

Agency on Attic Curse Tablets

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Who does what on Athenian curse tablets? Who are the agents involved and in which capacity and function do they act? First of all, there are the cursers, often represented by professional magicians, who want to accurse a rival for whatever reason. In order to do so, they invoke various gods of the underworld, in most cases Hermes, Hecate, Hades, Demeter, and Persephone. The dead also play a vital role, although they are only rarely mentioned in the curse tablets. So, we will have to deal with three agents, the cursers, the gods of the underworld, and the dead. As a point of departure, I would like to refer to an article by Benedetto Bravo.¹ In this article, Bravo draws too strict a line between the notion of the dead as dead, sometimes invoked in sympathetic magic (**Source 1**), and the notion of the dead as being alive and capable of action. Robert Parker, in his 2005 Oxford book on Polytheism and Society at Athens has adopted this viewpoint and even emphasizes the importance of the dead's immobility.² Admittedly, the Greeks' notions of the dead are notoriously vague, shady, and even contradictory, but as we will see and what I seek to demonstrate in this paper is that the view of the dead souls as powerful beings, actually well alive and ready for action, is the predominant view underlying the thought-world of most *defixiones*, even if it is not explicitly addressed in the tablets. I would like to go even one step further: the world of binding magic was not conceivable without the essential role the dead played as executioners of the spells. This role of the dead as lively agents was so self-evident to ancient cursers and magicians that they did not need to spell it out in detail. On the contrary, those few tablets stressing the immobility of the corpse are of negligible quantity and only express a fatal wish on the part of the cursers metaphorically. We can envision the relationship between the curser, the gods of the underworld, the dead, and the victim in a chain of action that is in a certain analogy to the Attic judicial system. Let us start with the curser or the professional

¹ B. Bravo, "Une tablette magique d'Olbia pontique. Les morts, les héros, et les démons," *Poikilia: études offertes à Jean-Pierre Vernant*, Paris 1987, 185-218.

² R. Parker, *Polytheism and Society at Athens*, Oxford 2005, 127-128, esp. n. 48.

magician as initiator of the spell and ask what kind of interaction with the gods of the underworld and the dead he aims to build up.

The Greek word for the professional magician is *goês*. The term hails from the cult of the dead. Originally, a *goês* was someone who mourned the dead, who had to bemoan the dead (*Totenkläger*). Over time, he turned into someone who was competent to communicate and interact with the dead, who was even able to conjure them up. We are now in the realm of necromancy, which is well attested in the Greek sources from an early period on. In *Od.* 11.12-224 Odysseus is the *goês* himself, conjures up the dead, and goes down into Hades for a visit. In a new papyrus find from Trier (**Source 2**), a fragment of Aeschylus' tragedy *Psychagogoi*, 13 verses hint at Odysseus' necromancy. The chorus of the *psychagogoi*, the servants of the oracle descending from Hermes, help Odysseus in conjuring up the seer Teiresias. A similar scene is to be found in *A. Pers.* 623-651. So it is via necromancy that Greek magic came into being. Necromancy thus seems to be the origin of Greek magic. The main task of the *goês* is to force or compel the dead into action via the help of chthonic deities. One more mythical example from Hellenistic times: in Apollonios Rhodios' epic *Argonautika*, the witch Medea unleashes the daimones of the dead and the hounds of hell against the enemy, a deadly attack (*Arg.* 1665-1690). Here we are in the realm of black magic. The cursers obviously thought that it was very difficult for them to contact and mobilize the dead directly. So, they put their trust in the gods of the underworld who were thought to be responsible for the dead and to have control over them. Again and again we see cursers enlisting the help of chthonic gods and goddesses to achieve the goal of their ill wishes. The normal formula is *katadô* or *katagraphô pros ton Hermen* or *pros tēn Persephonen*, I bind or I write down someone "in the presence of", "before Hermes, Persephone". *Pros* with accusative is often attested in the judicial realm. It means "register someone with someone else," transferring someone into another person's power. In the realm of magic, the victim of the spell is transferred to, handed over, devoted to the powers of the underworld gods, a morbid act indeed. The metaphorical action of binding or writing down is similar to, or I would even say, is in analogy to "I indict someone before the courts of Athens." In the later prayers for justice the cursers invoke and even implore the gods to punish an unknown person. In classical Athens we have only precursors of prayers for justice, pieces which H. Versnel calls borderline cases, but the principle is the same: Cursers address the gods to

achieve their goals (**Source 3**). Since most tablets were deposited in graves, wells, or hidden in sanctuaries, they were not meant to be read by contemporaries, but by the gods and the dead. Some tablets are specifically addressed to the gods (**Sources 4**). How do the cursers try to contact and influence or persuade the gods to act on their behalf? Via prayers and magical rituals. We will see that Plato calls these forms of exerting influence *peithô*, persuasion. Thus, we see again the analogy to the Attic judicial system, where speakers sought to convince, to persuade the judges of their version of things via *peithô*, persuasion.

Before we address the gods of the underworld, we have to ascertain first the role the dead play in this whole morbid business. According to Sarah Johnston, the attitude of the Greeks toward their dead gradually changed during the late archaic period.³ The dead were now thought to be capable of interaction with the living. They were more and more perceived as threats and thus banned to the cemeteries outside towns. The dualism between the material world and the world of ideas, thoughts, and spirits that found its highest literary expression in Plato, is already tangible here. Of course the Greeks knew that corpses were dead and immobile, but the souls of the dead were well alive, in their opinion. The view that there is an afterlife, that the souls of the dead are indeed alive, permeates all our sources and is at the core of necromancy and binding magic. There is an abundance of literary evidence for active souls (**Source 5**). The Greeks worshipped their dead at the graves, bringing them food and pouring out libations. In imprecations against desecrators of the grave from Asia Minor the dead are thought to have feelings that can be hurt, they have needs and wishes. In the so-called orphic gold tablets, we encounter dead souls searching for the right path to Elysium. Some dead are more active than others, Johnston calls them restless dead, because they cannot find peace. They are either unburied (*ataphoi*), were murdered (*biaiothanatoi*), or died prematurely for different reasons (*aôroi*).⁴ They are angry, because they could not live their life to the full and they were denied proper burial or marriage and thus the procreation of a child, the main telos in a good Greek's life. These restless souls full of spite and harm were thought to hover between the realm of the living and the dead. They were still destined to go down into Hades for good, but were maybe

³ S. Johnston, *Restless Dead. Encounters between the Living and the Dead in Ancient Greece*, Berkeley – Los Angeles – London 1999 *passim*.

⁴ W. Riess, *Performing Interpersonal Violence. Court, Curse, and Comedy in Fourth-Century BCE Athens*, Berlin – Boston 2012, 179f.

susceptible to do some harm to somebody else before descending into the underworld. Maybe they would even be willing to take someone with them on their way down to Hades.

On some tablets these unhappy souls longing for revenge are mentioned as *atelestoi* (**Sources 6**). The broad semantics of the adjective *atelês* is telling. It can mean uninitiated in some kind of mystery cult, unburied (not having received the proper burial rites) or unmarried and thus the term *atelês* summarizes the different groups in question. In some rare cases, the archaeological evidence reinforces our impression that the dead can function as agents or at least, to be more cautious, the burial site is mentioned on the tablet or is encapsulated via a voodoo doll (**Sources 7**). In some cases, the practitioners of the magical ritual placed the tablets into the right hand of the corpse (**Sources 8**), probably hoping that the corpse would pollute the tablet and thus the name inscribed on it and would eventually even drag the victim down with him into Hades.

What is now the task of the chthonic gods, standing as intermediary agents between the cursers and the dead? Unlike the dead, the gods are almost always included in the spells, either addressed or even invoked as witnesses of the magical act or as messengers to get in touch with the dead. Sometimes, the curser is more compelling and dares to give orders to the gods to bind or restrain the victim or hold him or her down. In these cases we even find imperatives: *kateche* or *katechete* (**Sources 9**). Hermes katochos is the god most frequently attested on the tablets, Hermes the Restrainer (**Sources 10**). We must not forget that Hermes is *the psychopompos* who leads the souls of the dead to their destination in the underworld. The dead are entrusted to him, to his guidance, he is responsible for the dead and has control over them and that is why the cursers contact him and his divine colleagues first, not the dead. It lies in the logic of black magic that the victim of the curse is also, first of all, handed over or devoted to the gods of the underworld,⁵ a serious matter, if we keep in mind that to the Romans the *devotio* was always meant to be fatal. Communication between humans and the dead can be direct, as in some forms of necromancy, or indirect, as in most cases of black magic. In black magic, you can communicate with the dead and mobilize them via the gods, who are responsible for the dead, and these are the chthonic gods mentioned in the tablets.

I mentioned the formula “to Hermes,” “to Persephone” before. The victims are bound in the presence of these gods, before them. It is correct that the gods in these formulae can be

⁵ Riess 2012, 207.

understood as witnesses of the magical act, which is often mentioned in the secondary literature on the topic. But their role is not confined to that of witnesses only.⁶ In legal contexts, the accusative case after *pros* is regularly used to refer someone to the magistrate who has jurisdiction over a case. This means that the agent of the curse renders the accursed person subject to the jurisdiction of the chthonic powers. This very act of registering the victim with the gods endowed the dead, in turn, with extraordinary functions. The person handed over to the psychopompic gods first of all faced trial before these deities. They decided whether or not the victim would be hurt at all and if yes, what kind of calamity would befall him or her. The gods would then order the dead under their control, i.e. the unruly spirits eager for spite and revenge, to become active and execute the spell, i.e. haunt the victims with the whole range of adverse conditions they had at their disposal. If the verdict was death, the chthonic gods would not execute the spell themselves, but would again enlist the help of the dead, who should take the victims with them on their way down to Hades. Once in the underworld, the victims may have faced another trial in front of the judges in the underworld, typically Minos (who can be replaced by Triptolemus), Rhadamanthys, and Aeacus. These judges would decide further about the future of the newly deceased in the underworld (for evidence on the trial in the underworld, see **Sources 11**).

We now come full circle and can envision the analogy between the realm of binding magic and the judicial sphere at Athens. The curser's speech act *katadô* or *katagraphô* is the initiation of the action against a rival or opponent. The curser corresponds to the accuser in court who files charges against an opponent or, to be more neutral, to the speaker in court, because plaintiffs and defendants alike used black magic. What is important is the launching of a formal process, some kind of court proceedings with the whole personnel necessary, prosecutor, defendant, judges, and executioners. One contacts first of all the pertinent authorities, in the city, the various magistrates, in the case of black magic, the chthonic gods who are responsible for the shady realm of the dead, necromancy, and of course also binding magic. These gods of the underworld are to be found on almost every tablet. They are indispensable. In the ensuing proceedings, the speaker in court and the curser tries to persuade the judges/chthonic deities of his version of things, that he was innocent and had suffered harm and injustice from the hands of the opponent. The

⁶ Riess 2012, 208-210.

persuasion (*peithô*) occurred in court via rhetorical means, and in the realm of magic via magical means and rites. Not only are rhetoric and magic equated from Gorgias on, rhetoric being a kind of magic, with the gifted speaker being a kind of magician who is able to enchant his audience and lead them wherever he wants, but Plato explicitly speaks of *peithô* in characterizing the activities of the *goêtes* versus the gods. Plato exactly keeps to this chain of action. What is more, the curser compels the gods to help him, to serve his needs. This kind of serving the needs of the curser is expressed with the verb *hypêretein*. *Hypêretein* is related to *hypêretês*, which denotes the executioner in Attic legal language (**Sources 12**). It is telling that Pl. *R.* 364b–c uses the word *peithô* in characterizing the activities of the *goêtes* versus the gods. The *goêtes* have the power to persuade the gods to help them. Similarly clear is Pl. *Lg.* 909a–c.

These gods addressed are the first judges; they determine what the semantically broad notion of *katadô* would actually mean in a particular case, so they decide on the punishment to be meted out against the target. In a way, they are preliminary judges. The magician implies that these gods have their own servants, their own tools to carry out the dirty work, i.e. the dead. So, the magician contacts, mobilizes, and conjures up the dead via the chthonic gods. The dead are the real underlings, the executioners who actually have to carry out the negative implications of the curse. They correspond to the subservient executioners in democratic Athens.⁷ The *daimones* of the dead now haunt the victims of the curse. Sometimes, the cursers contact the *daimones* directly without the detour via the underworld gods. But it was nicer to stick to the hierarchies and inform the bosses first who would then contact their servants to carry out the spell. If the verdict was really death, the dead, who wanted to go down to Hades anyway, dragged the victims down with them into Hades with Hermes, the psychopompos, leading the way. Once in Hades, the accursed may have faced trial again, this time in front of the underworld court.

To summarize: it is not the gods of the underworld themselves, who are mentioned on the tablets all the time, but the souls of the dead, mostly unmentioned, who take the accused person down into Hades, upon the order of the chthonic deities who are invoked by the curser with magical means.

⁷ Riess 2012, 216f. with n. 251.