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A CURSE AGAINST THE GREENS¹

by

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Abstract: The curse tablet presented in this study is part of the collection of Musée Bargoin in Clermont-Ferrand. After its discovery in 1906, it was forwarded to Auguste Audollent for examination. However, no scholarly investigation has been conducted on the tablet since then, and it has not been published, save for a short reference. The tablet, as indicated by its inscription, may have been made with the intent of influencing the outcome of a North African chariot race involving the Green team.

Keywords: curse tablet, North Africa, chariot racing, *defixio*, *factio*

After Auguste Audollent's death, his scholarly bequest was allocated to two public collections in Clermont-Ferrand, France. The Musée Bargoin now houses his collection of curse tablets, primarily provided by colleagues for research purposes, while the written documents were entrusted to the Archives Départementales du Puy-de-Dôme.² Although the French scholar examined and published many of these tablets, some are still in their original state within the museum's storage, requiring further investigation.

The tablet under discussion is one from this latter group.

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² Németh 2012, 141–142. and Németh 2013, 15–22.

The tablet, Inv. No. 72.1.222, is part of the collection at Musée Bargoin, having been discovered in 1906 at Bir el Djebbana in North Africa and dating back to the 2nd century CE.³ In its present state, it is fragmentary, with approximately one-third of its original size missing. While the upper part remains intact, the lower part, both on the right and left sides, has lost significant portions and displays considerable corrosion. The existing surface, though uneven, does not show signs of folding, rolling, or piercing.⁴ Measuring a maximum of 9 cm in height and 8.5 cm in width, the surviving tablet is not fully inscribed. There is a concise four-line text in the center. Additionally, the now-lost sections may have contained further text, a few letters of which remaining visible. However, due to their distance, these fragments may not have formed part of the four well readable lines.

The Latin cursive letters suggest a practiced scribe. All letters measuring between 0.4–0.6 mm exhibit consistent formation, with minor variations. Notably, 'P' at the beginning of the four lines extends upwards above the other letters, underscoring the cohesion of this unit. 'S' elongates considerably below the baseline, as does the vertical stem of 'R,' with one exception in each case. Vowels adhere to cursive forms, too, where 'E' consists of two closely parallel lines, 'V' features parallel lines set slightly apart, the left one a little more slanted. 'A' is written with two lines, the hooked line on the left intersected by the straight line on the right. 'L' is represented by a single line, while 'M' displays two intersecting lines twice. The horizontal articulus of 'T,' along with its distinct vertical line, is faintly visible.

Diplomatic text

PRAS
ACVMIVS
RVSTICVS
STELLA

Text arranged in a classical standard version, with diacritical marks

Pras(ini):
Ac̣o=Ṿmius
Rusticus
Stella

³ Németh 2013, 28.

⁴ We used a high-resolution photograph for our investigation.



Commentary

Considering the abbreviation 'Pras(ini)' and the three proper names, it appears that this is likely an agonistic curse. Curse tablets targeting charioteers and race-horses have been discovered across different regions of the Roman Empire. In his 2004 monograph, Jan Tremel collected 100 curse tablets originating from 14 different locations, primarily concentrated in four main areas: North Africa, eastern provinces, Greece, and one piece from the city of Rome.⁵ The large number of these tablets are not surprising, as competition is inherent in sports, and it is to be expected that people have resorted to magic in this realm as well.

⁵ Tremel 2004, 27.

Latin language tablets against charioteers and race-horses have so far only been found in the North African provinces, yet they were certainly used in other regions as well.⁶ Many such tablets have been discovered in the cemeteries of Hadrumetum and Carthage,⁷ while the exact provenance of the current tablet remains unknown.

Graphic layouts, such as drawings, magical symbols (*signa magica*), or special placement of text, including Greek script or text, are not uncommon on the existing tablets. In the surviving parts of our tablet, such features are not clearly discernible, but the fragmented letters outside the four lines appear more disordered. It is conceivable that the now-lost sections may have had a non-standard text arrangement—often intended to enhance magic.⁸

Given the factio designation and the three names, the tablet falls into the category of agonistic tablets that typically present a list of names, possibly concluding with an additional request to the demon.⁹ The nature of the names does not clearly indicate whether they pertain to the charioteer or the race-horse. Among the three, *Rusticus* can be considered both an anthroponym and a horse name.¹⁰ The Greek-origin *Acomius* (derived from ἄκομος, meaning 'without hair, bald,' with a vulgar Latin sound change represented by 'V' instead of the stressed 'o')¹¹ has been known solely as an anthroponym, previously found in Carthage, too.¹² Nevertheless, considering that one of the semantic categories for horse names is based on appearance, it is plausible that *Acomius* could also function as a horse name. For instance, the horse name *Auricomus*, meaning 'golden-haired,' specifically refers to the mane.¹³ Lastly, the Latin *Stella* has been known exclusively as a personal name, from Africa proconsularis in some cases.¹⁴ Although a Greek version (*Aster*) for horses exists, which can denote a patch on the fur or even the speed of a shooting star.¹⁵

6 Urbanová 2018, 22. Nevertheless, tablets inscribed in Greek have been discovered in numerous provinces where Greek was spoken within the Roman Empire — Urbanová 2018, 165.

7 Urbanová 2018, 165.

8 Sánchez Natalias 2022.

9 Urbanová 2018, 347–348. Pl. *Haec nomina hominum et equorum, quae dedi vobis, cadant, precor vos*. May these names of men and horses, which I gave to you, fall, I ask you. dfx 11.2.1/10

10 Anthroponym: (CIL XI, 06726,01a) *Q. Iunius Rusticus praefectus urbi*, horse name (CIL VI 37836, Rome, 15 CE): *Menander (...) bigarius vincit (...) eq(uis) Basilisco Rustico* Menander bigarius won with his horses Basiliscus and Rusticus. Regarding Darder Lissón 1996, 227, horse names like *Urbanus*, *Rusticus* refer to *origo*.

11 For the transformation of the vowel system in African Latin, see Adamik 2020.

12 *P(ublius) Acom[---]* CILPCart 00158, Carthage; *Acomius Tertullus* (mentioned together with a certain *Atiarius Rusticus*!) CIL III 00633,3, Philippi; *Acomio ben[emerenti]* ICUR-03, 06497, Rome.

13 Darder Lissón 1996, 24.

14 Erucianus *Stella* CIL VIII 01646 and 15885; *Q. Stella Felix* and *Q. Stella Saturninus* CIL VIII 14522 and 14523, Africa proconsularis; *Lucius Arruntius Stella* consul suffectus in 101.

15 *Aste[---]* CIL VI 10053 — Darder Lissón 1996, 72. In addition, there is a certain Ἀστέρπιος *agitor* of the Greens from Rome, late 4th c. CE. (DTAud 160–161).

Due to the fragmentary nature of the tablet and the brevity of the legible text, it remains challenging to clearly identify the names, since curses could be directed against both charioteers and race-horses simultaneously, as seen in a tablet from Baetica where some names are *agitatores* (charioteers) and others *introiugi* (horses in the key position when turning at the *metae*).¹⁶ The reason for providing three names on this particular tablet remains unclear, too. However, it may be plausible that they represent a *ternae* associated with the 'prasini' factio.¹⁷ In a typical 12-chariot race, where the four factions—greens, blues, whites, and reds—each mount three chariots, these three names might signify either the *agitatores* of the chariots of the green team or the *introiugi*.

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¹⁶ Gordon 2021, 123 cites a curse tablet from Baetica (AE 2017, +00059a) where *agitatores* and *introiugi* were cursed at the same time.

¹⁷ Gordon 2013, 52. n. 136.