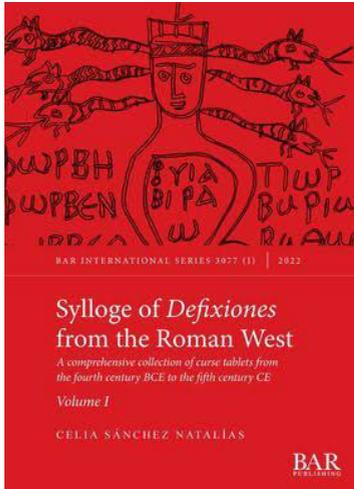


SYLLOGE OF *DEFIXIONES* FROM THE ROMAN WEST



SÁNCHEZ NATALIÁS, CELIA (2022). *Sylloge of Defixiones from the Roman West. A Comprehensive Collection of Curse Tablets from the Fourth Century BCE to the Fifth Century CE*. 2 vols. BAR International Series 3077. Oxford: BAR Publishing. 600 pp., £126 [ISBN 978-1-4073-1532-4].

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In the well-known words of Pliny the Elder (*Nat. Hist.* XXVIII 19), “no one is not afraid of being nailed by imprecations”. For example the poet Ovid (*Am.* III 7, 29) wonders if his erectile dysfunction is not due to his name being “nailed” by a witch with a red wax tablet. Both writers use the verb *defigo*, like an officer in Africa (*CIL* VIII 2756) who records his wife’s premature death as due to her being “nailed by spells”, *carminibus defixa*. From *defigo* comes the noun *defixio* (“curse tablet”), very rare in ancient sources, but now often used for these malign texts. As Sánchez Natalías notes (p. 11), only one tablet actually uses it to refer to itself; other terms they use are *c(h)arta*, *plumbum*, *tabel(l)a*, *tabula*, to which may now be added *pittacium* in a Brit-

ish tablet about to be fully published (*Tab. Uley* 62 = no. 419), a term already found in the Greek Magical Papyri.

This great Sylloge is the latest and largest collection of such texts from the Latin-speaking Roman West. It complements and extends the excellent collections already available.¹ But what are *defixiones*? With Greek tablets more in mind, David Jordan famously defined them as “inscribed pieces of lead, usually in the form of small, thin sheets, intended to influence, by supernatural means, the actions or welfare of persons or animals against their will”. To which Sánchez Natalías adds a few inscribed on other materials, such as the marble slab from Mérida (no. 120) which begs Proserpina to punish a thief unknown, and the pewter plate from Bath (no. 235) with its calligraphic list of names. She also stresses (p. 5) their “harmful nature”: “every curse is born from rancour, envy, anger, fear, desire, love or desperation ...” emotions nicely illustrated by a British curse published since her cut-off date of summer 2018 (Fig. 1).² One face is inscribed with a text, the other depicts the victim being pierced by an arrow.

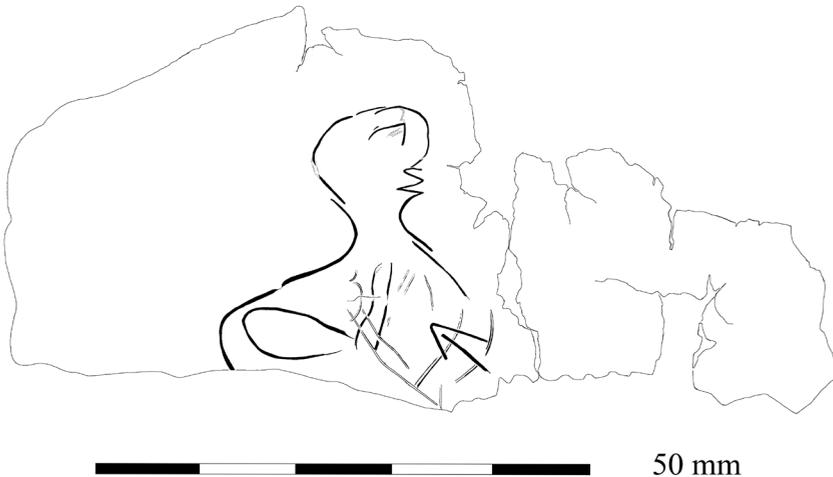


Fig.1

1. Gager, 1992; Kropp, 2008; Urbanová, 2018; McKie, 2022.

2. *Britannia*, 53, 2022, pp. 516-517.

Curses are written, Sánchez Natalías continues, to accomplish what cannot be done “through the available means, due to a lack of knowledge, power or economic/legal resources”. And she echoes the phrase coined by Henk Versnel for a significant minority, the “prayers for justice”, to refine Jordan’s definition: a curse “is a strategy for obtaining ‘individual justice’, which was illegal in Rome and feared throughout ancient societies”.

Interest in such *defixiones* has grown ever since the pioneering work of Auguste Audollent, *Defixionum Tabellae* (1904), which collected about three hundred from the Mediterranean world, almost all of them in Greek or Latin. Thirty-odd were then soon found in the amphitheatre at Trier (1908), and in more recent years, large collections have been found in Rome (the fountain of Anna Perenna), in Germany (the sanctuary of Isis and Magna Mater at Mainz) and in Britain (the hot spring of Sulis Minerva at Bath, the hilltop temple of Mercury at Uley). Besides these “archives”, many have been found in smaller numbers, by archaeologists in excavation or casually, by metal detectorists in particular. They mostly come from graves and cemeteries, or temples and sanctuaries including sacred springs. Inscribed lead tablets deposited underground or in water stand a much better chance of survival than papyrus, even if corrosion now makes them hard to read. In the western provinces of the Roman Empire, they join wooden writing-tablets in compensating for the almost total loss of papyri. Despite difficulties of reading and editing, they are important contributors to Roman social history; a rich and fascinating source for the study of Roman literacy and handwriting, of Latin whether formulaic or colloquial, of popular attitudes and beliefs in that borderland between magic and religion. In Britain, for example, there is a tablet from Uley (no. 361) addressed to the god Mercury which attempts to reverse someone else’s ungodly curse: “Varianus and Peregrina and Sabinianus have brought evil harm on my farm animal ... I ask that you drive them to the greatest death, and do not allow them health or sleep unless they redeem from you what they have administered to me”.

The *Sylloge* is two volumes of unequal length. Volume I is quite slim, only eighty pages, but provides a comprehensive and penetrating overview. It begins with a survey of previous scholarship and how to define the term *defixio*, before noting that most curses were written on sheets of lead, but other media might be used, such as ceramic lamps and lead vessels in the fountain of Anna Perenna. A *spoken* curse would have accompanied the written text, with most of them written conventionally from left to right, but some are reversed in various ways, not for encryption but to “reverse” their victims as well. The author of a Pannonian tablet (no. 532) extends this idea to his writing-instrument, so as to silence his enemies: “Just as I write this with a bent, twisted stylus (*averso graphio*), so too, may their bent and twisted tongues (*linguas*

illorum aversas) be unable to do harm...”. Some Latin curses may also include Greek words for “technical” terms, or magical symbols and letters (*charakteres*), sometimes even a line-drawing of the deity invoked or the victim being victimised.

After being inscribed, most tablets were folded or rolled up “like a cigar” (Delattre, quoted on p. 33). A few were pierced by nails to symbolise “defixion” or even deliberately damaged. They were then deposited, as already said, in graves, temples and other sanctuaries including sacred springs; comparatively few have been found in a “domestic” context associated with the victim like “the spells and devotions, the name of Germanicus written on lead tablets ... and other evil devices by which it is believed that souls are consecrated to the infernal powers” (Tacitus, *Ann.* II 6) that were found in the house where Germanicus died. This question of where tablets were actually deposited Sánchez Natalías discusses in great detail, tabulating their varied contexts in a series of tables.

Students of curse tablets ever since Audollent have categorised tablets by what prompted them: whether they were directed against thieves, against rivals in love, against competitors in the arena, against the other side in a lawsuit or even “enemies” unspecified. Audollent collected only five against thieves (*in fures*) but, thanks largely to the British contribution, this has now become the largest category in the Latin West. All categories are well discussed by Sánchez Natalías, who begins by noting that more than half of the known *defixiones* do not actually state their reason. This was by “tacit agreement” (p. 53) between the *defigens* and the deity addressed, since they both knew already what it was. But this does mean that many tablets are little more than lists of names, enemies or at least suspected enemies, not further specified. For much the same reason, some *defigentes* do not give their own name; not for self-protection, but because it was already known to the deity. When we pray, we do not need to say who we are; and in this area Versnel “has moved the debate forward more than any other scholar to date” (p. 60) by his concept of “prayers for justice”. In Britain at least, it is striking how many tablets are written by persons who voice a justified sense of grievance, but Sánchez Natalías is right to insist on not making a rigid distinction between these petitions and outright curses. Consider, for example, the tablet from Ratcliffe-on-Soar (no. 349) which gives Jupiter one-tenth of the money stolen, that he pursue it “through [the victim’s] mind, through his memory, his inner parts (?), his intestines, his heart, his marrow, his veins ...”. This catalogue of body-parts is typical of many an outright curse.

The two concluding chapters of Volume I consider the deities to whom tablets are addressed, when this is explicit or can be inferred from where they were found, and then the distribution of tablets by time and place. The results are conveniently tabulated in a series of tables and maps. Volume II is just as detailed, but rather less

slim, since it devotes more than four hundred pages to 535 texts, noting others which have not yet been read or published, but without giving them numbers. The sequence is geographical: first Italy and the islands, including a few in the Etruscan, Umbrian and Oscan languages, but only one from Sicily, since texts written wholly in Greek have been excluded. Then the western provinces: not Africa, but Hispania, Gaul and Britain (including a few in Celtic), Germany, Raetia, Noricum and Pannonia. Africa Proconsularis and Byzacena are excluded “because there are not enough published images with which I could work” (p. 83), but quite often their tablets are noted in the commentary to other tablets, besides being included with them in the tabulations at the end. In fact Sánchez Natalías is currently studying unpublished tablets in Tunisia. Nor is she to blame for omitting some other tablets, or rather, for reducing them to little more than numerals: she has to summarise nos. 193-202 from Trier since there is “little published information” (p. 262); and likewise nos. 374-378 and 389-439 from Uley in Britain, noting that no. 440 was “published among those that Tomlin treated in a rather cursory fashion” (p. 366). The present reviewer must apologise for this, but he can salve his conscience by promising they will soon appear: it is more than a year since he gave the full edition to Oxford University Press.

Each tablet in Volume II comes with a note of its provenance and the present location, then a line-by-line transcript with word-separation and editorial brackets (etc.), followed by bibliography, a detailed commentary and a translation if possible. There is no apparatus criticus, and Sánchez Natalías was unsurprisingly not able to visit every tablet (this, after all, is the duty and privilege of the first editor), which is why she modestly calls her work a “sylloge” (p. 83); not a corpus but a “collection”. Her very helpful commentary is not ordered systematically line by line, word by word, but often notes variant readings and interpretation, and discusses many points of interest. Having just published on this subject, she is always eager to note any magical “deadline” for the curse to take effect. Her command of the whole corpus is such that she often notes whether ideas and phrases are unique or found elsewhere. Thus no. 115 (ancient Mariana, in Corsica) is the only tablet to make the deity “the sole victim of a crime”, which he is now asked to avenge. No. 121 (ancient Salacia, in Portugal) promises the deity a quadruped sacrifice, “an unparalleled offering in the corpus of curses from the Roman West”. No. 463 (Bodegraven, in the Netherlands) is the only tablet to use the verb *extero*, which according to its editor meant that the victims’ names were “erased” somewhere else, but Sánchez Natalías prefers to translate *sic ext[r]iti [si]nt quomodo h[oc] e[s]t* as “may they be crushed just as this (tablet) is crushed”, despite noting that “the tablet has been very well preserved, though its surface is uneven”.

A great strength of the Sylloge is that most of its texts are accompanied by line-drawings; their absence from the Anna Perenna texts (nos. 19-47) is unconsciously emphasised by asking the reader to “note the capital shape of certain letters” in no. 21. This he cannot do, for only no. 24 is illustrated, and that by Sánchez Natalías herself. It supports her reading against that of Jürgen Blänsdorf, who also edited the Mainz tablets; his contribution to the study of *defixiones* fills a whole page of the Bibliography, twenty-eight items in all. Her other drawings are nos. 108 (Verona), 117 and 118 (unknown provenance, but now in Bologna), the latter repeated on the cover of Volume I and nicely echoed by the museum’s own photograph on Volume II. These four drawings are the fruit of her “(not so morbid) autopsy” (p. ix), the first-hand examination which she mentions quite often, but usually to report on the tablet’s present condition, not to justify a new reading. And at the end of Volume II, the photographs of forty-five tablets and two texts on stone include seven taken by her.

The thought of new readings prompts this reviewer to consider the treatment of tablets from Britain in particular; naturally he is interested, and he might be allowed to mention a few. In no. 238 (Bath) Sánchez Natalías accepts his reading of *sacellum* as “shrine”, which “better fits with the text itself” than *sac<c>ellum* (a “small bag”) as suggested by Joyce Reynolds in her review, but the discovery since of *sagellum* (diminutive of *sagum*, a “small cloak”) in the Vindolanda tablets now suggests a likely object of theft.³ Confusion between *g* and *c* is uncommon, but it does occur in a London tablet (no. 339), *defico* for *defigo*. In no. 267 (Bath), the thief is required to return the stolen clothes “in his snout”, *in suo rostro defer[at]*. Reynolds preferred “on its peg” or “in its bench”, but Sánchez Natalías accepts “snout”; she might have added that Jim Adams has now shown that it was used in this sense in Latin, a sense which survived into Spanish and Portuguese before it came to mean “face”.⁴ But she notes other corrections by Adams: in no. 304 (Bath), for instance, the editor understood *involaverit* and *perdiderit* as being synonymous (“has stolen” and “has robbed”), but Adams rightly observed that *perdere* means “to lose by theft”. Two lines later, she should also have accepted his emendation of the editor’s *quicumque r[es]* to *quicumque <e>r[it]*. Then in no. 365 (Uley), she is right to follow Adams in taking *pareat* to be, not a mis-spelling of *pariat*, but a “quasi-legalism” meaning “to be clear, evident”; despite the difficulty of extending this to the meaning of “to *make* clear, evident” which the context requires. In the same tablet, incidentally, the writer seeks to be “reconciled” with the thief, using the term *concordia*. Its rarity is noted by Sánchez Natalías,

3. *Britannia*, 41, 2010, p. 206.

4. Adams, 2007, pp. 385-389.

who knows that it occurs again as *congortiam* in no. 373 (Uley); but she cannot have known that it also occurs in two other, not yet fully published tablets from Uley, in no. 389 as *concoartiam* and in no. 418 as *congordiam*. This variation in spelling at a single site is worth emphasis, since it implies that curse-tablet formulas were transmitted orally, not copied out of a book.

Sánchez Natalías does not engage with this question of authorship, insistent though it is. In no. 356 (Uley) she notes it is “without parallel” for the *defigens* Saturnina to “define herself as a woman” (*muliere*); but does not ask whether this means that someone else, her husband perhaps, was writing on her behalf. And in a Bath tablet (no. 271), the name of the *defigens*, Exsuperius, is written in New Roman Cursive; but the rest of his long text (twelve lines) is in Old Roman Cursive, much earlier in date. This freak of palaeography is, for Sánchez Natalías, only a “transition” from one style to the other; but perhaps she should have asked whether it implies there were two hands at work. For she comments on the curse from Raetia (no. 523) in which Secundina writes to Mercury “in the third person singular” (*Secundina Mercurio ... mandat*) that it is “as if a third party wrote the curse on the victim’s behalf”. By “victim”, of course, she means the aggrieved party, which was Secundina herself.

Authorship is a difficult question, but one worth pursuing. Another is that of “quasi-legal” language, which authors may have thought was appropriate to “prayers for justice”. Consider, for example, the very long text from Rome (no. 48) which invokes “eighteen mythical beings” to curse Caecilia Prima, “who is named no less than 24 times”. On her first appearance she is “Caecilia Prima, or whatever other name she goes by”, *sive quo alio nomine est*: this phrase is familiar from legal documents such as the deed of sale of a slave, and surely expresses the determination of *defigentes* that their curse should target the right person. In Britain, they are particularly fond of “defining” an unknown criminal by means of pairs of mutually exclusive alternatives such as “whether man or woman”, “whether boy or girl” and “whether slave or free”. But there is only one instance of this in Hispania, the appeal to the Lady of the Spring – *dom(i)na fons* – at Italica (no. 127) that she recover some stolen shoes from an unknown thief, “whether girl, woman or man”. Then consider the appeal to Proserpina at Mérida (no. 120): “I ask you by your majesty, I beg you, I beseech you that you avenge the theft which has been done me ...” (*per tuam maiestatem te rogo oro obsecro uti vindices quot mihi furti factum est*). Compare it with this appeal to Sulis at Bath (no. 240): “I ask your most sacred majesty that you take vengeance on those who have done me wrong” (*rogo [s]ancitissimam maiestatem tuam [u]t vindices ab his [q]ui [fraude]m fecerunt*). Are these echoes only coincidence – or do they imply a common source, some sort of handbook?

The Sylloge is so wide-ranging that it is bound to raise such questions. It was proof-read in “many virtual trips back and forth between Zaragoza and Oxford” (p. ix), and this reviewer has noticed only a few slips. Those of any importance are in transcription: [*Prosep*]ina (no. 13.15); *genis* (p. 320) for *gens* = *gen(tili)s* in no. 303; *sit* for *sic* (no. 494.7); *unvalavit* (no. 367.4); *sa[nc]te* for *sa<nc>te* (no. 530.1). To which add the names “Docilliana” for *Docillina* (p. 377) and “Ulatius” for *Ulattius* (p. 415); and the inept translation of “in the name of Camulorigis et Titocuna ...” for *nomine Camulorigi(s) et Titocun(a)e* (no. 350.1). In no. 505 Cassius Fortunatus and Lutatia Restituta are said to be “identified with their *nomen*, *cognomen* and a patronymic”, but with no patronymic being there. The *archigalli* of no. 499 are said to be “the priesthood initiated in the reign of Antoninus Pius, which is mentioned by Pliny the Elder” who had died fifty years before. Less obvious is the transposition of the two drawings of no. 492: face B is below the transcript of face A, and vice versa. There are also some typos of the sort we all make: “translated” (p. 6); “practitioner’s” (p. 16); the conflation of two drafts in “the *nomen* ... for which Vetter has claimed Celtic in origin” (p. 173); “possibilites” (p. 293); “form” for “from” (p. 364); “ejection” (p. 373); “that” for “than” (p. 475); “peu-têtre” (p. 412); “on error” for “an error” (p. 418); “inicial” (p. 458). It should be added that the list of abbreviations (p. 465) unfairly omits *DTM* for Blänsdorf’s Mainz tablets, despite using it in all of the individual entries.

These nits are worth picking, not as criticism, but to help its many readers edge the Sylloge even closer to perfection. It is a major work of scholarship which will be an essential resort for anyone intrigued by *defixiones* and the covert, undercover intelligence they provide of the busy Roman world.

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