Binding Across Borders

Continuity, Change, and Local Adaptation in Ancient Curse Tablet Practice

Curse tablets are inscribed objects made to affect the actions or welfare of another person, or occasionally an animal, through a physical medium and supernatural means. Most survivors are thin sheets of lead (De Blasio 2024, 54). Ancient Greeks called such objects *katadesmoi*. Modern scholars also use *defixiones*, a term derived from Latin (De Blasio 2024, 53-54). Lead predominates, though examples on other metals and also on pottery survive (De Blasio 2024, 62). Lead was cheap and easy to work, and its coldness and weight were associated with sickness or death (De Blasio 2024, 54). Surviving tablets are often found folded, rolled, or pierced (Sánchez Natalías 2022b, 31-35). Most examples have been found in graves, chthonic sanctuaries or water below ground (De Blasio 2024, 55). Writing is only one part of the evidence. The treatment of the object and the deposition can be equally informative.

The known corpus runs from late sixth-century Sicily into the late imperial period and spans widely separated parts of the Greek and Roman worlds (De Blasio 2024, 54; Urbanová 2017, 57-59). Curse-tablet practices therefore persisted for centuries, yet the surviving forms vary. Drawing on case studies from Sicily, Attica, Roman North Africa, Mainz and Britannia, this essay argues that curse-tablet practice remained recognisable across space and time, but that chronological development alone cannot account for variation in the surviving evidence. Local disputes and ritual settings better explain the forms that the practice took in each region.

The surviving corpus comprises roughly 1,600 ancient curse tablets, about 600 of them in Latin, but deliberate concealment and accidental discovery mean that these represent only a fraction of those once produced (Urbanová 2017, 57). Preservation and discovery vary greatly between regions, so surviving totals cannot be treated as direct measures of ancient practice. Nor can the evidence be fitted into a simple progression from Greek rites to increasingly elaborate Roman magic. The early Sicilian material is already complex, while the Attic evidence connects curse writing with legal disputes and commercial activity. Roman provincial practice also resists a single sequence. African

tablets differ substantially from those found in Britain and Mainz, although the evidence overlaps in date, as Figure 1 shows. The comparison therefore gives greatest weight to observable features, particularly handwriting and the physical treatment of the objects. Interpretations of motive or spoken performance remain more tentative.

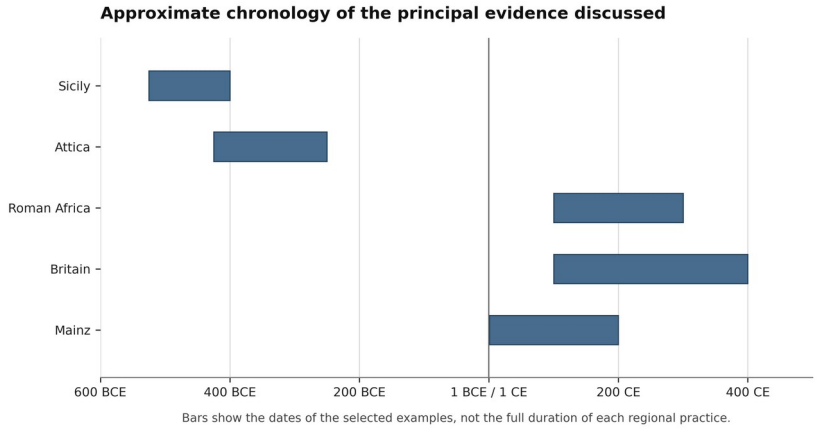


Figure 1. Approximate chronology of the principal evidence discussed. Bars represent the selected examples, not the full duration of each regional practice. *Sources: De Blasio 2024, 54; Curbera and Lamont 2023, 312; Urbanová 2017, 62, 77-80; Franek and Urbanová 2019b, 200.*

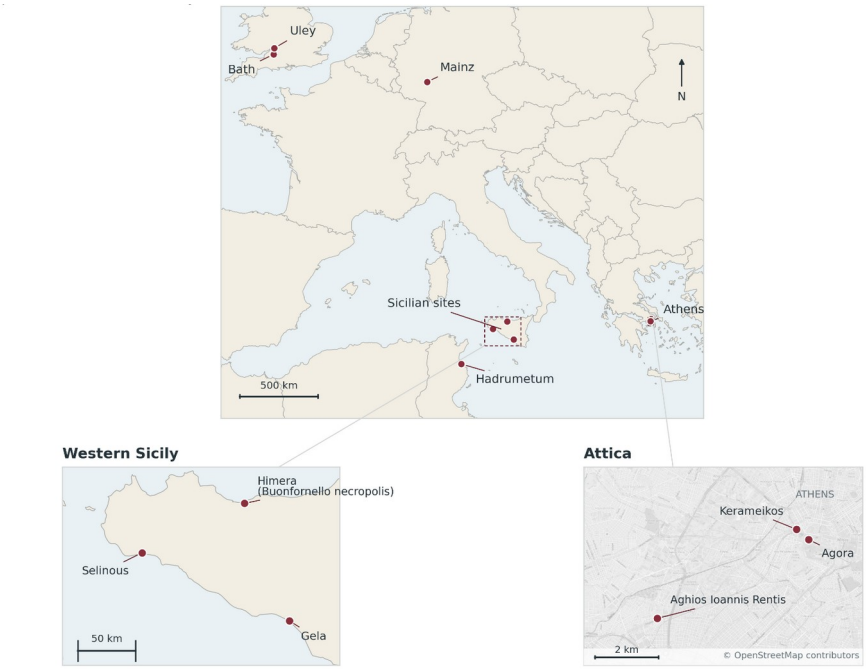


Figure 2. Locations of the principal curse-tablet case studies discussed in this essay, with detailed insets of western Sicily and Attica. *Map compiled by the author using site data from Pleiades (Bagnall et al. 2016), Lamont (2021b) for Piraeus Street 131–133 at Aghios Ioannis Rentis, and Landeshauptstadt Mainz (n.d.) for the sanctuary of Isis and Mater Magna. Base geometry from Natural Earth (n.d.). Attica street data © OpenStreetMap contributors (n.d.), available under the Open Database Licence.*

The early Sicilian evidence argues against the idea that curse-tablet practice began simply. One late sixth-century BCE tablet from Selinous asks that an opponent's "words and deeds" fail, while another binds a man's tongue together with those of his advocates (Lamont 2023, 24–25; Jordan 1985, 175). At the fifth-century BCE Buonfornello necropolis at Himera, excavators recovered fifty-four tablets, about forty of which had been bent together and secured with an iron nail (Lamont 2023, 21). This assemblage shows that physical binding formed part of the practice by the fifth century BCE. Some tablets give only names, perhaps because the performative verbs were spoken rather than written (De Blasio 2024, 55–57). The columnar arrangement of Sicilian texts may also have imitated civic registers or public lists of debtors and offenders (Gordon, cited in Lamont 2023, 32–34). Neither interpretation can be confirmed archaeologically: the spoken words themselves do not survive, and visual resemblance cannot establish a tablet's precise purpose. Even so, both suggest that the surviving inscription may record only part of the rite.

A reused lead sheet from Gela, dated to about 475–450 BCE, shows that the same object could carry both a commercial record and a curse. One side names Apellis as guarantor for a cattle transaction. The reverse carries a curse against rival chorēgoi and seeks victory for Eunikos (Jordan 1985, 173–74; Lamont 2023, 51–54). This reuse reflects a western Sicilian "epigraphic habit" in which lead carried ritual texts alongside civic and financial writing (Lamont 2023, 71). Selinous and Himera have yielded the earliest known Greek curse tablets (De Blasio 2024, 54), but the earliest surviving examples do not necessarily identify where the practice began. Because the practice cannot be traced securely to the cities that founded these colonies, an independent western Sicilian development remains plausible (Lamont 2023, 55–57).

At Selinous, curse tablets were recovered from cemeteries and extra-mural precincts associated with Demeter Malophoros, Hekate and Zeus Meilichios (Lamont

2023, 35–47). A sacred law from the city prescribed purification from an elasteros, a hostile power associated with the dead (Lamont 2023, 72–73). The law does not specifically mention curse tablets and cannot establish how they were made or used. It does, however, show that pollution and dangerous encounters with the dead received recognised ritual responses at Selinous. Read alongside the tablets, the law helps establish the religious context of their deposition without proving that purification and cursing served the same purpose. The Sicilian evidence therefore shows that deliberate physical treatment was part of curse-tablet practice near the beginning of the surviving record.

In Attica, curse tablets were used in a competitive legal and commercial setting. About 180 tablets are known from the area between the Agora and Kerameikos. The corpus begins in the late fifth century BCE, and the tablets have been recovered from graves, wells, houses and workshops (Curbera and Lamont 2023, 312). One interpretation treats classical bindings chiefly as interventions in competition, especially lawsuits (Faraone 1991, 6–20; 2002, 77–92). Another emphasizes danger and uncertainty, suggesting that people cursed when they felt exposed to harm (Eidinow 2007, 3–5). These explanations are compatible. Competition identifies what was at stake, while perceived risk helps explain why someone might seek supernatural control. A familiar formula, however, cannot establish function by itself. Tongue-binding often suits litigation, but similar language could be used outside the courts (Curbera and Lamont 2023, 316). Function must therefore be determined from context rather than formula alone.

Naming patterns show how a curse could extend beyond the principal opponent to other people involved in the dispute. Judicial curses often name the principal adversary together with people assisting that opponent (Eidinow 2007, 173–85), while three-quarters of the commercial curses in Venticinque's study name several people (2022, 54–55). A third-century BCE group illustrates this pattern. Five tablets, probably deposited

together, name twenty-six individuals. The shopkeepers Ophelion and Olympos recur alongside relatives and other associates (Venticinque 2022, 66). The repeated names and probable shared deposit suggest an attack on a business and social network rather than several unrelated curses (Venticinque 2022, 66–67). The pattern of targets reflects the structure of the conflict: commercial success depended on relationships, so those relationships also became targets.

Five tablets from a pyre-grave at Piraeus Street 131–133 in modern Aghios Ioannis Rentis, outside the westernmost Athenian Long Wall, provide evidence that some Attic curses were produced by a specialist. Dated to about 400–375 BCE, the tablets were cut to similar shapes and inscribed in the same hand (Lamont 2021b, 76–80). Their related hexameter formulae suggest that one writer adapted a model for different clients. Corrections and grammatical irregularities strengthen this interpretation (Lamont 2021b, 79–87). The metre and deictic language may derive from an oral model (Lamont 2021b, 76–77). This interpretation rests on linguistic inference, whereas the shared handwriting and similar construction of the tablets can be observed directly. At roughly the same time, Plato described itinerant priests and diviners offering binding spells for payment (Republic, 364b–e). His portrayal is hostile and cannot establish how common such services were, but it shows that binding spells were associated with paid specialists in the fourth century BCE. The cache provides material evidence that a skilled writer produced several related tablets. Neither the cache nor Plato’s passage shows that professional production was typical of Attic cursing.

Later curse tablets from Roman North Africa form a distinctive group. Nearly every known Latin agonistic curse comes from the region, and some tablets appear to have been produced in batches by local magical workshops (Urbanová 2017, 62). A third-century CE tablet from Hadrumetum shows what this form of cursing could look like. One face depicts a bearded daemon standing on a ship and holding an urn and torch. Ten magical words and the names of horses are written on the ship. The reverse curses named charioteers and horses belonging to the green and white circus factions

(Urbanová 2017, 62). Its design integrates image and text within a single composition. The tablet cannot establish workshop production by itself. Evidence for batch production comes from the wider corpus rather than the Hadrumetum object alone (Urbanová 2017, 62). Across the African corpus, texts also often use complex formulae and magical signs, while some combine Greek and Latin scripts (Urbanová 2017, 77–78). The surviving material is therefore distinctive in both subject matter and written form.

British evidence provides a contemporary contrast with Roman North Africa. Of approximately 270 tablets found in Britain, about 160 have been published, and more than one hundred of these seek justice against thieves. Most come from the sanctuaries at Bath and Uley, dedicated respectively to Sulis Minerva and Mercury (Urbanová 2017, 78–79). The British tablets date from the first to fifth centuries CE, with most belonging to the second to fourth centuries. They therefore overlap directly with the third-century tablet from Hadrumetum. Many other British curses consist of short name lists without the magical words, daemon names or signs common in the African material (Urbanová 2017, 78–79). This contrast shows that Hadrumetum represents a regional form of agonistic cursing rather than a later stage through which every province passed.

In a survey limited to Latin thief-curses, tablets from Britannia account for eighty-six of 106 examples, many from the sanctuary deposits at Bath and Uley (Sánchez Natalías 2022a, 95–96). Whether these should be called “prayers for justice” remains disputed. Versnel as discussed by Sánchez Natalías, distinguished open appeals that named a wrong from what he called “proper” curses, although he acknowledged that some texts combined both forms (Sánchez Natalías 2022a, 90). Sánchez Natalías retains the label for acts of vengeance after a crime but rejects a rigid division between prayer and curse (Sánchez Natalías 2022a, 91–92). This broader definition fits the British evidence, in which petitioners used sanctuary practice and Roman ideas of ownership to demand punishment. The texts therefore belong within curse practice, but their form reflects local legal and religious conventions.

One of the thief-curses from Uley shows how a petitioner could use claims of ownership to involve local deities in the recovery of stolen property. A woman named Saturnina divided her stolen cloth into three equal shares, assigning one to Mercury, another to Silvanus and retaining the final share for herself (Sánchez Natalías 2022a, 98). Since theft did not extinguish her ownership under Roman law, she could transfer an interest in the missing property (Sánchez Natalías 2022a, 97). Other British tablets describe similar transfers using forms of the verb “to give” (Sánchez Natalías 2022a, 97). Sánchez Natalías compares Saturnina’s arrangement to a votum, a vow in which divine fulfilment normally created an obligation to provide the promised gift. Saturnina instead gave the gods their shares before the cloth was recovered (Sánchez Natalías 2022a, 100–102). The theft had therefore become partly their concern. The wording of the petition and its sanctuary setting show how Roman ideas of ownership could be adapted to a coercive appeal for divine intervention.

The British evidence also varies in material and production. Two tablets are made of tin, and six from Bath are alloys containing more than ninety per cent tin (Sánchez Natalías 2022b, 11–12). Composition alone cannot reveal whether tin was chosen for ritual reasons or for practical considerations such as cost and availability. Handwriting offers firmer evidence about production. Of roughly 130 tablets found at Bath, only two appear to have been written by the same person (Sánchez Natalías 2022a, 96). This differs from the Athenian group attributed to one writer and the African evidence for workshop batches (Lamont 2021b, 76–87; Urbanová 2017, 62, 77–78). The Bath tablets nevertheless share formulae despite having many different writers. Small variations suggest that knowledge of the practice circulated without becoming fully standardised (Sánchez Natalías 2022a, 96). Common phrases may have circulated through memory or written models without a single workshop controlling their use.

Table 1 compares this evidence with the other regional cases and summarises the main limitation attached to each interpretation.

Table 1. Regional evidence, its contribution to the argument and its principal limitation.

Region and period	Evidence used in the argument	Interpretive limit
Sicily late sixth to fifth centuries BCE	Early legal and agonistic texts, name lists, bent sheets and nailing show linguistic and physical complexity (Lamont 2023, 21, 24-25; Jordan 1985, 175).	The earliest surviving examples do not establish the place of invention. Spoken elements and exact motives remain inferential (De Blasio 2024, 55-57; Lamont 2023, 55-57).
Attica late fifth to third centuries BCE	Legal and commercial networks appear beside varied object treatments. One coherent cache supports specialist production (Lamont 2021a, 88-95; Lamont 2021b, 76-87).	Formulae cannot determine function by themselves. Reuse and redeposition mean that a final findspot may differ from the first ritual setting (Curbera and Lamont 2023, 316, 322-323).
Roman Africa mainly second to third centuries CE	A Hadrumetum tablet combines a daemon image with magical words and named circus competitors. The wider African corpus supports batch production (Urbanová 2017, 62, 77-78).	One object cannot prove workshop authorship. Circus spectacles occurred across the empire, so the African concentration cannot define the full ancient distribution (Urbanová 2017, 62).
Britain first to fifth centuries CE	Thief-curses adapted ownership and votive practice. Numerous hands at Bath used recognisable formulae without full standardisation (Sánchez Natalías 2022a, 95-102).	Bath and Uley dominate the sample. Metal composition alone cannot show whether material choices were ritual or practical (Urbanová 2017, 78-79; Sánchez Natalías 2022b, 11-12).
Mainz first to second centuries CE	Writers used analogies drawn from the Galli and the sanctuary of Mater Magna to specify punishment (Franek and Urbanová 2019b, 184-188).	A common workshop or practicioner is possible, but the clear evidence establishes shared cultic imagery rather than identical authorship (Franek and Urbanová 2019b, 193, 200).

Mainz provides a particularly clear example of local adaptation. First- and second-century CE tablets from the sanctuary of Mater Magna and drew upon the physical properties and possible ritual treatment of lead, as well as practices associated with the cult. One example asks that the limbs of Placida and Sacra melt just as the lead will melt (Franek and Urbanová 2019a, 35). Franek and Urbanová also report Blänsdorf's proposal that these tablets were thrown into the sanctuary's sacrificial fire, although they leave open whether the burning was literal or symbolic (2019a, 35). Another uses a different material analogy: just as the tablet can never bloom, neither should Prima, the target of an apparent rivalry-in-love curse (Franek and Urbanová 2019a, 36). Four prayers for justice from the same sanctuary draw more directly upon its cult practices (Franek and Urbanová 2019b, 184–185). One asks that Gemella, accused of stealing bracelets, cut herself as the Galli, the priests of Mater Magna, cut themselves (Franek and Urbanová 2019b, 185). Another transfers the priests' cutting to the target's social standing and ability to conduct business, then compares his decline to a tree withering in the sanctuary (Franek and Urbanová 2019b, 187–188). Franek and Urbanová consider it likely that these shared

features originated in one Mainz workshop or with a single practitioner (2019b, 200). Their shared location and date support this interpretation, but do not establish common authorship. The evidence shows more securely that the sanctuary's cult shaped the language of punishment, while the properties and possible treatment of the tablets helped define the harm requested.

The comparison shows that curse-tablet practice remained recognisable across widely separated regions and many centuries, but the surviving evidence does not support a simple chronological progression. Sicilian tablets already combined legal language with bending and nailing. Attic evidence connected cursing with legal and commercial disputes while revealing more than one form of production. Later provincial evidence was no more uniform. The Hadrumetum tablet applied curse writing to circus rivalry. British petitioners framed demands for punishment through sanctuary practice and claims of ownership. At Mainz, the language and treatment of the tablets drew upon the rituals of Mater Magna and Isis. These cases show that the nature of a dispute and the religious setting in which a tablet was produced and deposited shaped its wording and physical treatment. Chronology remains important, but it cannot explain the complexity of the earliest evidence or the differences between contemporary provincial traditions. Curse-tablet practice therefore remained recognisable through its use of written and material constraint, even as communities adapted it to local needs.

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