

A Brief History of Previous Scholarship*

Despite the fact that traditional historiography long spurned the study of ‘aggressive magic’ and branded it as an aspect of Graeco-Roman culture that was unworthy of serious study, *defixiones* have nevertheless attracted a good deal of scholarly attention when compared to other facets of ancient magic. While some scholars have identified the origin of the modern study of *defixiones* with the publication of isolated Greek tablets that appeared in 1796 and 1813,¹ we can look even further back to 1737, when the priest and scholar A.F. Gori published the second volume of his *Museum Etruscum exhibens insignia veterum Etruscorum Monumenta*, in which he included an Etruscan *defixio* from Volterra.² During the nineteenth century and especially from 1840 onwards, the discovery of new tablets precipitated the publication of a large number of isolated studies.³ It was not until later, and in conjunction with a series of groundbreaking archaeological discoveries in Cnidus and Cyprus, that these artefacts increasingly came to capture the scholarly imagination. Nevertheless, the publications of these corpora by C.T. Newton and L. Macdonald respectively,⁴ only gave a taste of what was to come.

The systematic investigation of ancient cursing practices, however, did not reach maturity until the very end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth, when three monumental corpora of *defixiones* edited by R. Wünsch and A. Audollent appeared. In the first, Wünsch studied and edited 220 curse tablets from Attica, which were published in 1897 as part of *Inscriptiones Graecae* [III, 3], where the author also provided the briefest of treatments of the other Greek and Latin curses that were known at that time.⁵

Just one year later, Wünsch published a collection of the 48 so-called ‘Sethian’ *defixiones* from Rome, discovered in a columbarium near Porta San Sebastiano, which are largely written in Greek (cf. Wünsch 1898). Six years later, in 1904, Audollent published the third magisterial collection of curses, his *Defixionum tabellae quotquot innotuerunt tam in graecis Orientis quam in totius Occidentis partibus praeter atticas in ‘Corpore Inscriptionum Atticarum’ editas* (DT for short), in which he collected and edited 305 *defixiones*, the majority of which were written in Greek and Latin, though he included curses in Oscan, Etruscan, Iberian and Phoenician.

Thus, with the appearance of Wünsch’s and especially Audollent’s volumes, the study of *defixiones* was forever transformed from being an occasional curiosity to an established and coherent corpus of inscriptions. This work proved to be the foundation for twentieth-century scholarship, which included the publication of numerous new finds as well as various studies that dealt with particular aspects of the *defixiones*. Among the latter are the linguistically focused work of M. Jeanneret⁶ and that of M. Besnier,⁷ who sought to improve the published readings of the *defixiones* that had been edited between 1904 and 1920.

In the 1960s, two compilations were published that deserve special attention: the first, published by E. García Ruiz in 1967, is largely focused on linguistic questions and examines 100 curses;⁸ in the second, H. Solin published an edition of a new *defixio* from Ostia (cf. 53) with an appendix containing a list of 38 tablets published between 1920 and 1968.⁹

The number of publications dealing with individual *defixiones* continued to grow, thus leading to the need for a more systematic approach to the study of curse tablets. In an attempt to address the growing problem, Solin and D.R. Jordan announced in print their intention to compile a new authoritative corpus of *defixiones*. Nevertheless, this work never came to fruition,¹⁰ perhaps because of the

* In the following pages, bold numbers refer to curse tablet entries. For ancient sources, abbreviations follow A. Spawforth and S. Hornblower (eds), *Oxford Classical Dictionary*⁴ (Oxford 2012).

¹ Preisendanz (1930: 119–20) has argued that the first study of *defixiones* should be placed in 1796 when Ignarra published a discussion of a tablet found in Italy. Jordan (1990: 440), however, has rejected the identification of this item as a curse and hence dated the beginning of modern research on the topic to 1813, when Åkerblad published a Greek *defixio* discovered in a grave near Athens. Either way, and as the following discussion shows, the systematic study of the phenomenon did not begin until later.

² Gori 1737: 404. Cf. 87.

³ The original publication of the following tablets belongs to this period: 1–4, 56, 61, 69–70, 85, 92–93, 150–55, 461, 520, etc.

⁴ The 14 tablets from Cnidus, all written in Greek, were still folded or rolled when found in the temenos of the sanctuary of Demeter. Several of them were written by women who had been robbed. For a discussion, see Newton 1863: 382f.; 719–45; Gager 1992: no. 89; Faraone 2011. The Cyprian *defixiones* were found in what appears to have been a common grave. The published texts from Cyprus (only 22 of 260!) mostly belong to the group of juridical *defixiones*. In these texts, Greek and Oriental deities are invoked in order to silence those who planned to testify against the *defigens* in court; for a discussion, see Macdonald 1891; Gager 1992: nos 45–46; Wilburn 2013: 169–218.

⁵ Cf. Wünsch 1897. Currently, J. Curbera is re-editing this corpus; for a preliminary notice, see Curbera 2012.

⁶ See Jeanneret 1916 and 1917. In both articles, he carried out a comparative study of 125 curse tablets (specifically, the 103 Latin *defixiones* collected by Audollent in his corpus as well as another 22 items that were mostly published between 1904 and 1917).

⁷ See Besnier 1920, where the author compiled the Latin *defixiones* that Audollent had not included in DT (specifically those published by Olivieri in 1899) as well as all curses published between 1904 and 1920. This tallied up to a total of 61 additional texts. Some of these tablets were identified as *defixiones*, though subsequent work has shown that in fact they were not (e.g., the lead labels CIL XI, 6722, no. 1, 3–12, 14 and 17, which I examined in the year 2010 at the Museo Archeologico Nazionale dell’Umbria, concluding that they were not curse tablets).

⁸ Cf. García Ruiz 1967.

⁹ See Solin 1968: 23–31, where 44 Latin *defixiones*, three Greek curse tablets (nos. 40 and 44–45) and two *phylaktéria* (nos 3 and 43) are collected and arranged by provenance.

¹⁰ See the note published by Susini 1973: 139.

sheer number of new discoveries during the last third of the twentieth century. In 1979, just six years after these scholars announced their ambitious project, two large and extremely important caches of *defixiones* were discovered in the British sanctuaries of Sulis Minerva (Aquae Sulis/Bath) and Mercury (Uley), where 130 and 140 curses were found, respectively. These two finds alone drastically increased the project that Solin and Jordan had intended to undertake. Fortunately, R.S.O. Tomlin has dedicated years to the study and publication of these large and important collections.¹¹ Only four years after Tomlin's masterful edition of the curses from Aquae Sulis/Bath, J.G. Gager edited a book containing an interesting selection of mostly Greek curses, which brought the topic to a wider audience.¹²

But happily this was not the end, since then extraordinary discoveries continued: in 1999, excavators unearthed two more large caches of *defixiones* at both the sanctuary of Isis and Magna Mater (Mogontiacum/Mainz) and the fountain of Anna Perenna (Rome), both of which have been edited by J. Blänsdorf.¹³ Though smaller than the British collections, these two discoveries have proven exceedingly important.

These large discoveries have undoubtedly revolutionized and reinvigorated the study of *defixiones*, which have been the object of various studies and research projects since 2000. Notable scholarship includes the work of J. Tremel, who has studied agonistic curses, E. Eidinow, who has focused on Attic *defixiones* from a psychological perspective, and S. Sichert, who has collected the curses from North Africa and studied them in conjunction with the particular magical practices of their social and geographical context.¹⁴

B. Mees has analysed (though not always exercising an appropriate level of caution) the Celtic and Gaulish curses from Britain and Gaul, while F. Murano's masterful study has greatly improved our understanding of the Oscan curses.¹⁵ In a study of nearly 400 tablets, A. Kropp has provided a more global perspective on ancient cursing practices, paying attention to the language employed in

Latin *defixiones*, with a special interest in pragmatics.¹⁶ In a different vein, G. Németh has published 86 sketches that Audollent made while editing the North African tablets for *DT*.¹⁷ These sketches, which are housed in the regional archive of Puy-de-Dôme, had previously been unpublished and unedited. Accordingly, Németh's work has revealed a wealth of new details concerning the layout and iconography of these curses. Most recently, A. Alvar has published a study of the magical practices employed by slaves in the Roman world, while D. Urbanová has recently written a monograph on Latin *defixiones*, which seeks to distinguish the so-called 'prayers for justice' in a compilation of 309 curse tablets.¹⁸

This brings us to the present sylloge, which follows in Audollent's footsteps and collects 535 *defixiones* written in Latin, Oscan, Etruscan, Gaulish and Celtic from the Roman West. Traditionally, much of the scholarly effort has been dedicated to the study of the formulae and linguistics of the tablets. Nevertheless, in the present volume, these inscriptions are studied with a particular emphasis placed on the *defixiones*' archaeological and cultural contexts. Far from being monolithic, the practice of writing curse tablets changed and evolved over a millennium in the area that would become the Roman West. Recognizing this fluidity, this book aims to be a trustworthy source for scholars interested in the topic, offering not only an overview of the phenomenon but also an updated and reliable collection of texts.¹⁹ With this purpose in mind, and unlike the majority of scholars working on *defixiones* after Audollent, I have directly examined the texts whenever possible while compiling this sylloge. Luckily, most curse tablets that were discovered long ago remain legible,²⁰ and in many cases an autopsy (i.e., an in-person examination) has yielded new results that can improve our readings and understandings of the corpus.²¹ To conclude, the ambition of this sylloge is not to be just another compilation of texts, but rather a tool that clearly presents the evidence and is capable of generating further interest in this fascinating topic.

¹¹ For Bath, see Tomlin's masterful edition (1988a). Of the 140 tablets from Uley, which are generally in worse condition, see Tomlin's brief publication (1993a) as well as the individual editions of various curses which are annually published in the journal *Britannia* (for references, cf. 355–73). Currently, Tomlin is preparing a monograph dedicated to the curses from Uley.

¹² Cf. Gager 1992. The curse tablets, which are translated into English (no original Greek or Latin), are organized by content and accompanied by a brief commentary with relevant bibliography. The only 'downside' of the volume is that the editor focuses disproportionately on Greek texts, giving short shrift to Latin curses.

¹³ For the Mainz collection, see the magisterial edition of Blänsdorf 2012a. For the fountain of Anna Perenna (in general), see Piranomonte 2002 and 2015. Several of the curses have already been published by Blänsdorf in various publications (for references, cf. 19–47). The whole collection is the subject of a forthcoming monograph.

¹⁴ Tremel 2004 provides a collection of 100 tablets, which were written in both Greek and Latin and were mostly directed against charioteers, gladiators and *venatores*; Eidinow 2007 examines a corpus of 170 Greek curse tablets and compares them with the oracular questions and responses from the Dodona oracle; Sichert 2000: 865–939 collects 120 tablets written in Greek and Latin from North Africa.

¹⁵ Mees 2009 chapters 1–6 focuses on the Gaulish and Celtic inscriptions (both curses and other types of inscriptions); for the Oscan curse tablets, see Murano 2013.

¹⁶ See Kropp 2008. Her catalogue lists 578 tablets, 391 of which are subject to linguistic analysis.

¹⁷ See Németh 2013, which includes neither a reading nor transcription of the texts.

¹⁸ See Alvar 2017 and Urbanová 2018 (which is an English translation of the original in Czech, published in 2014).

¹⁹ Although the sylloge does not include curses published after summer 2018, new scholarly discussions of previously published texts have been included in the commentary and bibliography. For a fuller explanation of the inclusion criteria for the sylloge, see the Note to reader under section II. ²⁰ *Contra* Urbanová 2018: 13.

²¹ For the tablets that I have examined personally, not only have many readings of some texts been improved, but autopsy has also provided new important details about the curse's layout or iconography. Furthermore, this meticulous process has allowed me to discover that certain artefacts that have previously been classified as *defixiones* have actually been misidentified. Just to mention some examples, in addition to the lead tags included in Besnier 1920: nos 40–50 and 52 (cf. note 7), see also another label currently housed in Florence. The text, considered by Besnier 1920: no. 52, Kropp 2008: dfx 1.1.1/2 and Urbanová 2018: no. 2 as a *defixio*, is actually a label of an *officina plumbaria*, whose text reads: *M(arci) Ponti Secundi officina plum(baria)* (cf. Paolucci 1994: 106–07, *contra* Gordon 2019b: 423).