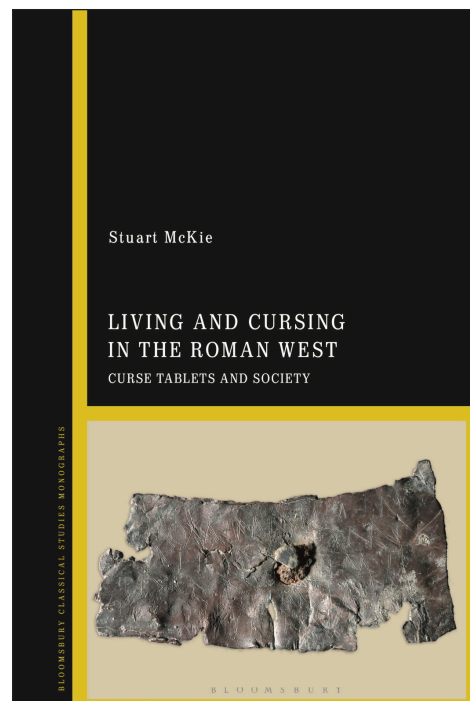


Book Review

McKie, Stuart. 2023. *Living and Cursing in the Roman West: Curse Tablets and Society*. London: Bloomsbury; 978-1-3502-8935-2 paperback £28.99.

The book opens with an imagined reconstruction of the creation of a curse tablet in Mainz, describing the experience of an unnamed woman as she cursed one Ulattius Severus, whom she claimed defrauded her of her husband's fortune. This vignette sets the tone for the rest of the book, which sees curses as individual, personal reactions to specific circumstances. This is achieved through a 'lived religion' approach, which emphasizes the role of individual experience and action rather than abstract belief or doctrine in the performance of religious practice. As both textual and material evidence, curse tablets lend themselves well to this type of analysis. Indeed, scholars have often considered curse tablets in their individual physical, religious and social contexts. For this reason, I disagree with the assertion that the book represents a paradigm shift. The explicit use of a lived religion approach and the scale of the application are, however, new.

McKie focuses his analysis on the curse tablets from the western Roman Empire during the Roman Imperial period. The corpus includes 607 tablets from 126 locations, from Hispania to Pannonia and Britannia to Africa Proconsularis. He includes a selection



of the inscriptions in an appendix, noting origins, estimated dates, transcriptions, English translations and select bibliographic data. McKie presents the texts in an accessible manner and analyzes them in a way that scholars of any aspect of the Roman world will find engaging.

The book comprises six chapters, including an introduction and epilogue, with the four central chapters developing the principal argument. The first of the four central chapters outlines the chronological and geographical distribution of curse tablets in the Mediterranean world before focusing more narrowly on the corpus from the Roman west and their general religious and cultural context.

Chapter Three addresses the cursing process from the moment of acquiring the materials for the tablet to the moment of deposition. McKie particularly emphasizes the curser's physical environment — the space in which they perform the ritual as well as the stylus they hold, the lead they write on, and the nail they might pierce with — and how this creates variation in the textual and material evidence that survives. McKie rightly points out that we cannot know where the act of inscribing took place and that our knowledge of depositional contexts is often hampered due to previous poor context reporting and looting. The situation is, however, not always so dire, and closer engagement with what is known of the archaeological contexts of curse tablets would have strengthened the discussion of tablet deposition.

Scholars have long categorized curse tablets based on the curser's stated motives — such as legal, commercial, or romantic competition, or vengeance for perceived wrongdoing — because these tablets show patterns in their addressees, language, material treatment and distribution. Chapter Four turns to these motivations for cursing and the social frameworks in which they exist, challenging the established approach of motive categorizations in favor of examining underlying social structures beyond moments of acute crisis. To achieve this, McKie uses anthropological and ethnographic approaches to magic, focusing on the roles of social tension, rumor and gossip in societies that practice or believe in magic. The result is a thoughtful reconstruction of social situations and interpersonal conflict in a world where curse tablets were thought to have (and thus did have) real consequences.

Chapter Five discusses how people used curse tablets to affect interpersonal relationships by acting within and manipulating power dynamics. Here, McKie explores the realities of inequality the users of curse tablets lived within, as well as how these realities affect access to what is needed to create a curse tablet, including knowledge of cursing practices, literacy, physical resources, and freedom of movement, thus affecting one's ability to curse. In outlining not only the agency of people and things

but also the power that impacts agency, McKie offers a convincing explanation of how curse tablets were used to replace or supplement more official structures that failed disenfranchised people in the Roman world.

This final chapter is the strongest demonstration of McKie's focus on specific personal circumstances. An extreme focus on the individual, however, runs the risk of obscuring the reality that, while curse tablets are individual responses to circumstances, they are also part of a widespread tradition grounded in shared — if sometimes varied — beliefs in human-divine communication. While creative reconstructions give a valuable reminder that the people behind curses were real humans who existed outside of the inscriptions, turning away from belief in the efficacy of cursing leaves us without an explanation for the widespread use of curse tablets or for their varied traditions and patterns in language and material treatment.

Defining the scope of the project regionally and including tablets in Latin, Greek and Celtic is a refreshing departure from language-specific scholarship. At times, however, the division between east and west seems arbitrary and even awkward. For instance, because they are heavily influenced by Graeco-Egyptian traditions, it is [difficult] to discuss juridical and erotic curses without reference to curses from Greece and Egypt. McKie also occasionally supports his analysis with non-curse evidence from the east, the confession *stelai* from Asia Minor being one example (p. 97); it is therefore not clear why curse tablets from the eastern provinces are not also used for comparative analysis.

The geographical and chronological scope of the project is nonetheless ambitious and perhaps undermines its aim of centering individual experience. Even so, McKie successfully balances general observations with more focused explorations of specific cases as he constructs his argument. Overall, the book is a valuable contribution to curse tablet scholarship and enriches the growing body of work that demonstrates the potential for lived religion approaches to ritual in the ancient Roman world.

Madeline Line
Department of Anthropology
University of Iowa
madeline-line@uiowa.edu

