Defixio: Curse Tablets of Roman Britain

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THE TABLETS CONTAIN LEAD
The curse tablets are made from a sheet of leaded pewter.
WASH HANDS AFTER TOUCHING.

Summary
A Roman religio-magical practice adopted and adapted by the inhabitants of Great Britain under the Roman occupation, especially in the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE. Generally used against thieves, they sought divine punishment for wrongdoers. An invocation would be inscribed on a lead sheet, then rolled up, sometimes nailed shut, and cast into a deep place (often water).

Introduction
The practice of writing curses or spells on lead tablets, which were then sealed and consigned to a deep place (a well, a grave, a pit) was widespread throughout the Roman Empire. The Empire brought the practice to Britain, as attested by large finds of curse tablets at Bath and Ulney, and smaller finds elsewhere. The tablets vary greatly in exact content, from blank tablets or ones with scratchings of pretend writing, to the names of the accursed, to magical formulas. Various techniques were used to sometimes enhance the magical nature of the curse, including writing letters, words or entire lines backwards, or including magical nonsense words. In Britain, especially in Bath, the curses are mostly aimed at petty thieves - it seems there were people stealing from tourists even then.

The practice lies on the boundary of magic and religion. Period sources describe curse-writing as a habit of evil witches. However, the two major English find sites are both temples, and the gods are invoked and promised sacrifices.

Curse Tablet Background
Oxford University’s Center for the Study of Ancient Documents maintains an excellent website on curse tablets from Roman Britain, which contains not only background information on the tablets, but also 27 examples of tablets, each including a photo and/or sketch, a transliteration of the inscription, and a translation. All the following background information comes from CSAD’s website (see Resources).

250 of the 500 recovered curse tablets in the world come from England. Over 100 were found at Bath, and 87 at a temple at Uley. They are dated to the entire Roman occupation, but based on the scripts used, they were most prominent in the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE. Script, text and find location give evidence that they were written by people of the town and of the country, from of many stations in life. On the Continent, generic ‘underworld spirits’ might be invoked to curse, but in Britain the find sites are primarily temples, and the gods of the temples are the powers invoked. Tablets would be left where only the god could read them - in sacred pools at both Uley and Bath.

Material
Lead or lead/tin alloys were used; the Bath tablets in particular are known as having a high enough tin content to be considered pewter. Metal content varied considerably. Some tablets were made from very neatly cast and trimmed rectangular tablets; others were on cruder, more uneven flattened bits of irregular metal. They range in size from roughly
50mm square to 120 x 80 mm, and the text can be oriented along either the short or the long axis of the tablet (modern ‘portrait’ or ‘landscape’ orientation).

Method
A stylus would have been used to scratch the letters onto the tablet. If the surface of the metal were oxidized, the letters would have shone silver. Then, the tablet was often folded or rolled (no set number of times) and the ends tucked over.

![Ulney 80, folded 5 times. Lines very visible. Suggests a sort of “rolling up”](image)

It might also be pierced by a nail: “defixio,” to curse, also means “to fix” as in to nail or fix something in place (e.g., crucifixion - to fix to a cross). The curse “fixed” harm to an individual until reparations were made.

![Roman steel nail, via Glasgow Steel Nail](image)

![Wrought iron reproduction of the above nail, via Glasgow Steel Nail](image)

Texts
The tablets seem to follow common formulas, possibly from magical handbooks or oral tradition. Some tablets bear only names but many carry longer texts. Curse tablets from Britain that protest against theft typically contain the following elements

- An appeal to the god
- To accept the gift or hear the prayer (of the curse tablet)
- Which describes a complaint or requests intercession.
- Gives the names victim and thief, where the latter is known.
- If the thief is unknown, various catch-all formulas are employed: whether man or woman, slave or free; also boy/girl, pagan/Christian, civilian/soldier.
- The crime is described
- The god is offered part of the stolen property or the thief himself
- To bring the perpetrator to account, the god is called on to deny them, or to consume, their health, life or blood.
- The god is asked to ‘fix’ the thief, drawing on the binding sense of curse magic, by causing their bodily functions to cease from working (e.g., may the thief not eat, drink, sleep, sit, lie, defecate or urinate in Uley 72). Occasionally death is threatened
- To make amends or halt these effects, the property should be brought to the temple

**Scripts**

Most tablets were written in a ‘cursive’ hand used for everyday letters and documents. Some were written in the ‘rustic capitals’ more usual in books or the headings of documents, or even the monumental script used for stone inscriptions.

Uley 2 using a Roman Rustic script. Three-stroke construction of the S very noticeable. ‘A’s have cross-bars. Ornamental strokes missing on some letters.

Words ran together without spaces, although sometimes points were used to separate them. Punctuation was not used, although symbols and abbreviations were.

Letters, words and even entire lines could be written in reverse for magical effect. Lines could also be alternated backwards and forwards, a technique called ‘boustrophedon’ (a Greek word describing the movement of an ox-team ploughing a field).

**Scriveners (quotes from CSAD website)**

“Roman literature presents witches like Pamphile as possessed of the appropriate knowledge for making curses, but so too perhaps did other religious specialists, like the haruspex (a diviner of the future from the study of entrails) who erected an altar at Bath, or the interpres Victorinus at Lydney. This may account for the echoes of prayers and sacrifice in the ‘gifts’ made to the god and the extraction of blood and other vital essences.”

“The practice of ‘magic’ and witchcraft was unacceptable in the Roman world, but it is not straightforward to distinguish ‘magic’ from ‘respectable’ religious practice. In Britain for example the practice of cursing also mostly took place alongside other ‘mainstream’ religious ritual in the province’s temples, rather than in polluted and dangerous places like cemeteries, the traditional haunts of the witch. In studying curse tablets we have an unusual opportunity to study the complexity of ancient magic and the difficulty of establishing clear-cut categories of magic and religion in a world in which there is no religious orthodoxy, populated by a myriad deities and cults.”

**Motive**

In Roman Britain, anonymous theft is by far the commonest complaint. This is rather different from the Continent, where curse victims were often named, and where a greater variety of complaints were offered.
Making a Tablet

Materials
Three things are needed to make a tablet: a pewter sheet, a stylus to scribe it, and a square-cut nail to fix it (and the last is optional). I purchased a sheet of craft pewter meant for embossing from Amazon.com.

AMACO ArtEmboss Pure Metal Sheet (9.25 x 12 Inches)

Then found square-cut nails from Lee Valley Hardware.

Square-cut nails sold by Lee Valley Hardware. This project uses the middle “E” nail. (http://www.leevalley.com/US/hardware/page.aspx?p=40387)

“Still made the same way as they were in 1819, these traditional square-cut iron nails are produced by Tremont, the oldest nail manufacturer in the United States. (Lee Valley website)” They match the general form of the square tapered nail with a large head seen in the artifact picture from Glasgow, above.

I have a steel-tipped stylus for my waxed tablet and used it.

The Curse
I decided to start with the text of the Caerleon tablet, which is fairly short but written on a generous 3” square:

Lady Nemesis, I give thee a cloak and a pair of boots; let him who wore them not redeem them except with his life and blood.

(The tablet measures 3.5” x 3”, but it is cut in the form of a stone funerary monument, a plaque with handles. The handles add the additional 0.5” or so of length, whereas the writing area is roughly square.)
I suspect the “thee” is a deliberate archaic phrasing; according to the CSAD website, this tablet was first published in 1927, when this would not be too unusual. “Thou” and “thee” would be the familiar form of “you” in English and hardly seem appropriate for addressing Lady Nemesis. (The Christian god Abba/Daddy, yes. A fearsome goddess of revenge, not so much.) When I wrote it out, I changed “thee” into “you.”

**The Script**
Two years ago, I was trying to learn rustic capitals as one of several hands appropriate to an Anglo-Saxon persona. Since rustic capitals are one of the scripts used on curse tablets, I decided to dust off that skill and give it a go. I used (Drogin 1989) and (Harris 2005) as lettering guides. I examined Uley 2 and saw that many of the lines at the ascender and descender were preserved, and so I copied those.

I did not try writing any letters or words backwards.

**The Tablet**
As the ad copy for the AMOCO pewter sheet promised, it cut easily with craft scissors, and I snipped out several 3” square sheets. I used the wooden dowel/embossing tool that came with the metal sheet to roll them flat. The steel-tipped stylus scratched the pewter sheet very easily, although my hand got a bit tired after scratching out the curse twice. I left one sheet unfolded for display and folded the other up about five times, into a narrow tube, then bend the ends in as described on the CSAD website. I also rolled and folded a blank sheet as a second exhibit piece.
Nails
I placed the two rolled tablets on a wooden board and put the square-cut nails through them. I used two nails on the longer one; interestingly, one nail has become rather loose. I have tried to push it in, hoping finger strength would deform the pewter enough to hold it firmly further up the nail, but it hasn't seemed to work.

Water
Since curse tablets were often cast into water, one of the nailed tablets is on display in a tall mug of water. It's supposed to be evocative.

Conclusions
This was hardly an extensive or complex research project, but I enjoyed reading the curse tablet texts. Making one was fairly simple, as it should be: this was evidently a practice used by many people from all walks of life. Higher efficacy lay not in any skill of smelting pewter or forging nails, nor in beautiful handwriting, but in knowing the secret magical ways to enhance the curse's power. Still, nothing prevented the casual irate traveler from hurling a lesser curse into the drink – perhaps even a blank tablet accompanied by a prayer that justice be done to the unknown malefactor.
References


Appendix: A List of Curses from CSAD

Uley 1, 85x135mm portrait
Cenacus complains to the god Mercury about Vitalinus and Natalinus his son concerning the draught animal which has been stolen from him, and asks the god Mercury that they may have neither health before/unless they return at once to me the draught animal which they have stolen, and to the god the devotion which he has demanded from them himself.

Uley 2, 83x60mm landscape
A memorandum to the god...Mercury (over Mars Silvanus) from Saturnina a woman, concerning the linen cloth which she has lost. (She asks) that he who has stolen it should not have rest before/unless/until he brings the aforesaid property to the aforesaid temple, whether man or woman, whether slave or free. She gives a third part to the aforesaid god on condition that he exact this property which has been written above. A third part...what she has lost is given to the god Silvanus on condition that he exact it, whether man or woman, whether slave or free...

Uley 3, 98 x 54mm, landscape
To the god Mars/Mercury gold ring from [house] and iron fetter who did wrong let the god discover.

Uley 4, 66 x 124mm, portrait
Biccus gives Mercury whatever he has lost (that the thief), whether man or male (sic), may not urinate nor fecate nor speak nor sleep nor stay awake nor [have] well-being or health, unless he bring (it) in the temple of Mercury; nor gain consciousness (sic) of (it) unless with my intervention.

Uley 5, 70 x 72mm,
The name of the thief who has stolen (my) bridle, whether free or slave, whether man or woman, is given to the god ( . . . ) two parts from his wife(?) a third to (his) health.

Uley 33, 70 x 76
Lucilia (daughter) of Mellossus ... Minu(v)assus (son) of Senebellena.

Uley 43, 84 x 98 mm, portrait
To the god Mercury (from) Docilinus ... Varianus and Peregrina and Sabinianus who have brought evil harm on my beast and are . . . I ask you 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.

Uley 49, 42 x 66mm, portrait
Aunillus, Vicariana, Covitius (son) of Minius gives Varicillus; Minura (gives) Atavacus ...

Uley 50, 91 x 39mm, landscape

Uley 55, 60 x 95mm, portrait
Mintla Rufus to the god Mercury. I have given them, whether woman or [man], ... the material of a cloak. I have given (them).

Uley 72, 76 x 131mm, portrait
Honoratus to the holy god Mercury. I complain to your divinity that I have lost two wheels and four cows and many small belongings from my house. I would ask the genius of your divinity that you do not allow health to the person who has done me wrong, nor allow him to lie or sit or drink or eat, whether he is man or woman, whether boy or girl, whether slave or free, unless he brings my property to me and is reconciled with me. With renewed prayers I ask your divinity that my petition may immediately make me vindicated by your majesty.

Uley 76, 79x75mm, portrait
To the holy god Mercury. I complain to you about those who are badly disposed towards me (and) who are acting badly over (?), whether slave or free, whether male or female. Do not allow them to stand or sit, to drink or eat, or to buy off these provocations(?) unless with their own blood ...

Uley 80, 72 x 42mm, landscape
The sheet (of lead) which is given to Mercury, that he exact vengeance for the gloves which have been lost; that he take blood and health from the person who has stolen them; that he provide what we ask the god Mercury [...] as quickly as possible for the person who has taken these gloves.

Brean Down, 85 x 57mm, landscape
[... I give to you] the caricaula which [I have lost. Whether] slave or free, whether man or [woman] who ... Lady, (?) ... you are to make redeem(?) them thus with his own blood ...whether man or woman .

Caerleon, 3.5 x 3 in in the shape of a square plaque with handles; landscape relative to handles
Lady Nemesis, I give thee a cloak and a pair of boots; let him who wore them not redeem them except with his life and blood.

Hamble, 84x128mm, portrait
Lord Neptune, I give you the man who has stolen the solidus and six argentioli of Muconius. So I give the names who took them away, whether male or female, whether boy or girl. So I give you, Niskus, and to Neptune the life, health, blood of him who has been privy to that taking-away. The mind which stole this and which has been privy to it, may you take it away. The thief who stole this, may you consume his blood and take it away, Lord Neptune.

Lydney, 2.5 x 3.125 in, portrait
To the god Nodens: Silvianus has lost his ring and given half (its value) to Nodens. Among those who are called Senicianus do not allow health until he brings it to the temple of Nodens.’
‘(This curse) comes into force again.’

Marlborough Down, 72 x 49 mm, landscape
I give (?). To the god Mars ... asks your Genius, Lord, that they [stop] as soon as possible and do not go for nine years. Do not allow [them] to sit [or to ... ]...

No provenance, 137 x 104 mm, landscape
Given to the god Mercury, whoever has stolen ... and other sundries ... whether man or woman, whether girl or boy, whether free-born or slave. May (the god) not allow him rest before ... limbs(?) ... by hand(?) ... day of death ... may (the god) torment him who has stolen the axe(?) of ... and who has stolen the writing(?) things.

No provenance, 69 x 53 mm, landscape
[(?] To the god [name] (from) [name]. I give to you the [stolen property] which I have lost. I beg your Majesty that you destroy this thief, whether slave woman (?) or boy or [girl], ... (?) that you [force] him to produce the stolen property [...]

Pagans Hill A (no. 7), 95 x 101 mm, portrait
... in 3 thousand denarii, of which (I give) you half part on condition that you exact it from Vassicillus the son of[...cominus and from his wife, since the coin(?) which they have stolen(?) from my house (the syntax breaks down) and you are not to permit them health nor to drink nor to eat nor to sleep [nor] to have healthy [children] unless they bring this [my] property to your temple. With repeated [prayers] I ask you that this [coin(?)] may come to be recovered [from the very] names of my [enemies].

Pagans Hill B (no. 8), 75 x 45 mm, portrait
... eight times nine ... let him be wearied with every sort of hardships.