (his house). After giving detailed information of the type of punishment that the wrongdoer should suffer, Honoratus also asks for proof of the successful resolution of the conflict (a reconciliation and return of the stolen goods). Honoratus appears to have felt the need to leave a carefully written record of what happened and the ways in which he wants the situation to be resolved. The accrual of detail can be read as a type of assistance to Mercury, whose omniscience (or memory) may not be completely reliable in Honoratus' eyes.

Gods of ancient polytheistic cultures were not thought to be omniscient in the same sense as the supreme god(s) of the three major religions of the modern West.[73] Beginning with the theft of fire by the Titan Prometheus, Graeco-Roman mythology is full of stories in which the gods are cheated and bamboozled (or attempts are made to do this) by other deities, divine entities, and even mortals.[74] All these scenes evidence a much more diverse (and human) reality that would be unthinkable if the Graeco-Roman gods

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[72] *Deo sanc`to´ Mercurio Honoratus conqueror numini tuo me perdidisse rotas duas et vaccas quattuor et resculas plurimas de hospitiolo meo rogaverim genium numinis `tu{u}i´ utei qui mihi fraudem fecerit sanitatem ei non permittas nec iacere nec sedere nec bibere nec manducare si baro si mulier si puer si puella si servus si liber nis{s}i meam rem ad me pertulerit et meam concordiam habuerit iteratis pr{a}ecibus rogo numen tuum ut petitio mea statim pareat me vindicatum esse a maiestate tua*. Cf. *SD* 365. Translation by Tomlin 1992: 311, modified following Adams 2016: 314-315.

[73] I am grateful to Jennifer Larson for this idea and fruitful discussion, in addition I thank her for sharing her unpublished work about divine omniscience. Also see Versnel 2011 and Eidinow 2015 for further discussion and references.

[74] Examples abound, as showed Heracles' labours, the myth of Sisyphus, or the story of King Laomedon cheating Apollo and Zeus, among many others.

were understood to be completely omniscient gods. As Jennifer Larson has argued in relation to Greek gods, 'divine omniscience' includes the following types of knowledge: the ability to see or hear anything, the ability to read minds, the possession of strategic information and the ability to pay unlimited attention to all goings on (in other words, to have simultaneous knowledge of all events).[75] Nevertheless, the limits of gods' knowledge could also be questioned, as Versnel has pointed. Apollo, who was believed to be one of the most (if not the most) knowledgeable gods,[76] was put to the test back in the third century CE, as demonstrated by a series of oracular responses in which Apollo Kareios admits that he does not know everything.[77] In this regard, Versnel also highlights the second fable of Babrius, in which a farmer who lost a mattock decided to go to the temple to put the suspected thieves under oath. But just before entering the temple, a herald announced a reward for anyone who could provide information about a theft committed in the temple. This announcement made the farmer question whether the god would ever be able to find his mattock, given that he was not even able to find his own stolen property(!) The story demonstrates how mortals, despite their devotion to certain gods, recognized their weaknesses or, at least, questioned the limits of their abilities. As shown by Babrius, mortals perceived the ignorance and fallibility of gods.

Conclusions

As magical-religious artefacts, curse tablets were used for over a millennium across a wide geographical area. Far from being static, the practice of writing curses was adopted and adapted by the societies that employed them in order to meet their specific needs. In the case of Roman Britain, many individuals wrote curses in response to theft and appealed to divine justice, with the hope of recovering their property and/or punishing the thief. Interestingly enough, some of these individuals decided to reveal their identity to the invoked deities using their own name. The various ways in which practitioners decided to present

[75] Larson (personal communication).
[76] According to Herodotus (1.47), the god stated 'I know the number of the sand and the measure of the sea, I understand the speech of the dumb and hear the voiceless.'
[77] On this, see Versnel 2011: 398; for the texts, see West 1967, esp. IIIb.

themselves to a deity shows how, even when members of a single community relied on religion to address common problems and needs (i.e., catching a thief), there was no uniform way of understanding a deity and his/her powers. Traditional historiography has explained the inclusion of an author's name as a sign of his/her fearlessness towards a particular deity. Nevertheless, if we follow this logic, this interpretation also implies that those individuals who preferred to remain in anonymity were, in turn, afraid of the gods. Contrary to this hypothesis, which reduces the inclusion or exclusion of the practitioner's name to a question of dread, I argue that this variation is better explained by two different factors. First, we ought to consider the influence of the spatial context where these curse tablets were deposited (mostly sanctuaries) as well as the rituals associated with those places (e.g., the making of vows, offerings, and dedications). Second, we ought to factor in an individual's understanding of a deity: every practitioner could differently conceive of the level of a god's knowledge, assuming that a god, being omniscient, had all the facts or, alternatively, that the deity would benefit from having additional information to catch the thief and/or recover the stolen property.

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