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ANCIENT GREEK MAGIC & RELIGION

EDITED BY

CHRISTOPHER A. FARAONE

DIRK OBBINK

Magika Hiera

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EDITED BY
Christopher A. Faraone
Dirk Obbink

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The Agonistic Context of Early Greek Binding Spells

Christopher A. Faraone

A flattened lead "gingerbread man" now in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris is deceptively benign at first glance; closer examination reveals two brief texts inscribed at different points on its surface:[1]

καταγράφω Εἰσιάδα τὴν Α⟨ὐ⟩τοκλέας
πρὸς τὸν Ἑρμῆ τὸν κάτοχον.
κάτεχε αὐτὴ⟨ν⟩ παρὰ σα⟨υ⟩τόν.

καταδεσμεύω Εἰσιάδα πρὸς τὸν Ἑρμῆ
τὸν κάτοχον· [χ]ῆρες,
πόδες Εἰσιάδος, σῶμα ὅλον.

I register[2] Isias, the daughter of A(u)toclea, before Hermes the Restrainer. Restrain her by your side!

I bind Isias before Hermes the Restrainer, the hands, the feet of Isias, the entire body.

Apparently found at Carystus on the island of Euboea, these two messages date to the fourth century B.C. and are good examples of a uniquely Greek form of cursing known as a κατάδεσμος, or *defixio*, terms that I shall use interchangeably to mean "binding spell."[3] Nearly six hundred Greek *defixiones* have been published to date and more than four hundred others have been unearthed and are awaiting study.[4] The earliest examples are found in Sicily, Olbia, and Attica and date to the fifth century B.C.; by the second century A.D. they begin turning up in every corner of the Greco-Roman world. In the classical period they are usually inscribed on small sheets of lead, which are folded up, pierced with a bronze or iron nail,[5] and then either buried with the corpse of one of the untimely dead (ἄωροι)[6] or placed in chthonic sanctuaries.[7] In later periods they are more often placed in underground bodies of water (e.g., wells, baths, fountains).[8] Sometimes the findspot indicates the target of the curse in use; *defixiones* aimed at charioteers, for example, have been discovered beneath the starting gates and amidst the ruins of the *spinae* in late Roman hippodromes.[9]

My aim is to provide an analysis of the function and social context of the κατάδεσμοι in early Greek society. The approach will be twofold: I shall (1) analyse the various formulas used in the binding curses and demonstrate that they originally aimed at binding but not destroying the victim and (2) suggest that an

agonistic relationship was the traditional context for the use of *defixiones* and that they were not employed as after-the-fact measures of vengeful spite but rather as effective "preemptive strikes" against a formidable foe in anticipation of a possible or even probable future defeat.

THE BINDING FORMULAE

From the available evidence it is still somewhat unclear whether these binding rituals are a traditional form of self-help to which the ancient Greeks themselves turned in times of crisis or whether a professional "magician" was employed to perform the ritual in their stead. The act of flattening out a soft piece of lead and then scratching a name into it certainly did not require much more effort or technical skill than inscribing a potsherd for a vote of ostracism.[10] On the other hand, Plato refers clearly to peripatetic magicians who perform *κατάδεσμοι* for a price (*Resp.* 364c), and there are several well-documented instances (albeit dating to the Roman period or later) that involve caches of *defixiones* mass-produced by the same individual(s) working from a formulary.[11] Four bound lead "voodoo" dolls—each enclosed within a lead box inscribed with a binding curse—were recently discovered in two different graves in the Kerameikos; dating to circa 400 B.C., they seem to have been produced by the same person(s), perhaps providing the earliest extant material evidence for the professional magician at work in Greece.[12]

The actual layout of an inscribed *κατάδεσμος* occasionally bears close similarities to other written forms of public or private communication. A few Attic examples from the early fourth century, for example, consist solely of names designated in the formal manner (i.e., with patronymic and demotic) and laid out neatly in columns (e.g., *DTA* 55 or SGD 48); in two cases this imitation of contemporary public monuments is made explicit by the heading *ἀγαθῆ τυχῆ · θεοί* (SGD 19 and *DTA* 158). At other times the tablet is referred to as an epistle sent to a chthonic god or a restless *nekydaimon;* such a form would naturally suggest itself to a Greek, since lead seems to have been a common medium for letter writing in the earlier periods.[13] The efficacy of a few early Attic curses may hinge on the corpse's ability to read the tablet placed in his grave and act accordingly.[14] One curse from Piraeus (*DTA* 103) reads, "I send this letter to Hermes and Persephone"; while another (*DTA* 102) takes the form of a bill of lading: "I send a letter to the daemons and Persephone bearing NN (name of person to be supplied)."[15] In at least three cases, the inscription of the names of chthonic gods on the outside of the rolled-up tablet may be meant to imitate the method in which ordinary letter scrolls were regularly addressed.[16]

These parallels to other forms of written documents are infrequent and seem to be idiosyncratic inventions or variations that probably do not point to the origin of this uniquely Greek form of cursing.[17] Some scholars, in fact, have argued that the *defixio* was originally a purely verbal curse, although I prefer to think that both the spoken formula and the attendant gesture (i.e., the distortion of lead, wax, or some other pliable material) developed simultaneously.[18] A cache of some forty blank tablets, rolled up and pierced with nails, may suggest that the name of the victim and

the cursing formulae could merely be recited over the tablet while it was being twisted and perforated.[19] Another clue is the fact that the earliest terms used to refer to *defixiones* do not allude to the act of writing;[20] a fifth-century Sicilian curse tablet (SGD 91) refers to itself as an εὐχά ("prayer" or "boast") and Plato (*Resp.* 364c) speaks generally of binding spells called κατάδεσμοι. The ὕμνος δέσμιος (lit., "binding song") of the Erinyes in Aeschylus' *Eumenides* seems to be a purely verbal form of *defixio;* it aims at binding the verbal and mental faculties of Orestes in hopes of inhibiting his performance at his forthcoming murder trial.[21] Indeed the very fact that the great majority of the earliest Sicilian and Attic *defixiones* consist solely of lists of names strongly suggests that a verb of binding was uttered aloud sometime during the ritual and that the later development of more-complex, written formulae reflects a desire to inscribe more and more of the spoken charm on the tablet, a process that was undoubtedly accelerated by the gradual spread of literacy in the classical period.

The Greek κατάδεσμοι that mention only the name of the intended victim steadily decrease in frequency from the classical age until their total disappearance in the first century A.D. The complex formulae become correspondingly more popular in the later periods[22] and can be divided roughly into four groups:[23]

1. *Direct binding formula.* The *defigens* (lit., "the one who binds") employs a first-person singular verb that acts directly upon the victims or specified parts of their bodies, for instance, καταδῶ τὸν δεῖνα ("I bind NN").
2. *Prayer formula.* Gods or daemons are invoked and urged by a second-person imperative to perform similar acts of binding, for instance, κατέχετε τὸν δεῖνα ("Restrain NN!").
3. *Wish formula.* The victim is the subject of a third person optative, for instance, ὁ δεῖνα ἀτελὴς εἴη ("May NN be unsuccessful!").
4. *Similia similibus formula.* This type employs a persuasive analogy, for instance, "As this corpse is cold and lifeless, in the same way may NN become cold and lifeless."

The direct binding formula (no. 1) is best described as a form of performative utterance that is accompanied by a ritually significant act, either the distortion and perforation of a lead tablet or (more rarely) the binding of the hands and legs of a small effigy. Often various bodily parts or personal possessions are listed alongside the person's name as more specific targets, for instance, *DTA* 52 (Attic, third century B.C.): "I bind Mnesithides and the tongue, work, and soul of Mnesithides." The most common elaboration of the direct binding formula is the addition of the name(s) of a deity or deities who appear as witnesses or overseers of the act, for instance *DTA* 91 (Attic, third-century B.C.): "I bind Ophelion and Katheris before (πρός) Hermes Chthonios and Hermes Katochos." Most of the other verbs used in the first-person (e.g. κατατίθημι, παραδίδωμι or καταγράφω), like ἀπο- and ἐγγράφω on the early Sicilian tablets, seem to be legal or technical terms that shift responsibility for the binding to the divine sphere;[24] thus the *defixio* that reads simply, καταδίδωμι τὸν δεῖνα ("I assign NN") is probably shorthand for the full expression that would include a "prayer formula" as well, such as on the text from