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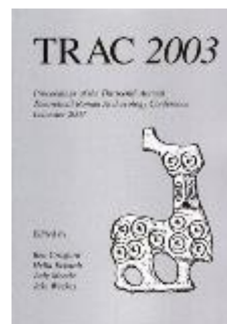

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Did Curse Tablets Work?

Philip Kiernan

Introduction

While the act of placing a curse on someone may be dismissed by some modern observers as meaningless superstition, the Romans saw the efficacy of magic as scientific fact. This is demonstrated not only by the continual use of curse tablets throughout the Roman empire, but also by surviving magical texts and recipes to protect oneself against magic. Tacitus (*Ann.* 2.69) tells of how inscribed curse tablets led to the death of Germanicus and Pliny the Elder (*De Nat.* 28.10–31 and 30.1–13. 28.4.19) gives extended descriptions of magical practices.

Most British curse tablets come from either the votive deposit in the sacred spring of Sulis Minerva at Bath or from the excavations of the Shrines of Mercury in Uley. The tablets consist of thin pieces of lead alloy inscribed with formulaic appeals to the gods. Most can be dated to between the second and fourth centuries A.D. Almost all of the British tablets seek the punishment of a thief. Typically, a piece of stolen property is named and various punishments are requested for the thief. A reward is sometimes offered to the deity invoked for the retrieval of the stolen item. This predominance of tablets concerning theft is unique to Roman Britain. Elsewhere in the Roman world curse tablets involve love affairs, court cases, as well as business competitions and sporting events (Gager 1992).

In his publication of the Bath tablets, R.S.O. Tomlin suggested that the curses might actually have worked (Tomlin 1988: 101–105). His argument was based on ancient belief in the power of magic and the principle of psychosomatic illness. The thief's belief in the power of the tablets, perhaps combined with a guilty conscience and the awareness that he or she may have been cursed, would have weighed heavily in his or her mind and eventually caused him or her to become sick. Such an illness, generated by the mind, is frequently referred to as a psychosomatic illness. Tomlin is not alone in attaching a psychological element to British cursing. Both Martin Henig and Graham Webster have seen psychological motivation on the part of the curser who would find that the act of placing a curse both 'removed intolerable tensions' (Henig 1984: 145) and 'allowed a transfer of emotion' (Webster 1986: 136). The anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard has shown how witchcraft was used as an explanation for everyday disease and misfortune in the African Azande culture. (Evans-Pritchard 1937). It is possible that one ought to imagine magic playing a similar role in the ancient world (Gager 1992: 23; Brown 1972: 131–138). But these are separate ideas and will not be discussed here. The purpose of this paper is to support Tomlin's proposal of a psychosomatic mechanism for curse tablets with a broader range of evidence and ideas taken from modern psychological and anthropological studies. Rather than look just at the tablets from Bath, this paper will also examine the entire range of published Romano-British curse tablets that specify the desired fates of their victims.

Psychosomatic Illness and Somatoform Disorders

The means by which psychological stress can be converted by the mind into physical symptoms is well known to modern psychologists. The process was first identified in the late nineteenth century by both Charcot and Freud. These pioneers of psychology named this sort of mental disorder as 'hysteria' and, later, "conversion disorder" based on the idea that psychological stress is converted into a physical manifestation (Veith 1965). Today, the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (the DSM) and the World Health Organization's *International Classification of Mental Disorders* (the ICD) employ the term 'somatoform disorders'. Though the DSM and the ICD differ slightly in their classification of the different types of somatoform disorders, both retain the important principle that physical symptoms are generated by the mind. This often happens in relation to traumatic events or emotional disturbances. Diagnosis under both systems requires that the symptoms are not the result of a genuine physical illness and are not under the voluntary control of the patient. There is nothing intentional or deceptive about these disorders. To give an example, someone suffering a somatoform disorder might have a paralysed limb but would still have normal reflex reactions and might even inadvertently move the paralysed limb when distracted. Though there is no physical reason that the patient should not be able to move the limb, it is nonetheless a real paralysis to the patient that causes real stress and inconvenience.

The link between magic and psychology can be found in modern contexts. Tomlin was able to find historical examples of effective cursing, including a nineteenth century Welsh tradition of cursing wells that could even cause death (Tomlin 1988: 102). More recent examples of this phenomenon can be drawn from a much wider range of material. In a recent study conducted in India, a special clinic was held for people who claimed to be the victims of Bhanamati sorcery (Keshavan, Narayanan and Gangadhar 1989: 217–218). The 209 patients who showed up were examined both by doctors and psychologists. This number alone is testimony to modern belief in magic. Of these, 138 (or 66%) were found to be suffering varieties of psychosomatic disorders. A further 14% suffered from anxiety disorders. Only the remaining 20% suffered from genuine physical illnesses (Keshavan, Narayanan and Gangadhar 1989: 219).

Whether or not the victims of British curse tablets knew they had been cursed or not made very little difference to the psychosomatic effect. They must have known their crimes were punishable by magic. It was their belief in the power of this magic and the knowledge of the sorts of things suffered by curse victims that resulted in the generation of a psychosomatic illness. Psychosomatic illness, attributed to magic or other causes, certainly would have existed independently of the curse ritual. But, if the victims knew themselves to have been cursed, which they may have, it would have intensified the psychosomatic mechanism. This knowledge would have taken the place of the traumatic event or emotional conflict found in the modern definition of psychosomatic illness. Going on the assumption that the tablets did work, I would like to examine the various fates demanded by the British curse tablets and make comparisons to the symptoms of psychosomatic illness as described in both psychological texts and descriptions of witchcraft and possession from anthropological studies. These studies not only provide better support for Tomlin's proposal but also provide a glimpse into what victims of magic actually suffered.

The Fates of the Cursed

Table 1: Fates invoked in the Romano-British Curse Tablets

Fate	Number	Examples of phrases used
Death	12	– *redimat ni vita / redimat illud vitae suae* – *ut eum dea Sulis maximo letum adigat / ut eos maximo leto adigas* – *ut animam suam in templo deponat*
Blood	19	– *redimat sanguine suo / non redemat nessi sanguine suo/ sanguine illud redemat / facias illum sanguine suo illud satisfacere* – *sagnuino (=sanguine) suo solvat* – *ut sanguinem suum mittat usque diem quo moriatur* – *consumas sanguinem eius*
Health	17	– *nec permittas sanitatem/ non illi permittas sanitatem / nec eis sanitatem permittas* – *per sanitatem suam* – *ut sanitatem tollat*
Insomnia	11	– *nec ei somnum permittat / nec permittas somnum* – *non ante laxetur nisi* – *nec permittas dormire*
Sit or Stand, Lie	4	– *non illi permittas nec sedere nec iacere / ei non permittas nec iacere nec sedere*
Insanity / Memory	4	– *ut exigat per mentem per memoriam / defico mentem et memoriam / ut mentes suas perdat*
Blindness	3	– *ut perdat oculos suos in fano* – *non illi permittas oculus nisi caecitatem orbitatemque quoad vixerit.* – *ut liminibus (=luminibus) configatur*
External limbs	2	– *ut omnibus membris configatur* – *non ante eum laset quam mimbra*
Internal Organs	3	– *ut exigat per intus per intestinum per cor per medullas per venas* – *iocinera pulmones intermixta* – *etiam intestinis excomesis omnibus habeat*

An examination of the published British evidence reveals 55 curse tablets that requested that the deities invoked should inflict a specific punishment or set of fates upon the victim. A little over 300 curse tablets are known in Roman Britain, with 130 from Bath, about 140 from Uley, and the rest from other sources. Publications of curse tablets can be found in RIB, JRS, Tomlin's chapter in the Bath Excavation report, and in the annual reports of inscriptions found in Roman Britain in Britannia. Most of the Uley tablets have yet to be published, and many of the published texts (from all sources) are highly fragmentary. In many instances the tablets are not fully legible and it is clear that some of the fates they once bore are now lost. Other tablets

simply request that an individual be cursed and do not specify how. Of the 55 tablets with legible fates, specific fates are used 75 times. These are summarized in Table 1 above. Many tablets contain more than one fate, and some fates are frequently combined with others. I have counted each usage regardless of how it appears.

What is immediately apparent in this examination of the curse tablets is the fact that the fates are always plausible elements of real diseases and thus represent potential psychosomatic symptoms. The tablets never say anything like 'may he break his legs' or 'may his house burn down.' Moreover, we seldom see descriptions of diseases that could be the result of infections or natural causes that could not be generated by the mind. Thus requests such as 'may he suffer eye disease' or, 'may he grow a tumour' or, 'get leprosy' are not to be found. Yet these diseases must have existed in the society that produced the curses.

Unfortunately, a full compilation of fates from European tablets, and the more varied Greek Magical Papyri, is not possible here. Still, it should be noted that these sources are not dissimilar to the British tablets. For instance, the instructions for a love spell in the Greek Magical Papyri require the sorcerer to recite the fates to be inflicted on his victim. These include prohibitions on sitting, eating and drinking, and sleeping (PGM IV.1514–1520). All of these fates are known on the British tablets.

Blood and Life

In 12 instances, the British tablets ask that the victim should die. The most commonly requested fate, with 19 occurrences, is the request that the victim should redeem his crime with his own blood – '*ut sanguine suo redimat'*. This phrase is often translated as a request for death and is certainly used in this way in late Latin. It is most often seen in Christian texts referring to Christ's redemption of humanity by means of his death. Fatal black magic and sorcery is known in some modern societies. Anthropologists in the early twentieth century observed magical pointing rituals amongst native groups in Australia, the Pacific and South America where individuals were doomed to death (Roheim 1925: 92; Skeat and Blagden 1906: ii.327; Krause 1911: 334–335). Consider the following example from the Gisu tribe in East Uganda:

> Nagibembe would have hit Maiti but was afraid of him so he merely pointed his forefinger at him with the threatening words 'You will see. You will die with your hand upraised'. Subsequently Nagibembe was away in Kenya for two months during which nothing happened to Maiti who was heard to scoff at the suggestion that he ought to apologize or he would be bewitched. Shortly after Nagibembe's return Maiti fell ill. His head ached and he held his hand in the air, unable to lower it. He died in hospital in the District Headquarters. The corpse was brought back to the village for burial and my informant said it was clear that his death had been due to sorcery (probably powerful sorcery bought in Kenya) (La Fontaine 1963: 208).

Although some anthropologists claim to have witnessed the deaths of curse victims such as this, the modern psychologist's definition of a psychosomatic illness excludes death. Psychosomatic symptoms, however, can in themselves be the cause of other physical problems. For instance, there is a modern case of a girl who believed herself to have a vomiting sickness. While the girl's frequent vomiting was psychosomatically induced, it eventually caused a

ruptured oesophagus and the girl's death (Taylor 1989). Similarly, the victims of Australian pointing magic have been known to refuse food and water and die as a consequence (Nile and Clark 1996: 39–40). The request of the tablets that the victim may not be able to eat or drink might have had similar results.

But the curse tablets themselves provide good reason to think that the literal meaning of these tablets is not death. Consider the following excerpts from three British tablets:

> *ut eum dea Sulis maximo letum* (=leto) *adigat nec ei somnum permittat nec natos nec nascentes donec caracallam meam ad templum sui numinis pertulit*
>
> that the goddess Sulis drive him to the greatest death nor permit him sleep nor children nor the ability to conceive them unless (until) he bring my cloak to the temple of her divinity. *(Tab. Sul.* 10.10–19),
>
> ...*exigas hoc per sanguinem et sanitatem suam et suorum nec ante illos patiaris bibere nec manducare nec adsellare nec [meiere?]*
>
> ...exact this through the blood and health of the thief and his family; you shall not allow them to drink eat or defecate or [urinate?] before he has....(*Tab. Sul.* 41.3–6),
>
> *quicumque res Vareni involaverit si mulier si mascel sangu(i)no suo solvat –erit et pecunie quam exesuerit Mercurio dona et Virtuti s<emis>*
>
> Whoever stole the property of Varenus, whether woman or man, let him pay with his own blood. From the money which he will pay back, one half is donated to Mercury and Virtue (Tablet from Kelvedon, Essex , JRS 48 [1958]: 150).

In the first two of these tablets, the deity is asked to provide non-fatal results in addition to death. Sleep, children and the ability to conceive them are denied in one and the ability to eat or drink and defecate are forbidden in the other. These additional fates are unnecessary if the intended outcome is the death of the victim. It seems pointless to request that an enemy should lose sleep as well as die. The tablets might mean that the person should suffer certain fates and then die, but a dead thief cannot return the stolen cloak of the first tablet or pay back the value of whatever it is that has been stolen from Varenus in the third.

In his earliest extant speech, given on behalf of Publius Quinctius, Cicero used the words '*non modo pecuniam, verum etiam hominis propinqui sanguinem vitamque eripere conatur*' – 'Not only is he endeavouring to take his money, but even his life-blood.' (*Quinct.* 39). Freese, the translator of this text, notes that the words *sanguinem vitamque,* (life-blood), is a rhetorical flourish and that the case being debated only involved property. Note that Freese correctly combines two separate words, life (*vitam*) and blood (*sanguinem*). The connection of the two words with the enclitic *-que* in a legal context usually denotes the use of two synonyms (Adams 1992: 2). This would seem to suggest that *sanguis* does refer to life. But Cicero used the words *sanguine meo* twice in two later speeches (*Sest.* 24 and *Dom.* 23) to refer to his exile. In both instances the phrase appears in the context of a transaction made by Cicero's enemies and clearly refers to his exile. The idea seems to be a legal and political death rather than a physical one (Nisbet 1939: 88). Similarly, the word *caput* in Latin can refer both to life itself as well as someone's civil status and freedom (OLD 4 and OLD 6). It seems likely that something similar was meant about Quinctius in the first passage and also in the Latin tablets.

The extent to which the tablets themselves contained rhetorical flourishes will be discussed later.

The very word *sanguis* can also mean 'life force' or 'vital fluid' (OLD 4). In Greek and Roman medical thought, blood is one of the humours in which health is seated (Jackson 1988: 22). In curse tablets, the phrase could mean something like 'with his own body' or 'with suffering' rather than death. One German scholar has translated the phrase into German as '*soll persönlich zahlen*' – 'he must personally pay' (Versnel 1991: 84). Though Versnel rejects this last translation, he argues that the phrase could also be used as a freestanding exclamation meaning '(Let the guilty man pay) With his blood!' (Versnel 1991: 86). Versnel has also argued this point by drawing comparisons with a group of Turkish tablets that describe their victims with the Greek word *pepremenos*. The word literally means 'burned' but clearly refers to the physical discomfort or illness to be suffered by the victim (Versnel 1991: 85). One of the tablets from Bath (*Tab. Sul.* 99) asks: *sanguine et vita sua illud redemat.* – 'Let him redeem that thing with his blood and his life' – which seems to suggest *sanguine* is not *vita* and, therefore, does not refer to the life of the victim. Similarly, the word *sanguis* is also found combined with *sanitas* ('health').

Health and Other Symptoms

The demand that the victim should not be allowed health (*sanitas*) makes a firm connection between magic and disease. This request appears seventeen times in its various forms in the British tablets and, after fates involving blood, is the second most commonly requested fate. Whatever illness or disease was imagined, it is clear that the authors of the tablets believed their spells to be effective chiefly over the physical well being of their victims.

After health, and frequently combined with it, the next most commonly requested fate is insomnia. The deity is asked not to allow sleep to the victim: *non permittas ei somnum.* Today, insomnia is only sometimes listed as a symptom of a psychosomatic illness and is properly classified along with other sleeping disorders (Barlow and Durand 1995: 377). But, as common sense would suggest, psychological stress is a common cause of sleep loss (Barlow and Durand 1995: 388). It is not hard to imagine that someone who believes in the power of magic, and believes themselves to be cursed, should lose sleep over it. This effect would certainly be intensified if the victim knew that the terms of the curse consisted of a denial of sleep or even if he or she knew that insomnia was a common fate of those who are cursed.

Today, paralysis, weakness of the limbs, an imbalanced gait, loss of sensation in the limbs, and variously reduced motor functions are amongst the more common symptoms of psychosomatic disorders (ICD F 44.4, 6 and 7; DSM IV 300.11; Merskey 1995: 211). Several British curse tablets seem to attack motor function. Two tablets attack movement directly: one asks that the victim simply should not walk (*Tab. Sul.* 54) and the other that he 'stop and not go for nine years.' (Britannia 1999: 378–379). There are also two tablets that mention limbs (Britannia 1991: 293–295; *Tab. Sul.* 97). The first of these is incomplete and the other asks simply that the victim's 'limbs be cursed' (*configatur*). Lethargy, in which a patient sits or lies listless and unresponsive, is also known as a psychosomatic symptom (*e.g.*, Wang 1991: 338, case 11). One tablet asks that the victim 'become as liquid as water' (*Tab. Sul.* 4) and another demands that the victim be 'tired by all manner of labours' (Britannia 1986: 336–341). These seem to be good descriptions of lethargic symptoms. A member of the African Ndebmbu tribe,

who was believed to be pursued by the shade of an ancestor and to be the victim of sorcery, was described by an anthropologist as suffering pains throughout his entire body and being fatigued 'after short spells of work.' The same anthropologist added that he believed these symptoms to be largely psychosomatic (Turner 1964: 255).

Requests that the victim may not be able to lie, sit or stand suggest the opposite of lethargy. Restlessness, the inability to sit still, continuous frantic movements and even convulsions are recorded as common symptoms of psychosomatic disorders (ICD F 44.5). In two cases, the denial of sitting, lying and standing are combined with a request that the victim may not be allowed to walk. The point then seems to be that the victim shall not be comfortable in any posture. This sort of behaviour is frequently recorded in anthropological descriptions of witchcraft and possession. A description from the Falasha culture in Ethiopia records the fit of a possessed woman:

> Around noon, in one of the villages nearby Gondar, a Falasha widow lost her mind... ...Since morning she had been screaming and crying and beating herself. ...for the last few days neighbours had recognized that she was behaving strangely, as if there was a power pushing her down... ...When he (the spirit-doctor) arrived, there were already about 30 people standing in a circle around the woman who was turning in circles, beating herself and seemed not to recognize the crowd around her. People were talking to her, but she did not react. When they tried to touch her, she avoided their touch. As time passed, unlike the crowd, she did not become tired. ...(Kahana 1985: 135–6).

In this case, the witch doctor confirms the woman is possessed by one of the Zar spirits and, after coaxing the spirit to leave, his patient recovers. While possession by a spirit is not quite the same as a curse, note that the decision of the nearby villagers is that the woman has lost her mind. This reminds us of the four British tablets that request that their victims should lose their minds (*ut mentes perdat*). Perhaps the authors of the tablets envisioned similar experiences for their victims. In the next example, a victim of Bhanamati witchcraft in India is described by a psychologist:

> An 18-year-old single Muslim girl suffering attacks of unconsciousness, during which she would sometimes scream and utter incomprehensible words. The attacks, which usually lasted about thirty minutes to two hours, were associated with bizarre limb movements, and occurred whenever the topic of her marriage came up in conversation (Keshavan, Narayanan and Gangadhar 1989: 219, case 1).

In both cases, there is additional psychological stress accompanying belief in witchcraft and possession. In the first case the possessed woman has been recently widowed. In the second, the girl is afraid of an approaching arranged marriage. But in both accounts, magic is the accepted explanation of the unusual behaviour and this explanation may have exacerbated the existing stress. The second example is one of the 209 patients from the clinic held in India mentioned earlier (Keshavan, Narayanan and Gangadhar 1989). It is interesting to note how all the published examples from the clinic include such additional stress factors. This may be a result of the emphasis on finding such stress factors in both the ICD and DSM classification systems and the desire of the authors to publish cases that were "textbook examples" of psychosomatic disorders. Unfortunately, only a few descriptions were published. It would be interesting to see if any of the unpublished psychosomatic cases were generated purely from the belief in Bhanamati magic. Two further examples of madness resulting from sorcery are

known from the Gusi tribe in Uganda. In one case, Nampande has been insulted by Wofakala, the son of his peer, Gidudu, at a party:

> Nampande departed in high dudgeon, saying to them 'You will see if you can treat an age-mate in this way.' This occurred in April and some time later Nampande told Gidudu that he had bewitched Wofakala. From that time Wofakala behaved oddly; he became violent and apparently mentally deranged. He attacked his parents and beat his wife so severely that she left him (La Fontaine 1963: 210).

Note how in this case the spell is known to have been placed prior to the onset of the madness. In the second example, the victim of sorcery is described as follows: 'He would not sleep and would walk about tearing his clothes or stand praying or reading a religious book. At night he would rush out of the hut when no one was looking and 'behaved like someone who does not know what he is doing.' (La Fontaine 1963: 209). In this case, sorcery was only suspected at first but the identity of the sorcerer was known. Though La Fontaine suspected the behaviour might have been partly the result of membership in a fundamentalist Christian sect, he also observed that it ended with the placation of the suspected sorcerer who consented to dine with his victim – an act believed to remove spells. Some British tablets suggest that forgiveness will be granted upon the return of stolen property for which the curse has been invoked, but various other means of protection against magic were also availabe. As well as amulets meant as general prophylactics against harmful magic, we also have examples of magical texts from both the Greek and Roman world that seem to have been intended to act as antidotes against specific curses (Gager 1992: 218–242).

The remaining fates called for by the British curse tablets include prohibitions against eating and drinking, loss of memory, the inability to defecate or urinate, the inability to conceive children, and blindness. All of these things have been reported by psychologists as symptoms of psychosomatic disorders (DSM IV 300.11). Amnesia, the loss of memory, is known but, unlike organic amnesia, it is usually focused around a stressful event and varies in extent from day to day. The inability to conceive children is probably the most concrete of all the fates called for. If it refers to impotence, or sexual difficulties, then it can be classed as a stress related psychological problem just like insomnia. The DSM lists the retention of urine though not constipation (DSM IV 300.11.452). Psychosomatic blindness is common but is rarely total. Reduced or blurred vision is much more frequent (ICD F 44.6). The inability to eat and drink, as with insomnia and sexual difficulties, can also be attributed to stress.

Illness and Just Retribution

Because the fates of curse tablets only relate to physical suffering and illness, they also provide insight into ancient conceptions of disease and suffering. The Christian writer Lactantius described the death of Diocletian as punishment by God for his persecution of the Christians. The description is not historical fact, but rather fits in with Lactantius' theme of how God punished persecuting emperors throughout history:

> *Iactabat se huc atque illuc aestuante anima per dolorem nec somnum nec cibum capiens. Suspira et gemitus, crebrae lacrimae, iugis volutatio corporis, nunc in lecto, nunc humi. Ita viginti annorum felicissimus imperator ad humilem vitam deiectus a deo et proculcatus iniuriis atque in odium vitae deductus postremo fame atque angore confectus est.*

> He would toss himself here and there, his soul in a torment of grief, taking neither sleep nor food. He sighed and groaned, he frequently wept. He was forever twisting and turning his body, now on his bed, now on the ground. Thus this emperor, who for twenty years had been most fortunate, was cast down by God to a life of humiliation, smitten with injuries which led him to hate life itself, and finally was extinguished by hunger and anguish (Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, 42.2–3).

The similarities to the fates in the curse tablets are striking. Diocletian cannot eat, drink or sleep. Nor is he able to sit or stand or lie still. The symptoms eventually lead to the death of this hated individual who is being punished by a divine power.

Ancient conceptions of illness are also important in trying to understand the psychosomatic mechanism of ancient magic. Although victims of somatoform disorders do not intentionally produce their symptoms, they are nonetheless prone to imitate the diseases and symptoms they are familiar with. Thus the sort of psychosomatic symptoms first recognized by Freud and Charcot are not as common today because people's conceptions of medicine and illness have changed. In the nineteenth century, epilepsy and paralysis were amongst the more common types of psychosomatic illness encountered. The former disease, in its genuine form, had received significant attention from the popular press of the late nineteenth century and so held a special place in the mind of the public. Similarly, the psychosomatic symptoms of first and third world countries are radically different today. We should certainly not expect any modern mentality to correspond directly to a Roman one.

Witnesses and Respectability

The proposed psychosomatic mechanism for curse tablets comes with a number of problems that must be addressed. Most importantly, for curse victims to suffer the exact symptoms requested, they must be aware of the fates that had been called down on them, but it is generally thought that all magical activity was both forbidden and conducted in secret. For a number of reasons, I would like to argue that this was not the case with the British tablets. The existence of counterspells and curses, which specifically request the removal of an existing curse, suggests that some curse victims did indeed know that they had been cursed. But how? Was it mere suspicion? Information provided by witnesses of the initial curse? Or was it possible to read the actual text of the offending curse tablet?

Some anthropologists believe that all magic has a verbal and communal aspect and this would be defeated if the process of depositing a curse tablet was entirely secret. Instructions in the Greek Magical Papyri on how to place curses similar to those of the British tablets often include the requirement that the spell be recited out loud. There may well have been witnesses to the ritual of depositing the tablets who overheard the contents of the curse. At Bath, a building restricting access to the spring into which the tablets were thrown would have made it easy to prevent their deposition. The tablets themselves were written by paid professionals who may have done more than simply record the petitions, they may also have passed on word of the curses to the community at large.

Most importantly, unlike other curse tablets, the contents of the British tablets are not dishonourable. They do not ask infernal powers to rig chariot races or gladiatorial combats. Nor do the authors ever demand that their female victims should fall madly in love with them.

In the Ugandan Gusi tribe mentioned above, the only harmful magic that sorcerers openly admitted to possessing were spells for causing thieves to become sick (La Fontaine 1963: 195). Almost all British tablets with secure archaeological contexts come from the sanctuaries of two respectable gods, Sulis Minerva and Mercury. I am only aware of one British tablet that was found in a grave, and one reported to come from an amphitheatre; these are the more unsavoury places one usual associates with magic (Westell 1931: 290–292). Moreover, most British tablets do not attempt to exercise power over the ghosts of the untimely deceased or other infernal powers. Instead, they call upon respectable gods to avenge injustices. What could be wrong with that?

Curses as a Votive Ritual

Versnel has compared the British tablets to prayers but they also share much in common with votive texts and the model of votive offerings recently proposed by Ton Derks (Versnel 1991, Derks 1998: 215–239). Both rituals contain a *nuncupatio* and *solutio*. A reward or payment is proposed should a deity do something (*nuncupatio*) and the reward is duly paid when the god carries through (*solutio*). The *nuncupatio* part of the votive ritual was publicly announced and often recorded by an inscription. It is possible that curses were also announced, or that the tablets were displayed prior to their deposition. A number of 'confession' inscriptions from Turkey testify to the avenging power of the gods on curse victims who have subsequently made amends for their crimes (Gager 1992: 137; Versnel 1991). In a way, these represent the *solutio* part of the cursing ritual. Perhaps the authors of the Bath tablets also made thank offerings of coins or other objects after their victims had been appropriately punished.

Some British tablets have been written on backwards, rolled up, and nailed shut. These requests were reserved for the eyes of the god to whom they were addressed and it cannot be denied that they were probably secret. But other tablets seem to have been nailed before they were rolled or folded as if to pin them to something. Derks has argued that the presence of metal seal boxes on sanctuary sites attests to the use of wooden writing tablets that recorded parts of the votive *formulae*, and which were put on display or deposited in the sacred area. One British curse has also been inscribed on an ansate plaque: a thin metal rectangle with triangular wings to allow it to be mounted for display. Ansate plaques were frequently used to record and display the written parts of the votive ritual. Thus it is possible that the victims of some curse tablets were able to read the very fates set out for them.

It might also be argued that the fates requested were exaggerations and not literally intended. The specificity of the tablets, even with their stock phrases, seems to argue against this. One tablet from Bath asks that the victim go mad and lose his vision in the temple itself (*Tab. Sul.* 5). Thus the author seems to seek proof, through association of the place, that the fates are just punishment from the god on the correct victim. Another objection is that the texts of the tablets were not fully understood by their authors and that they simply reproduced the various fates from a stock of set phrases. The frequent use of assonance in combined pairs of fates (*nec somnum nec sanitatem* etc.) seems to suggest something of a poetic quality to the tablets.

But still, where did these set phrases come from? And most importantly, why do they exclusively attack the health of their victims and never any other aspects of their lives? I

would like to propose that it was because these *formulae*, thanks to a psychosomatic mechanism, were found to be the only ones that really did work.

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Abbreviations

Tab. Sul. = *Tabellae Sulis.* Edited and translated by R.S.O. Tomlin. See Tomlin, 1988 below.
(All other curse tablets have been referred to by the year and page numbers in which they were published in the *Journal of Roman Studies* (JRS), or in the annual review of inscriptions from Roman Britain in *Britannia.*)
DSM IV = *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-IV.* Washington: The American Psychiatric Association.
ICD = *International Classification of Diseases, the ICD 10 Classification of mental and behavioural disorders: clinical descriptions and diagnostic guidelines.* 1992. Geneva: World Health Organisation.
OLD = *Oxford Latin Dictionary.* 1982. Oxford: Clarendon.
PGM – Papyri Graeci Magici – Translated by H.D. Betz 1992. *The Greek Magical Papyri in translation, including the Demotic Spells.* Chicago: Chicago University Press.
RIB = Collingwood, R.G. and R.P. Wright 1965. *Roman Inscriptions of Britain.* Oxford: Clarendon Press.

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