



ANCIENT GREEK CURSE TABLETS

LAMONT (J. L.) *In Blood and Ashes. Curse Tablets and Binding Spells in Ancient Greece*. Pp. xxviii + 404, ills, maps. New York: Oxford University Press, 2023. Cased, £71, US\$110. ISBN: 978-0-19-751778-9. doi:10.1017/S0009840X24000167

This monograph provides an extremely detailed and interesting analysis of curses from 750 to 250 BCE, is the first work to explicitly focus on the ‘development and dissemination of cursing’, and fills several gaps in previous scholarship. Throughout, there is good use of illustrations, which are often difficult to come by in many books on curse tablets. It is particularly valuable to have images of the tablets alongside drawings. The inclusion of hitherto unpublished translations of tablets is extremely important to the continued development of the discipline. The translations are well done and considered. It is, however, a shame that there was no attempt to unify the conventions used when reproducing texts from previous editions.

The book is divided into three parts: ‘The Beginnings of Greek Curse-Writing Rituals’; ‘The Early Spread of Curse Technologies, 500–250 BCE’; and ‘Orality and Text: Curse Practice in the Realm of Binding Spells and *Arai*’. It places curse tablets within their proper wider context, with issues of geopolitics, the import of silver, the epigraphic habit, and what other documents were being inscribed upon being brought in to build up a picture of how the creation of curse tablets fitted into the wider cultural context. This will prove especially helpful to those engaging with curse tablets for the first time. At points the book uses curse tablets as a springboard from which to engage with a myriad of different topics and issues.

The discussion of curse effigies (*kolossoi* or formally ‘voodoo dolls’) in the introduction is particularly strong; the levels of research are impressive; and the ideas presented are compelling. This work fills an important gap in previous scholarship. The approach is systematic, analysing the surviving figurines and where they are found.

Part 1 examines curse tablets from the cities of western Sicily as our earliest surviving curse tablets. The first chapter, ‘Sicilian Beginnings’, primarily focuses on tablets from Selinous rather than encompassing examples from Sicily more broadly. Despite this decision being explained, it would have been interesting and illuminating to include examples from Sicily more broadly. S. Bianchi Mancini’s forthcoming monograph *Visible and Invisible Powers: Law and Legal Curses in Ancient Sicily* (vel sim.) will hopefully satisfy this curiosity and provide a more comprehensive analysis of Sicilian curse tablets and the broader context in which they should be considered. Obviously, much of the future research on Sicilian tablets hangs on the publication of the recently discovered examples from the Buonormello necropolis.

As regards the analysis of the inscriptions on the tablets, the nuances highlighted are good, such as the discussion of the *diple* symbol in Chapter 1. As well as evaluating the possible meanings that can be ascribed to the symbol, the argument is taken further: ‘The use of diacritics and annotations – signs of advanced written competency – may signal the role of professional scribes in early curse-writing rituals’ (p. 32).

When presenting the tablets from the Malophoros and the Meilichios precincts, the level of technical detail included in the description of the contexts into which the curses were deposited will be extremely helpful for readers being introduced to these tablets for the first time. However, the suggestion that the Malophoros precinct may have hosted a Thesmophoria festival (p. 37) is perhaps too strong. The item cited (G. Sfameni

Gasparro, 'Politica, Religione e Culti', in: N. Bonacasa [ed.], *Lo Stile Severo in Sicilia: Museo Archeologico Regionale, Palermo, 10 Febbraio – 30 Settembre 1990* [1990], pp. 43–54) only suggests that some archaeological finds from the Malophoros precinct have some similarities with those found in sanctuaries of Demeter Thesmophoros; it does not directly state that the Malophoros precinct may have hosted a Thesmophoria festival.

The discussion of the Selinountine curse tablets as being 'explicitly and self-consciously aware of their written nature' (p. 42) adds a layer of complexity to arguments that the practice of creating written curse tablets developed from an oral tradition. This work nicely synthesises and builds upon earlier scholarship to present clearly the nuances of this argument. The idea that the creation of curse tablets in Sicily was an elite phenomenon is well evidenced.

In Chapter 2, 'Why Western Sicily?', arguments for the Phoenicians as a cultural bridge, which allowed ancient Near Eastern practices to spread to the Greek world, are assessed and convincingly rebuffed. As L. states: 'There are similarities, to be sure, but many ancient and modern cultures have independently developed ritual practices which involve the use of spells, incantations, figurines, nails, animals, and other *materia magica*; such rites seem not to be cross-cultural, ubiquitous, and deeply human, and in this sense we need not expect external influence for the emergence of curse rituals in the Greek world' (p. 59).

Part 2 is particularly good. The work in Chapter 3 on the spread of cursing rituals from coastal Sicily to the Greek and Oscan communities of the Italian mainland is especially interesting. Often, analysis of such tablets falls through the gaps created when scholarship only works with tablets in certain languages or from certain locations.

Three case studies are presented in Chapter 3: the Italian mainland, the northern Black Sea Coast and the Kingdom of Macedonia; these are well chosen, casting more light on areas that have been less focused upon in previous scholarship. In particular, the linguistic analysis of the Greek text is useful and interesting for the Macedonian tablets. The links drawn between different verb usage in different locations add depth to the analysis and mean that the chapter avoids becoming fragmented, with various examples and locations presented with no clear relationships between them. These links are useful for drawing in ideas of the creation of tablets by professional ritual practitioners versus that of non-expert individuals.

Chapter 4 focuses on 'Athenian Curse Practice', and there is a sense that this section is what the book has been building towards, particularly via the sections on Sicilian curse tablets. The discussion of the issues when dating the earliest Athenian curse tablets and effigies is interesting and runs counter to the generally accepted and widely cited date of c. 460–450 BCE. There is a direct challenge to the view that the emergence of Athenian curse-writing rituals was connected to 'shifts in collective anxieties or a new sense of risk after the Peloponnesian War'. L. suggests that the emergence is 'more to do with broader epigraphic habits and contemporary incursion of writing within the litigation process' (pp. 186–7). A small section in this chapter (p. 180) includes information on lead isotope analysis, which, aside from offering interesting extra information, will provide important evidence for future work considering the spread of curse tablets and those creating them.

The book makes an important contribution to scholarship with the presentation of new translations and highlighting understudied examples for a broader readership. The inclusion of discussions of 'ritual speech and organic materials' in curse practice means the book contains a full analysis of many aspects of cursing. The work contains detailed

notes, and it is a shame they are confined to endnotes, particularly when they contain discussions of nuances in possible translation.

University of Exeter

CHARLOTTE SPENCE
c.spence2@exeter.ac.uk