

A related effect of backward reading is the illusion that carts are central rather than circumstantial. By beginning with the premise that vehicles are necessarily signifiers of meaning, each text transforms into a meaning-making machine and each textual cart into a productive ‘gear’. But backward reading, in this analogy, causes the analysis to avoid studiously considering the device’s banality outside of the machine (i.e. real vehicles), its interchangeability within other machines (i.e. other narratives), or that in many cases this gear could be wholly replaced by another device (i.e. another means of conveyance) and the machine would only be minimally different.

While the shifting position of translations (from the body, to the footnotes, to none at all) is confusing, it is a mere quibble compared to the writing style’s impenetrable pretension. First, readers are pummelled by puns: every chapter and subheading is some play on words, as is nearly every verb of the preamble. Throughout the text, readers are overwhelmed by parentheticals: clever asides and innuendo played for effect rather than clarity. It seems H. imagines the book as a joyful dialogue between author and reader, filled with wit, quips, rejoinders and repartee. But as a reader I never get a word in, instead becoming increasingly annoyed with the author constantly interrupting himself. Worse still, this style mimics the method and treats the academic process like a plaything, a theatrical monologue rather than a collective scholarly endeavour. Perhaps this style was a homage to the rhetorical subject matter; but, if so, it arrives on stage like the *pilentum* of ‘hack dramas’ (p. 57) and leaves like the *plaustrum*, exiting empty (at best) before illumination.

Nonetheless, many aspects of the book remain valuable for reuse, specifically H.’s exceptionally keen eye for nuance over an impressive array of literary material. For example, future scholars might apply H.’s observations and other evidence within an explicitly comparative framework, one that parses the textual chronology more closely and which asks how details of form and function impact (or not) the interpretations of a particular vehicle. Such research might resemble the critical approaches to the labels applied to Roman domestic space. In this, H.’s extensive *index locorum* (greater than the bibliography) will be an indispensable starting point.

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ROMAN DEFIXIONES

SÁNCHEZ NATALÍAS (C.) *Sylloge of Defixiones from the Roman West. A Comprehensive Collection of Curse Tablets from the Fourth Century BCE to the Fifth Century CE*. In two volumes. (BAR International Series 3077.) Pp. xvi + viii + 575, ills, colour maps. Oxford: BAR Publishing, 2022. Paper, £126. ISBN: 978-1-4073-5931-1 (vol. 1), 978-1-4073-5932-8 (vol. 2), 978-1-4073-1532-4 (set).

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This volume is part of a long series of publications dedicated to *defixiones* released in the twenty-first century, including corpora, studies and publications of numerous partial

discoveries from a single locality. As a result, recent decades have seen previously neglected and highly specific epigraphic evidence – tablets with *defixiones* – finally receive the scholarly attention it deserves. This development has also undoubtedly been enhanced by major archaeological discoveries, for example in Britain (R. Tomlin, *The Curse Tablets* [1988]), Italy (J. Blänsdorf, *The Social Background* [2012]) and Germany (J. Blänsdorf, *Die defixionum tabellae* [2012]).

These inscriptional documents *sui generis*, mostly engraved on lead plates, were intended to influence negatively the life of cursed victims through supernatural forces. They reflect ancient people's ordinary lives, hopes, wishes, sorrows and religious ideas and thus provide a unique testimony of the time. They reveal people's innermost fears and efforts to avoid various risks and adversities – illness, hostility, injustice – or win over a beloved person, win a lawsuit or catch an unknown thief.

The reviewed book introduces the latest, quite voluminous, collection of Latin *defixiones* from the Latin West. It is S.N.'s *magnum opus*, containing 535 inscriptions, including not only Latin and Greek–Latin bilingual texts but also curses written in Oscan, Etruscan, Celtic and Gaelic. Greek curses from the same area were excluded from the sylloge, which is an understandable choice. However, it is a pity that S.N. could not include tablets originating from the African provinces (c. 88 curses) due to, in her words (p. 83), the lack of published visual material. These tablets from African provinces represent a specific, elaborate group that often includes an extensive magical apparatus. Thus, a rather important and original component of the corpus of *defixiones* preserved until today is missing from the sylloge. Nevertheless, the African curses are included in the statistical tables in the sylloge's first volume. The book can, to some extent, be regarded as the most extensive collection of *defixiones* currently in print, not taking into account *TheDeFix*, the electronic database of the University of Hamburg, which contains 1,272 Greek and 530 Latin *defixiones*.

Compared to a previous collection of curse tablets by A. Kropp (*Defixiones* [2008], incl. 382 curses) and studies by D. Urbanová (*The Latin Curse Tablets* [2018], incl. 309 curses), A. Kropp (*Magische Sprachverwendung* [2008]) and S. Chiarini (*Devotio malefica* [2021]), this sylloge focuses particularly on the epigraphic, archaeological and material aspects of *defixiones*, which the works previously cited have tended to neglect since they instead emphasised the tablets' linguistic, ritual, formulaic or content aspects. Significantly, and unlike those publications, S.N. incorporates facsimiles of individual tablets and photographs of selected tablets in the appendix. Moreover, the book appropriately fills a gap in current research and allows readers to get a closer, unbiased idea of what these artefacts look like, how and in what script they were inscribed, and what their archaeological context is. It is divided into two parts. The first part, concisely written, introduces readers to the subject of Latin *defixiones* in terms of their materiality – S.N. discusses the tablets' materials, text-engraving methods and general layout, including magical symbols and deposition contexts. Only two pages are devoted to the *formulae defigendi*, a brief categorisation of curse types, invoked deities and the geographical distribution of curse texts. In addition, S.N. presents a number of interesting statistics (eleven tables) relevant in the context and four maps showing the temporal distribution of *defixiones*.

The corpus itself is structured geographically according to the *CIL*, i.e. by province and region. The further subdivision of inscriptions originating from a single location is based on the earliest first edition of an inscription from the site. For evidence found in a single broader area and published in a given year, the site's modern toponym decides the order – this may result in a somewhat obscured relation to previous site-specific collections of inscriptions, which are familiar to readers.

Each entry includes basic information on the tablet, such as its site and archaeological context, material, dating, current location and measurements, if these are known. It continues with a reading of the inscription using the Leiden apparatus but without punctuation (for a detailed discussion of this problem, see E. Dickey's review in *BMCR* 2022.10.38). Most inscriptions are accompanied by facsimiles, which S.N. sometimes prepared herself, but more often took from previous publications. The inscriptions are presented with translations, either adopted from other sources, modified or completely original. The bibliographical data relating to each inscription are given at the head of the inscription; they are not always complete but are sufficient for basic orientation. Additionally, for each inscription S.N. adds comprehensive commentary focused mainly on the circumstances of the tablet's discovery, its archaeological context and a description of the inscription, including orthographic and phonetic features. S.N. also discusses various aspects of the tablets' content, identifies the type of curse and briefly discusses how its interpretation has developed. Occasionally, she quotes, although rather selectively and inconsistently, those authors who advanced the reading or interpretation of an inscription in their partial studies; older interpretations are not mentioned.

In this way, S.N. provides readers with a basis for their own work, even though one might object to various shortcomings in individual commentaries. For instance, for No. 51 a facsimile by L. Borsari is used although there is a more recent one (F. Luciani et al., *Epigraphica* 81 [2019]); for Nos 518 and 497 there are points to be disputed concerning the interpretation of the inscriptions; and for No. 492 the facsimiles of sides A and B are confused. The bibliography is unfortunately rather incomplete and, for some authors, highly selective; an older facsimile sometimes does not correspond to the stated reading of the inscription, see No. 62. The work contains minor typographical errors and omissions, not so much in the actual inscription texts as in the accompanying texts (for missing parts of the translation from Spanish to English, see e.g. No. 51). Some inscriptions do not have facsimiles, partly due to the tablets being currently unavailable. Unfortunately, facsimiles of tablets from the Fountain of Anna Perenna in Rome are also missing, although these exist and have been published (Nos 19–23, 25–41). The volume includes a concordance with other inscriptional collections (Nos 497–509).

The book is a welcome contribution and enrichment for the scholarly community thanks to its innovative, hitherto neglected, approach to these specific inscriptions, especially in terms of the tablets' materiality (material used, shape, writing), the archaeological context, the practices associated with the curse ritual (manipulation), the belief in the power of gods and demons, and the refined geographical and temporal distribution of the surviving curses in the western territory of the Roman Empire, not to mention the large number of collected texts. The publication of the facsimiles of the curse tablets is a large advantage, because it allows readers to become comfortably acquainted with a number of texts, especially previously published ones, which are difficult to find today; the selected photographs at the end of the second part (pp. 517–65) are also a welcome contribution. Considering the enormous work and effort that must have gone into the production of this voluminous and reader-friendly book, S.N. deserves our respect.

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