

72-1-223:
CURSE BOUND IN A SPIRAL.
PRELIMINARY RESULTS
OF THE EXAMINATION OF A CURSE TABLET
FROM CARTHAGE

ANDREA BARTA

1. Discovery

Two short, partial publications have appeared to date on the curse tablet catalogued as 72-1-223 at the Musée Bargoin.¹ From these, we know that the item was discovered in 1906 in Carthage, in the Bir el Djebbana cemetery. As with many other curse tablets from North Africa, the excavating archaeologist sent this piece to Clermont-Ferrand for study by August Audollent. However, Audollent did not deal with it in any meaningful way and did not publish it. Many years after his death, in 1972, the tablet was donated to the Musée Bargoin as part of Audollent's estate. Its scholarly analysis is still ongoing; below we present the most important points of our preliminary findings, which we arrived at during the autopsy of the tablet.²

1 Németh 2013, 27. Nr. 9. and Sánchez 2022, esp. 257–260. Celia Sánchez Natalías, György Németh and Andrea Barta are currently preparing a full edition of the tablet.

2 In June 2017 and July 2022. We would like to thank the management of the Musée Bargoin and Marie Beche-Wittmann for allowing us to examine the tablet in person, and especially Camille Besse for her invaluable help in providing access to the material.

2. Description

The thin lead plate, originally roughly square in shape, measures 11.5 × 11 cm at its largest. Today, it is in a fragmented state, with approximately one-third missing. The largest missing section is at one corner of the plate, but in other areas as well smaller and larger pieces have broken off, or wear and tear can be observed. Deposits on the surface make it even more difficult to read the text. The writing is only on one side. After the inscription was made, the tablet was folded several times, then unfolded again at an unknown point in time, most likely after it was found.

What makes the tablet unique is that the text runs spirally across it, from the outside in, following the angular lines of the square shape. It was written in 8-9 lines in every quarter, but due to deposits and missing parts in the central part of the tablet, the exact number cannot be determined. We know of 12 tablets with this type of text layout,³ most of which are in Greek. This one, however, is primarily in Latin, but is interrupted in several places by Greek writing, which is partly *voces magicae* and partly fragments of meaningful Greek text (e.g. σὺζω). Furthermore, the bilingual context of its place of origin is indicated by the presence of Greek names (*CRISASPI* < Χρύσασπις) and Greek words (*SPIRITVS CTHETORIS* < κτήτωρ) in the Latin text, showing spoken, vulgar Latin phenomena and Latin inflections.

The two previous publications date the tablet to the end of the 2nd century or the beginning of the 3rd century.

3. Text

Even in its fragmentary form, the tablet can clearly be classified as a circus curse tablet. The word *quadriga* can be read in two places. The terms *introiugus* and *dextroiugus*, which are the names of the horses

3 Sánchez 2022, 256.

used in chariot races, are repeated several times:⁴ the former refers to the horse closer to the *meta*, while the latter refers to the horse running on the right side of the team. However, the curse also targets other horses, as indicated by the term *ceteros equos*. In addition, the tablet lists a number of horse names, many of which are known from other sources: in accordance with the names preserved elsewhere, these are partly Latin (e.g. *Virilis*, *Superbus*, *Volucer*, *Decoratus*, *Crescens*, *Felicissimus*) and partly Greek in origin (e.g. *Chryspis*, *Helius*). In the case of a few other names, such as *Scorpianus* and *Olympianus*, it cannot be ruled out that they refer to the charioteers or the owners themselves. The text read so far contains no reference to which *factio* the curse was directed against.

The text, which spirals inward from the outside, begins with instructions, of which only a few expressions are legible at this point. *Oblige caput, manus, pedes* [---] ('Bind his head, hands, and feet') is a well-known phrase used to bind gladiators and circus performers.⁵ In the line above the binding, the expression *spiritus chetoris* is certainly an invocation of the intervening force, to which the second-person singular imperative verb forms refer. On Latin curse tablets from North Africa, it usually refers to the soul of the cursed person,⁶ but in Greek magical texts, *πνεῦμα*, which corresponds to *spiritus*, has several meanings: it can be (1) the air where the divine power dwells,⁷ (2) an un-

4 DTAud 272 = dfx 11.02.01/09

5 E.g. dfx 11.01.01/22 *obliga illi pedes membra sensus medullam obliga Gallicum* "Bind his feet, limbs, senses, marrow, bind Gallicus".

6 dfx 11.1.1/25 (Carthago) *Daemon, qui possides Hispaniam et Africam, qui solus per mare transis, pertranseas animam et spiritum Maurussi* "Daemon, who hold the territories of Hispania and Africa, the only [daemon] who pervades across sea, pervade the soul and spirit of Maurussus."

7 PGM V 122: ἐπικαλοῦμαι σε, τὸν ἐν τῷ κενῷ πνεύματι δεινὸν καὶ ἀόρατον θεόν "I call upon you, awesome and invisible god in the empty air."

defined divine power,⁸ (3) the soul of a human being,⁹ or even (4) the soul of an animal.¹⁰ The non-normatively transcribed¹¹ *κτητωρ*, meaning ‘owner’, usually refers to landowners; in later periods, during the Byzantine era, it referred to church founders. The most obvious explanation here is that it refers to the owner of the tomb, or the person buried in the tomb.¹² Its appearance in this Latin context is without parallel. It is questionable why a Greek word was used, conjugated in Latin, when the author of the text was well versed in Latin.¹³ Considering the Latin and Greek letters and language parts of our text, as well as the *voces magicæ*, we can definitely classify it among the texts in which Marco Simón found that unexpected changes between languages or alphabets increase the power of magic.¹⁴ However, there are examples on North African curse tablets where a basic word is used in Greek in a Latin text: therefore, the reason is not incomplete language skills, but perhaps some kind of emphasis, drawing attention, or possibly a kind of taboo.¹⁵

-
- 8 PGM IV 3038 ὀρκίζω σε, πᾶν πνεῦμα δαιμόνιον, λαλήσαι, ὅποιον καὶ ἂν ᾦς “I conjure you, every daemonic spirit, to tell whatever sort you may be...”
- 9 PGM IV 1951 δέσποτα Ἥλιε, ἐπάκουσόν μου τοῦ δεῖνα καὶ δός μοι τὴν κατεξουσίαν τούτου τοῦ βιοθανάτου πνεύματος “I beg you, lord Helios, hear me NN and grant me power over the spirit of this man who died a violent death.”
- 10 PGM XIII 371 θῦε δὲ λευκὸν ἀλέκτορα ἄσπιλον καὶ ἄλλον ἄφες καὶ περιστερὰν ὁμοίως ἵνα οὔ ἔαν βούληται εἰσελθῶν ὁ θεὸς πνεῦμα λάβῃ “Sacrifice an unblemished white rooster, and leave another alive, and similarly [sacrifice one] pigeon [and leave another] so that the god, when he comes in, may take the spirit from whichever he prefers.”
- 11 With similar superfluous aspiration, from the same word stem, cf. *Cthetus* CIL XI 3613 (Caere, 25 AD) LLDB-92939; CIL XII 394 (p 811) (Gallia Narbonensis) LLDB-79355. (For the LLDB database, see <https://lldb.elte.hu/>)
- 12 See note 9.
- 13 As a term for ‘possessor’, *cteticus* was the only form of the Greek verb κτάομαι used by Latin grammarians. Don. *Gramm.* IV 373, 28; Cledon. *Gramm.* V 36, 10; Pomp. *Gramm.* V 147, 7; Consent. *Gramm.* V 341, 2.
- 14 Marco Simón 2012, 141.
- 15 11.2.1/8 (Hadrumetum) δεσχενδο ιν αδυτους Οσυρις ετ δισσολουαμ θεν θαππεν (= descendo in adytus Osyris et dissolvam τὴν ταφήν)

Continuing with the curse text, the *spiritus* receives two further instructions: firstly, immediately before the word, we read IMPLICIES, which is the subjunctive form of the verb *implico* ‘to entwine, to wrap around’, with a hypercorrect diphthongized ending (< *implices*).¹⁶ It also belongs to the imagery of binding, and is often accompanied by an instrument, e.g. *licinia*.¹⁷ On this tablet, the first word of this quarter is *implicifēs*, followed by the addressed power, so it can be assumed that this is the beginning of the text.¹⁸ The end of the preceding quarter is fragmentary, so it has not yet been possible to determine whether an instrument appeared before the verb.¹⁹ Finally, immediately before the expression *Oblige caput, manus, pedes*, there is an imperative *SOLBE* (*solve*), also without an object. On another tablet from Carthage, in a similar context,²⁰ *solve* refers to loosening a clenched fist in combat.²¹ In our case, interpretation is complicated by the conjunction *ut* (*solbe ut oblige caput manus pedes*), which could also be a hastily written *et*.

4. Conclusion

This curse tablet is a special example of bilingual magical texts created in a circus context, but its details show close parallels with other North African tablets. Its circular, spiral writing style is not only a formal feature, but also a symbolic evocation of the oval track of chariot races. The alternation of Latin and Greek elements enhances the magical ef-

16 On grave inscriptions we can find numerous examples of incorrect spellings such as *DOLIES* < *dolens* and *LIBIES* < *libens*: LLDB-12281 = CIL V 1697, 5; LLDB-2806 = RIU 4, 972, 4.

17 dfx 11.1.1/27, 11.1.1/28

18 Sánchez 2022 determined the opening section likewise.

19 It can be ruled out with almost complete certainty, both on linguistic grounds and in terms of content, that the object of *implico* is *spiritus*.

20 dfx 11.1.1/27 (Latin text in Greek alphabet) λακινια ιλλι ινρλικητουρ οβλιγητουρ stb. Latin alphabet: *lacinia illi implicetur, obligetur; ursellum non respiciat, liget neminem, pugni illi solvantur, (...) obligentur illi pedes, nervi, ilia*.

21 From Britannia (dfx 3.12/1), we know of a *prayer for justice*, which demands the thief to redeem the stolen item with his own blood (*sanguine suo solvat*).

fect as a conscious rhetorical device. The observations presented in this study are preliminary results of a more comprehensive investigation, which we will conduct in the near future within the framework outlined above.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Daniel 2022 = Daniel, R. W.: Magic Square-Spiral Designs on a Group of Circus Curses from Carthage. *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 221, 167–173.
- Marco Simón 2012 = Marco Simón, F.: Power and evocation of the exotic: Bilingual magical texts in the Latin West. In: Piranomonte, M. – Marco Simón, F. (eds.): *Contesti magici. Contextos Mágicos*. Roma, 135–145.
- Németh 2013 = Németh, Gy.: *Supplementum Audollentianum*. Hungarian Polis Studies 20. Zaragoza, Budapest, Debrecen.
- Sánchez Natalías 2022 = Sánchez Natalías, C.: More Magical Square-Spirals from Carthage (and Königsberg). *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 224, 255–261.

