

SEU GEN(TILI)S SEU CH(R)ISTIANUS: THE BATH CURSE TABLETS AND THE CHRISTIAN IN PAGAN SPACES

Charlotte Spence

Abstract

This chapter focuses on a single case study, Tab. Sulis 98, from the late third century CE discovered in the Roman Baths at Bath, UK. This lead curse tablet is potentially the earliest inscribed evidence for Christianity from Britain. This chapter aims to illustrate that engaging with curse tablets allows for an analysis of how personal decision-making can demonstrate the existence of an early Christian group in this location, through othering, and how broader socio-religious experiences can impact upon interactions with a chosen divine figure.

Keywords

Early Christianity; magic; religion; Roman Britain; curses; curse tablets; pagan; Christian.

DOI: 10.22618/TP.CSLA.2026.388.cs

SEU GEN(TILI)S SEU CH(R)ISTIANUS: THE BATH CURSE TABLETS AND THE CHRISTIAN IN PAGAN SPACES

Charlotte Spence*

Abstract

This chapter focuses on a single case study, Tab. Sulis 98, from the late third century CE discovered in the Roman Baths at Bath, UK. This lead curse tablet is potentially the earliest inscribed evidence for Christianity from Britain. This chapter aims to illustrate that engaging with curse tablets allows for an analysis of how personal decision-making can demonstrate the existence of an early Christian group in this location, through othering, and how broader socio-religious experiences can impact upon interactions with a chosen divine figure.

Keywords

Early Christianity; magic; religion; Roman Britain; curses; curse tablets; pagan; Christian.

I. Introduction

As has been illustrated through the eclectic contributions collected in the rest of this volume, the Late Antique world of early Christianity was amazingly diverse. There was simultaneously a dissemination and fracturing of ideas. The idea of the Christian faith had not coalesced around anything resembling a universal, or Catholic, church, and there was still infighting at the highest levels of Christian authorities. Given the variety of conceptions of Christianity at this highest of levels, it is unsurprising that complex, and often potentially contradicting, beliefs can be detected in the lived realities of individuals in this period.¹

* University of Oxford (Faculty of Classics, University of Oxford), United Kingdom.

¹ The idea of focusing on a lived reality within the ancient and Late Antique worlds, which underpins this author's approach to the creation and use of curse tablets, was first effectively applied to the ancient world by Jörg Rüpke in his 2016 project and publications, initially: Jörg

This chapter is tightly focused around a key case study of one particular curse tablet. The focus is kept so small, particularly in comparison to other pieces in this volume, in order to illustrate the uniqueness of this piece of evidence as well as to echo the singularity of the creation of a tablet like this in the life of an individual.² This example hales from the cache discovered in the 1978-1983 excavations conducted by Barry Cunliffe and Peter Davenport at the Roman Baths in the city of Bath.³ Around 130 tablets were discovered in the sacred spring under the King's bath, none of which were inscribed in the same hand. This tablet is unique within this cache for its overt engagement with Christianity. In fact, this tablet has been taken as the earliest inscribed mention of Christianity in Bath, if not Britain.⁴

The analysis presented here aims to open up discussion of how the growth of Christianity impacted individual engagements with the supernatural. As well as to examine how personal innovation interacted with a desire to follow traditional or "correct" formulae and methods when engaging with the dead and the divine through curse tablets.

II. Definitions

To begin, it is important to set out definitions. Throughout this chapter, the term "curse tablet" is used following David Jordan's definition:

Defixiones, more commonly known as curse tablets, are inscribed pieces of lead, usually in the form of small, thin sheets, intended to influence, by supernatural means, the actions or welfare of persons or animals against their will . . . ⁵

Rüpke, *On Roman Religion: Lived Religion and the Individual in Ancient Rome* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016).

² There is, of course, the previously controversial publication of what is now referred to as *Tab. Sulis* 100. This tablet was originally published in 1904 by Byron Nicholson as "*Vinisius to Nigara*": a 4th cent. Christian letter written in south Britain and discovered at Bath. After much controversy following this publication – not helped by the loss of the tablet when it was moved for safe-keeping in 1939, Roger Tomlin has fully put discussion to bed in Roger S. O. Tomlin, "*Vinisius to Nigra: Evidence from Oxford of Christianity in Roman Britain*," *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 100 (1994): 93-108.

³ The excavation is published at: Barry Cunliffe, *The Temple of Sulis Minerva at Bath: Volumes 1& 2* (Oxford: Oxford University Committee for Archaeology, 1988).

⁴ Marion Bowman, "Belief, Legend and Perceptions of the Sacred in Contemporary Bath," *Folklore* 109 (1998): 25-31, 26.

⁵ David Jordan, "A survey of Greek *defixiones* not included in the special corpora," *Greek and Byzantine Studies* 26 (1985): 151-197.

Importantly, I will follow Jordan's later, expanded definition, which includes curses inscribed on media other than lead.⁶ Curse tablets survive from the end of the sixth century BCE through until roughly the eighth century CE. Examples have been found in all modern countries surrounding the Mediterranean as well as in those formally controlled as Northern Roman Provinces. Critically, here the umbrella term "curse tablets" envelops those texts which fall into the prayer-for-justice category; a distinction which is still debated amongst scholars.⁷

As for definitions of the two slippery terms "pagan" and "Christian," these are particularly difficult for this period. I would like to start by emphasizing that the concept of "pagans" can be viewed as artificial.⁸ However, it is used throughout this piece because it is an easily identifiable term to the audience, it applies to those who were not Christian, a group which was by no means uniform in their beliefs, practices, or world views. Furthermore, I believe it to be the most suitable translation of a key term in the example under analysis in this piece: *gentilis/ gens*.

"Christians" is also used in a broad strokes way; here, it is someone who subscribes to some of the Christian teaching or values. To try and pinpoint, in this period, a more exact idea of what Christians should or should not have been doing is an exercise which becomes completely bogged down in outliers and oddities.⁹ As Gassman states: "Ambiguities of religious practice and belief are a crucial feature of the religious transformation of the late Roman world. Recent scholarship on the limits of Christianization has focused, above all, on the tension between the lifestyles

⁶ David Jordan, "New Greek Curse Tablets (1985-2000)," *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 40.1 (2000): 5-46.

⁷ The concept of prayers for justice was posited by Henk Versnel, "'May he not be able to sacrifice...': Concerning a Curious Formula in Greek and Latin Curses," *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 58 (1985): 247-269. For the debate regarding prayers for justice see: Henk Versnel, "Beyond Cursing: The Appeal to Justice in Judicial Prayers," in *Magika Hiera: Ancient Greek Magic and Religion*, ed. Christopher A. Faraone and Dirk Obbink, (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 60-106; Henk Versnel, "Prayers for Justice in East and West: Recent Finds and Publications," in *Magical Practice in the Latin West*, ed. Richard L. Gordon and Francisco Marco Simón (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 275-356; Henk Versnel, "Response to Critique," in *Contextos mágicos/ Contesti magici. Atti del Convegno Internazionale*, Roma, 4-6 novembre 2009, 33-45 (Rome: Soprintendenza Speciale per i Beni Archeologici di Roma, 2012); Martin Dreher, "Gerichtsverfahren vor den Götten? – 'judicial prayers' und die Kategorisierung der Defixionum tabellae," in *Symposion 2009, Akten der Gesellschaft für Griechische und Hellenistische Rechtsgeschichte Bd. 21*, ed. Gerhard Thür (Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences Press, 2010), 303-337; Martin Dreher, "'Prayers for Justice' and the Categorization of Curse Tablets," in *Contextos mágicos/ Contesti magici. Atti del Convegno Internazionale*, Roma, 4-6 novembre 2009, 29-32 (Rome: Soprintendenza Speciale per i Beni Archeologici di Roma, 2012).

⁸ See Robert Wiśniewski, *The Beginnings of the Cult of Relics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019): 182 for an extended discussion of this. In this volume, see the introduction to Ryan Denson's contribution.

⁹ In this volume, see Joshua Littell's introduction for more analysis of the difficulties of the term "Christian."

of ordinary Christians and bishops' normative standards."¹⁰ This focus is not of the greatest help for the evidence we will examine today.

I would also like, at this point, to highlight that even the division between pagan and Christian can be problematic. And it has been argued that the shift from the pagan to the Christian world was one where "the pagans would have found themselves to be in unfamiliar territory."¹¹ However, ritual practices and religious observances had already been shaping the minds, everyday lives, and even the physical spaces which Christianity came to populate. The different attitudes towards interacting with the dead and the divine had evolved over many years previously and continued to do so. There are universal attitudes which can be found, such as basic ideas of respect and pollution. Furthermore, there is literary, epigraphical, and archaeological evidence which suggests that there was a continuity of interaction between people and external powers from antiquity onwards, a view strongly put forward by Peter Brown.¹² For instance, the creation of curse tablets continued long into the Christian period. The rituals used to interact with external powers were not inherently limited to specific cults or deities. Throughout the ancient Mediterranean and Northern Europe, votive offerings, prayers, curse tablets, and festivals were all ways of engaging with cults to various deities, including those of the Judeo-Christian tradition. In the Roman Empire, new deities were incorporated into the religious sphere as different regions came under imperial control. The development of Judeo-Christian worship would have, of course, made use of already-established means of interacting with and gaining the favor of external powers.

III. Theoretical Approaches

Throughout this chapter, the creation of curse tablets is understood to be an act of personal religion.¹³ Often, curse tablets are described as being "magic" or "magical"

¹⁰ Mattias Gassman, "Semi-Pagans? Some Mutations of Non-Christian Thought in Late Antiquity," *Studies in Late Antiquity* 9 (2025): 85–116, 85.

¹¹ Peter Brown, *The Cult of Saints: Its Rise and Function of Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 5.

¹² Peter Brown, "Society and the Supernatural: A Medieval Change," *Daedalus* 104 (1975), 133 – 151.

¹³ Personal religion is an idea put forward by Julia Kindt at: Julia Kindt, *Rethinking Greek Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) and Julia Kindt, "Personal Religion: A Productive Category for the Study of Ancient Greek Religion?," *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 135 (2015): 35–50. In her 2009 work: Julia Kindt, "Polis Religion- a critical appreciation," in *Entre Asclépios et Hippocrate: Etude des cultes guerisseurs et des medecins en Carie*, ed. Cécile Nissen (Liège: Presses universitaires de Liège, 2009), 9-34, she discusses the issues of dealing with private worship within the framework of *polis* religion. For the concept of *polis* religion, see: Christiane Sourvinou- Inwood, "What is Polis Religion?," in *Oxford Readings in Greek Religion*, ed. Richard Buxton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000a), 13–37. (First published in *The Greek City from*

by modern scholars. However, to draw such a distinction between this ritual for communication between mortals and the divine (or the dead) and other rituals, such as prayer or the consultation of oracles, creates a fracture between the conceptions of the powers addressed or invoked, which did not exist in the minds of ancient individuals. The decision to create a curse tablet rested upon the creator's lived experience, as well as the wider religious and social context in which they existed.

The idea of maintaining an awareness of individual decision-making and the wider lived reality builds upon two theories. The first is the vernacular religion theory, which was developed by Leonard Norman Primiano and focuses on the role of the individual in religious practice.¹⁴ The core focus is on religion as a lived experience of individuals, making their own decisions based on their own cultural and social reality and pressures, rather than presenting religion as a fixed doctrine of beliefs routinely repeated.¹⁵ And the second is the Lived Religion Approach developed by Jörg Rüpke, who describes the use of the model:¹⁶

... scattered evidence should be contextualized and interpreted by relating it to individual agents, their use of space and time, their formation of social coalitions, their negotiation with religious specialists, or providers, and their attempts to make sense of religion in a situational manner and thus render religion effective.

These theories or approaches are not set out in order to be tested by the evidence. They are presented here to provide an insight into the approach taken by me when engaging with these personal inscriptions.

Homer to Alexander. ed. Oswyn Murray, Simon Price (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 295–322.) and Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, "Further Aspects of Polis Religion," in *Oxford Readings in Greek Religion*, ed. Richard Buxton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000b), 38–55. (First published 1988 in *AION (archeol)* 10: 259–74). For curse tablets as personal religion, see Charlotte Spence, "Curse Tablets, Amulets, Spells," in *Ancient Greek Personal Religion*, ed. Julia Kindt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025).

¹⁴ Leonard Norman Primiano, "Manifestations of the Religious Vernacular: Ambiguity, Power and Creativity," in *Vernacular Religion in Everyday Life: Expressions of Belief*, ed. Marion Bowman and Ülo Valk (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), 382–394; see also: Marion Bowman, Ülo Valk. *Vernacular Religion in Everyday Life: Expressions of Belief*. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012).

¹⁵ For more see: Stuart McKie, "Distraught, Drained, Devoured, or Damned? The Importance of Individual Creativity in Roman Cursing," in *Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference 2015: Proceedings of the 25th Annual Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference 2015*, 15–27 (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2016).

¹⁶ Jörg Rüpke, *On Roman Religion: Lived Religion and the Individual in Ancient Rome*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016), 44.

IV. Issues of Authorship in Curse Tablets

The focus on the individual behind the creation of a curse tablet is key to any work on this body of evidence. However, when analyzing curse tablets, the issue of who actually undertook the inscribing of the text is inescapable. Without a doubt, there are a number of tablets that were created by professional ritual practitioners. These examples are often identifiable by the inclusion of *voces magicae* (long strings of vowels, untranslatable but ritually significant words, and powerful names for gods and *daimones*), *charaktêres* (untranslatable and unpronounceable symbols), and drawings.¹⁷ However, as mentioned above and is worth re-emphasizing in this context, the cache of tablets from the sacred spring at the temple of Sulis Minerva at Bath (to which our core example belongs) presents an interesting counter to this: of the approximately 130 tablets that have been published, none are written by the same hand. It is important to note that across the tablets in the cache, there are repeated formulae. The use of exhaustive dichotomies is a feature in the majority of the tablets from Bath, as well as a significant number of those published from elsewhere in Roman Britain, particularly Uley.¹⁸ The most common form is: *si vir, si femina* (if man or if woman), and *si servus si, liber* (if slave or if free).¹⁹ There are, however, many variations, as illustrated in this table, reproduced from McKie 2016:²⁰

Table 1. The variations of the two most common stock formulae and the curses on which they appear. Table reproduced with kind permission from Stuart McKie.

If Man or if Woman	If Slave or if Free
<i>sir vir sir femina</i> (Tab. Sulis 10, 32, 36, 49, 52, 66, 71, 100)	<i>si servus si liber</i> (Tab. Sulis 10, 32, 34, 39, 44, 47, 45, 49, 55, 57, 62, 63, 65, 66, 71, 97, 102, 105)
<i>si baro si mulier</i> (Tab. Sulis 67, 65)	<i>si liber si servus</i> (Tab. Sulis 11, 36, 38, 62)
<i>si vir si femina si ancilla</i> (Tab. Sulis 52)	<i>si libera si serva</i> (Tab. Sulis 62)
<i>sive vir sive femina</i> (Tab. Sulis 91)	<i>si serva si libera</i> (Tab. Sulis 62)

¹⁷ A noteworthy example is the cache of tablets referred to as the Sethian-cache, found in a columbarium near the Porta S. Sebastiano, Rome and dated to the fourth century CE, published at: Richard Wunsch, *Sethianisch Verfluchungstaflen aus Rom*. (Leipzig, 1898). The different types of pseudoparagraphia are presented in a table in Celia Sánchez Natalias, "Paragraphics and Iconography," in *Choosing Magic*, ed. Richard Gordon, Francisco Marco Simón, Marina Piranomonte (De Luca Editori D'Arte: Rome, 2020), 103-123, 106.

¹⁸ Roger S. O. Tomlin, *The Uley Tablets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024).

¹⁹ McKie "Distraught, Drained," 24.

²⁰ McKie "Distraught, Drained," 23.

<i>utrum vir utrum femina</i> (Tab. Sulis 98)	<i>utrum servus utrum liber</i> (Tab. Sulis 98)
<i>si femina si vir</i> (Tab. Sulis 38)	<i>si servus si liber si libertinus</i> (Tab. Sulis 31)
<i>si mulier si baro</i> (Tab. Sulis 44)	<i>si liber si ancilla</i> (Tab. Sulis 52)

This evidence suggests that there is a sharing of knowledge, probably orally, based on the varying spellings of key words. However, there was still the potential for personal innovation in the exact wording of the exhaustive dichotomies. It is these ideas of repetition and, simultaneously, innovation within the British corpus of curse tablets that prompted Tomlin to remark:

My own impression, in Britain at least, is that an author was aware of what was expected of him, but like a Roman with his will, ‘the document was emphatically his own invention, written by himself or dictated to another.’²¹

It is noteworthy that there is one example which includes the phrase: “the written page has been copied out” (*carta picta persc[ripta]*).²² This, on its own, suggests that there was a sharing of written “recipes,” or as Paul Foster suggests, a “master-list of curses,”²³ but the variations tabulated above illustrate that there was more commonly an oral sharing of formulae.

The lack of repeated hands at this site demonstrates that there is no one professional acting at this location providing a service of producing curse tablets. This is unlike other sanctuaries, such as that of Anna Perenna at Rome, where the distinctive cylindrical shape of the curses initially suggests that they were created by a single professional,²⁴ an idea which is challenged by Jürgen Blänsdorf’s

²¹ Roger S. O. Tomlin, “Cursing a Thief in Iberia and Britain,” in *Magical Practice in the Latin West*, ed. Richard L. Gordon and Francisco Marco Simón (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 245–274, 247. Quoting Edward Champlin, *Final Judgements: Duty and Emotion in Roman Wills, 200 BC–AD 250*. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), 183.

²² Tab. Sulis 9. Text: Roger S. O. Tomlin, “The Curse Tablets,” in *The Temple of Sulis Minerva at Bath: Volume 2 The Finds*, ed. B. Cunliffe, (Oxford, Oxford University Committee for Archaeology, 1988), 59–270: no. 9; trans. Roger S. O. Tomlin, “Writing to the Gods in Britain,” in *Becoming Roman, Writing Latin? Literacy and Epigraphy in the Roman West*, ed. Alison Cooley, (Portsmouth, RI: Journal of Roman Archaeology, 2002), 165–179: no. 9.

²³ Paul Foster, “British Curse Tablets and Their Implications for the Study of the New Testament and Early Christianity,” in *Antike Fluchtafeln und das Neue Testament*, ed. Michael Hölscher, Markus Lau, Susanne Luther (Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 474, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021), 93–109, 97.

²⁴ Charlotte Spence, “Change and Continuity in Curse Tablets from the Roman World,” in *Nemo non metuit: Magic in the Roman World*, ed. Fabrizio Conti and Elizabeth Ann, (Budapest: Trivent Publishing, 2022), 53–98, 69.

topographical analysis.²⁵ The tension between pre-existing conceptions of ancient literacy and the survival of a significant number of handwritten texts of varying competency is inescapable when dealing with issues of the authorship of curse tablets.²⁶ It is ultimately unknowable how many tablets were the result of scribal hands, professional ritual practitioners, and individuals of varying levels of literacy. However, critically, irrespective of how the words came to be inscribed or written, the surviving curse tablets are the culmination of individual and personal impulses, feelings, and decision-making.

V. *Tab. Sulis* 98

With these key ideas in mind, we may now turn to our case study: *Tab. Sulis* 98,²⁷ from the sacred spring at the temple of Sulis Minerva at Bath, and dated to the latter part of the third century CE. It is worth noting that the reference to Christians is the primary factor in previous scholarship ascribing a date of the fourth century, rather than any earlier date. Paul Foster rightly points out the circular nature of this argument and emphasizes that, on paleographic grounds and upon cross-examination with other third-century tablets, there is “little firm evidence for dating this tablet to the later period.”²⁸ Therefore, I believe a date in the third century is most appropriate. In the field of curse tablets, it is not the norm to use the contents of the text to disregard other methods of dating.

Lead, tin, and copper alloy
10.5cm by 6.0cm
Unfolded

²⁵ Jürgen Blänsdorf, “The Curse Inscriptions and the *Materia Magica* of the Anna-Perenna-Nymphaeum at Rome,” in *The Materiality of Magic*, ed. Dietrich Boschung, Jan. N. Bremmer (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2015), 293-308.

²⁶ The core work undertaken on ancient literacy by William Harris, *Ancient Literacy*. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989) has recently been challenged by the work of Amina Kropp, “Schriftlichkeit in der Schadenzauberpraxis am Beispiel der vulgärlateinischen defixionum tabellae,” in *Literacy in Ancient Everyday Life*, ed. Anne Kolb, (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 261- 288 and Roger S. O. Tomlin, “Literacy in Roman Britain,” in *Literacy in Ancient Everyday Life*, ed. Anne Kolb, (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 201-220, which both draw on curse tablets as evidence.

²⁷ Originally published at Mark W. C. Hassall, Roger S. O. Tomlin “II. Inscriptions,” *Britannia* 13 (1982), 404-5, no.7. This tablet has also been referred to by the following numbers: *SD* 303; *CT* 96; *dfx.* 3.2/77; *LCT* 276; *AE* 1982, 667; *TheDefix.* 101.

²⁸ Foster, “British Curse Tablets,” 97. See also Simon Esmonde Cleary, “Britain in the Fourth Century,” in *A Companion to Roman Britain*, ed. Malcom Todd (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2004), 409-427, 422.

Side A:

(*vacat*) seu gen(tili)s seu C-
h(r)istianus quaecumque utrum vir
utrum mulier utrum puer utrum puella
utrum s[er]vus utrum liber mihi Annia[n]-
o Mantuṭi'n(a)e de bursa mea s(e)x argente[o]s
furaverit tu d[o]mina dea ab ipso perexi[g]-
e[-c.1- eo]s si mihi per [f]raudem aliquam in DEP-
REG[-c.1-]STVM dederit nec sic ipsi dona sed ut
sangu-
inem suum (r)eputes qui mihi hoc inrogaverit

Side B:

Postum[inu]s Pisso
Locinna [A]luna
Maṭerna Gunsula
C'an`didina Euticius
Peregrinus
Latinus
Senicianus
Avitianus
Victor
Scō[ti]us
Aessicunia
Paltucca
Calliopsis
Celerianus

Whether pagan or Christian, whether man or woman, whether boy or girl, whether slave or free, whoever has stolen from me, Annianus (son of) Mantutina (?), six silver coins from my purse, you, lady Goddess, are to exact (them) from him. If through some deceit he has given me... and do not give thus to him but reckon as (?) the blood of him who has invoked this upon me.²⁹

²⁹ *Tab. Sulis* 98; Text: Celia Sánchez Natalias, *Sylloge of defixiones from the Roman west: a comprehensive collection of curse tablets from the fourth century BCE to the fifth century CE* (BAR international series, 3077. Oxford: BAR Publishing, 2022), no. 303; translation: Tomlin, "Curse Tablets," 233.

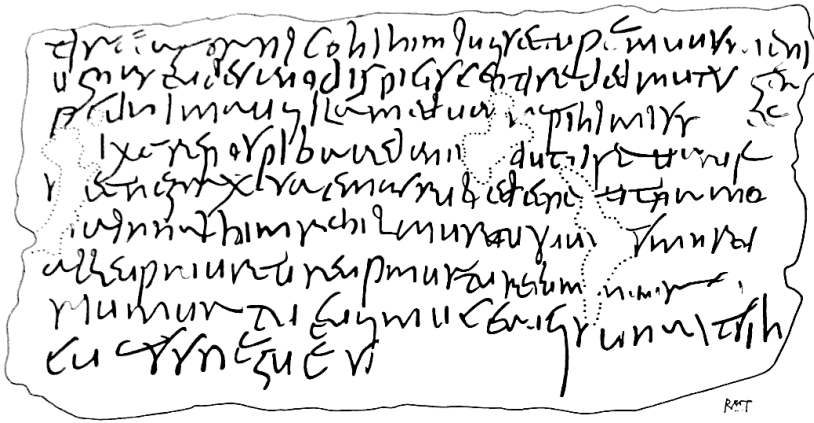


Fig. 1. *Tab. Sulis* 98: dated to the third or fourth century CE, from Bath UK.

Drawing by Roger Tomlin from Tomlin 1988: 232 no. 98.

Image reproduced with kind permission from Roger Tomlin.

The restoration of this text has been debated, specifically the reading of *gens* to *gen(tili)s* by Tomlin in his publication of the text,³⁰ which is reproduced by Sánchez Natalías in her 2022 catalogue and here.³¹ Adams argues that Tomlin's restoration is done "without justification" and goes on to highlight that *gentes* was well established in late Latin as a plural and therefore the use of *gens* is illustrative of an "occasional semantic back-formation in the singular."³² It could be suggested that Tomlin's restoration is not strictly necessary, as we have *gens* visible on the tablet, and the term is attested elsewhere as meaning a singular pagan individual.³³ Tomlin does provide some justification for this alteration by explaining that *gentilis*, meaning "pagan," is a late Latin use of the word and is in fact the "usual late-Roman Christian" term.³⁴ In any case, both the use of *gentilis* and *gens* have a precedent for use to refer to a "pagan" believer.³⁵ However, an established use of *gentilis* as

³⁰ Originally at Roger S. O. Tomlin, "Inscriptions," *Britannia* 13 (1982): 396–422, 404, fig. 32 and then reproduced in the catalogue of texts from the sacred spring at Tomlin, "The Curse Tablets," 232, no. 98.

³¹ Sánchez Natalías, *Sylloge of defixiones*, no. 303.

³² J. N. Adams, "British Latin: The Text, Interpretation and Language of the Bath Curse Tablets," *Britannia* 23 (1992): 1–26, 10–11.

³³ For example, the late fifth-century poet: Commodian, *Instructiones per litteras uersuum primas aduersus paganos* 1.26.24 (the text is CSEL 15). This usage is noted at Albert Blaise, *Dictionnaire Latin-Français des Auteurs Chrétiens*. (Turnhout: Brepols, 1954), s.v. *gens*. Furthermore, the use of the plural *gentes* by Christian authors to refer to pagan groups is well documented, for example, in Arnobius' *Aduersus gentes*.

³⁴ Tomlin, "Inscriptions," n. 13 and Tomlin "The Curse Tablets," 233– which follows Blaise, *Dictionnaire*.

³⁵ *Gentilis* appears to develop from the understanding of the word as referring to a group of foreign peoples to its use as describing pagans. *LS*: In ecclesiastical Latin used as an opposite to Jewish

referring to pagans generally is more of a later medieval phenomenon. Despite the debate on this point, it seems that any conclusion reached will have little impact on the interpretation of the tablet for the purposes of analysis in the present chapter. The use of either term would have had to occur in a heavily Christianized environment in order to have meaning.

Of greater importance is the question of who would have made use of such a term. Adams argues that it is “unlikely to have had any currency outside the special Christian register,” and given the other surviving usages of both *gens* and *gentilis*, this is convincing.³⁶ However, Reynolds argues that this tablet was created by a pagan *defigens*.³⁷ Tomlin suggests the *defigens* is a Christian and that the pairs of exhaustive dichotomies (or to use their formal term in Linguistics “relational antonyms”) are a parody of the words of Saint Paul to the Galatians: “There is neither male nor female, there is neither slave nor free ... in Jesus Christ.”³⁸ Further parallels can be drawn with the Pauline epistles:³⁹

For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether enslaved or free; and all were made to drink of one Spirit.⁴⁰

Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, enslaved, or free; but Christ is all, and in all.⁴¹

or Christian; *The Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources* (DMLBS): heathen, pagan, not Christian; *Lex Bohemorum*: *barbari, pagani, ethnici* (barbarians, pagans, or a specific ethnic group); *Kirchenlatein Wörterbuch*: suggests that the word was specifically used to refer to *griechisch redende Nichtjuden, welche zwar an Jahwe glaubten und nach Jerusalem wallfahrteten, aber nicht durch die Beschneidung dem Judentum beigetreten waren* (Greek-speaking, non-Jews, who did believe in the same god but who were un-circumcised) before more generally just referring to *heiden* (pagans). This last definition is echoed in both the *Firminus Verris* and *La Talleur*.

Gens = TLL illustrates a usage as early as the Vetus Latina such as at Matthew 18:17: *si ecclesiam contempserit, sit tibi quasi gens aut publicanus*. As well as in Christian Latin at: Pelagius, *On the Epistle of St Paul to the Romans*; Theodori episcopi Mopsuesteni, *a commentary on Paul's minor epistles*. See Adams, “British Latin,” 11 for more detail on this.

³⁶ Adams, “British Latin,” 11.

³⁷ Reynolds in Joyce Reynolds, Terence Volk, Terence, “Gifts, Curses, Cult, and Society at Bath,” *Britannia* 21 (1990): 379–391, 382; Roger S. O. Tomlin, *Britannia Romana: Roman Inscriptions and Roman Britain*. (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2017), 381–382.

³⁸ Galatians 3.28. The use of these exhaustive dichotomies/ relational antonyms is a strongly formulaic feature of curse tablets, particularly those from Britain. See Tomlin *Uley*, 22–36.

³⁹ See also Galatians 3:28 and Ephesians 2:13–17.

⁴⁰ 1 Corinthians 12:13. Translation from the English Standard Version of the Bible.

⁴¹ Colossians 3:11. Translation adapted from the English Standard Version of the Bible.

However, the use of exhaustive dichotomies had, by the point this tablet was created, already been a feature of curse-tablet creation since the fourth century BCE and included different options alongside man or woman, slave or free.⁴² In a counter-curse, from the early fourth century BCE, from Attica, we have a text which opens: “If anyone has cursed me, whether woman or man or slave or free or guest-friend/enemy or citizen or household member or stranger, from envy of me, my work and deeds.” (Εἴ τις ἐμὲ κατέδεσεν/ ἢ γυνὴ ἢ <ἀ>νὴρ ἢ δ<ο>ῦλος ἢ ἐ-/λεῦθερος ἢ ξένος ἢ ἀσ-/σ’τος ἢ οἰκεῖος ἢ ἀλλώτ-/ρτος ἢ ἐπὶ φθόνον τὸν ἐμῇ ἐργασίαι ἢ ἐργοῖς).⁴³ The inclusion of the phrases: “guest-friend or enemy” (ἐξένος ἢ ἀσ’σ’τος) and “household member or stranger” (ἐοικεῖος ἢ ἀλλώτρτος) is not found elsewhere at present. Despite these examples being separated by 700 years and thousands of miles, they both illustrate a sense of individual innovation within established formulae. With this in mind, we may question whether it is more likely that the individual who created this curse tablet was parodying Saint Paul or just innovating based on ritual knowledge. It is difficult to say for certain. However, I would argue that it is most probably a combination of both. As a means of being all encompassing in a statement, the formula “if man or if woman, if slave or if free” is a common one and therefore one which would appeal equally to Saint Paul and other individuals. Concerns over correct ritual practice explain why the formula occurs so commonly in the Bath curse tablets; they are being created in a socio-religious microcosm where knowledge was being shared. Therefore, the individual behind the creation of our tablet would have been able to both engage with local knowledge about curse creation and the ideas of Saint Paul.

The use of the term “Christian” (*C/h(r)istianus*) here is remarkable. In the Acts of the Apostles, it is claimed that the term was first adopted in Antioch,⁴⁴ and it is used only twice more in the New Testament.⁴⁵ However, evidence from *First Clement* and Ignatius’ frequent usage of the term illustrates that by the second century CE, the term had become common to refer to followers of Christ.⁴⁶ The fact that “whether

⁴² As Paul Foster highlights: ‘The fact that slavery was ubiquitous in the ancient world meant that the binary pairing of slaves and those who were free encompassed the totality of society. In the curse tablets, this formulation ensures that it is an umbrella way of encapsulating every person under the potential effects of the curse. In the Pauline letters, the ideology that views this key social distinction as being dissolved has the effect of stating that all who believe in Christ are equal.’ Foster, “British Curse Tablets,” 100.

⁴³ *TheDefix.* 235, very early fourth-century BCE Attica, dating and text by David R. Jordan, “Three Curse Tablets,” in *The World of Ancient Magic. Papers from the Norwegian Institute at Athens 4–8 May 1997*, ed. David R. Jordan, Hugo Montgomery, and Einar Thomassen (Bergen: Norwegian Institute at Athens, 1999), 115-124, 117; translation by author. Note that, as per the accepted epigraphic conventions, the use of ‘...’ illustrates letters which were added in antiquity to correct or complete a text.

⁴⁴ Acts 11: 26: χρηματίζουσα τε πρώτως ἐν Ἀντιοχείᾳ τοὺς μαθητὰς Χριστιανούς.

⁴⁵ Acts 26: 28 and 1 Peter 4:16.

⁴⁶ 1 Clement 3:4; 21:8; 47: 6. See “British Curse Tablets,” 102.

pagan or Christian" (*seu gen(tili)s seu Ch(r)istianus*) could be presented as exclusionary alternatives to the same extent as "whether man or woman" (*utrum vir utrum mulier*) must illustrate, despite limited epigraphic evidence, that the tablet was created in a society (or an immediate context) which was generally divided into these two groups, or perceived to be. Could it be the case that there was a large Christian population who harbored amongst them the thief, or perhaps our curse-creator Annianus, son of Matutina, was particularly suspicious of this religious sect?⁴⁷

It is entirely possible that an individual could use "pagan" (*gens/ gentilis*) to describe themselves. It is worth considering what other word could they have used? We do not seem to have instances of people self-describing themselves in this way in antiquity. Tomlin argues that they would not have done so, yet he simultaneously suggests that we cannot assume that this text was written by a Christian.⁴⁸ For instance, he highlights that both words contain errors in spelling, which may suggest that the *defigens* was unfamiliar with them.⁴⁹ These errors could also have arisen as a result of trying to write the text in reverse order.⁵⁰ It is, moreover, equally possible that this was a result of Christians using the word to distinguish between those like themselves and "others."

I am inclined to agree with Tomlin's reading that the creator of this tablet was not themselves a Christian. It would not make sense, particularly when compared with the examples presented in the "Christian Worship at Pagan Sanctuaries" section below, for a Christian to invoke "you, Lady Goddess" (*d[o]mina dea*) if they believed in the almighty power of the Christian god. This seems to be a case of a devotee of Sulis Minerva visiting her shrine to seek her assistance, either as a result of a longstanding relationship of worship or because Sulis Minerva was simply the goddess one turned to in the event of a loss of coins.⁵¹

The most interesting part of this tablet, for our present purposes, is the fact that it seems to reveal a belief that being a follower of Christ did not place an individual in their own special, removed sphere, safe from the powers of other divine figures. Annianus did not address the Christian god and ask that they punish one of their own. He clearly believes that Silius would be able to enact the vengeance called for as a wrong against herself, irrespective of whether the victim was a believer in, or worshipper of, her. I would assert that this reaches the crux of engagements with the supernatural in a polytheistic world. Belief in, or knowledge of, *all* powers was

⁴⁷ An idea put forward by "British Curse Tablets," 98.

⁴⁸ Tomlin, "The Curse Tablets," 233.

⁴⁹ Tomlin, "The Curse Tablets," 233.

⁵⁰ By this I mean that the *defigens* started at the bottom right corner and worked backwards. See Tomlin, "Britannia Romana," 381.

⁵¹ See Foster, "British Curse Tablets," 98–99 for an interesting comparison between the practice of giving stolen goods over to a deity with the Synoptic Gospels (Matt. 15:5–6 and Mk. 7:11–12) and the Jewish *korban* vow used to protect grave goods.

not necessary for a fundamental respect to still exist. Phillip Kiernan has undertaken an analysis of the punishments called for in the tablets from Bath and argues that much of the suffering could be wrought on the victims through their own minds.⁵² Many of the ailments, such as sleeplessness, could be induced psychosomatically. If this were the case, then was the victim protected by their belief in a new god?

After the decline of Roman rule of Britain in the early fifth century, the Baths themselves fell into disrepair and ruin – this is also, understandably, the latest point to which curses from the site are dated. After this point, a church was built on the site of the Roman *tholos*.⁵³ As can be seen in sites from across the ancient world, the recycling of locations of spiritual significance was extremely common. In this particular instance, it seems to carry a novel kind of pathos; the power of Sulis Minerva, invoked to punish a follower of the Christian god, ends up quashed by that very power.

VI. Christianity in Late-Roman Britain

Clearly, the curse tablet under analysis here was not created in a vacuum. There are instances where pagan spaces appear to have been reused, such as at Lullingstone Roman villa (Kent, UK), which is a rare example of a house-church, whose closest parallel is in Dura Europus, Syria. There are paintings on the walls which date to approximately 350 CE. Alongside the Christian imagery on the walls, there is a mosaic featuring Bellerophon.⁵⁴ This instance illustrates a later blending of Christian and pagan iconography and spaces. However, in Hinton St Mary (Dorset, UK), there is a fantastic mosaic dating to the fourth century CE, which spreads from the main room into a side room. In the side room, there is another depiction of the Bellerophon myth, and in the center of the main room, there is the figure of Christ, suggested to be the oldest depiction of this figure (see Fig. Two for an image of the main room). There is some discussion as to whether this should be considered Christ or an emperor.⁵⁵ However, the framing of the figure with the Chi Rho seems to me to make sense most as a figure of Christ, or at least the emperor in the guise of Christ. In this instance, we have a space which consciously blends Christian and pagan ideas.

⁵² Philip Kiernan, 'Did Curse Tablets Work?,' in *Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference 2003: Proceedings of the Thirteenth Annual Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference, Leicester 2003*, ed. Ben Croxford, Hella Eckardt, Judy Meade, Jake Weekes. (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2004), 123–134.

⁵³ Bowman, "Belief, Legend and Perceptions," 26.

⁵⁴ Martin Henig, "The secret of the Lullingstone mosaic," *Kent Archaeological Review* 139 (2000), 196–7; see also printer's corrections to this paper in *Kent Archaeological Review*, 140 (2001), 219.

⁵⁵ See Susan Pearce, "The Hinton St Mary Mosaic Pavement: Christ or Emperor?," *Britannia* 39 (2008), 193–218.

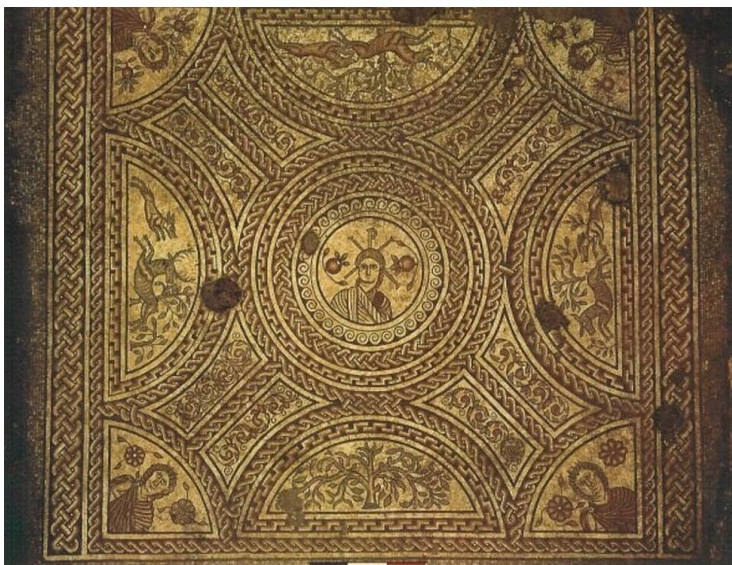


Fig. 2. The mosaic in the main room of the villa at Hinton St Mary, Dorset, dated to the fourth century CE. Image by User: Fransars (2007) via Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hinton_St_Mary_Mosaic.jpg. The image is reproduced and redistributed under the CC BY-SA 3.0 license.

It could well be that the use of the Bellerophon myth was chosen because of the connotations of good conquering evil.⁵⁶ Aside from these mosaic examples, there is another instance from material culture. There are no other curses from late-Roman Britain which make use of Christianity or Christian ideas, but at Uley, a site relatively close to Bath, where there was once a temple to Mercury (where another cache of curse tablets has been discovered),⁵⁷ a rather interesting fourth-century plaque was recovered.⁵⁸ This was probably once part of a small casket, a scrinium or maybe some kind of reliquary.⁵⁹ The plaque consists of two registers, one depicting the scene of Christ and the centurion's servant,⁶⁰ the other depicting Christ

⁵⁶ There are also possible instances at Poundbury and Fifehead, for more see Pearce, "Christ or Emperor." Another example is reported from Frampton, again in Dorset, UK. Here, there was a Chi Rho monogram in one of the borders and a central motif of Bellerophon slaying the Chimaera again. This example was, however, apparently destroyed in 1845 or 1855. See Keith Branigan, *The Roman Villa in South-West England* (Bradford-Avon: Moonraker Press, 1976), 62, 65-69 and figure 29; and Thomas in *Temples, Churches and Religion in Roman Britain*, ed. Warwick Rodwell (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, 1980), 148.

⁵⁷ Tomlin *Uley*.

⁵⁸ Published with figures by Martin Henig in: *The Uley Shrines: Excavation of a ritual complex on West Hill, Uley, Gloucestershire: 1977-9*, ed. Ann Woodward, Peter Leach (London: English Heritage in association with British Museum Press, 1993).

⁵⁹ *The Uley Shrines*, 110.

⁶⁰ Matthew 8: 5-13.

healing a blind man,⁶¹ with Jonah under a gourd with a *kētos* alongside him and the sacrifice of Isaac below.⁶² Other plaques had also been dedicated at this site, and it seems to have been one of the main ways of making an offering to the god; one of the plaques actually depicts Mercury.⁶³ If this object was deposited in the same votive fashion as the others, which seems the only likely possibility, then we have more evidence of a blending of Christian and pagan worship at the same site. Here, though, it seems we have a Christian venerating at a pagan site in contrast to the pagan making use of Christian ideas at a pagan site, which our Bath curse tablet suggests.

VII. The Issues of Tracing Christian Worship at Pagan Sanctuaries

It is worth spending more words considering whether a Christian worshipper would have made use of a pagan sanctuary setting to engage with divine powers. It appears that something similar occurred at the sanctuary of Anna Perenna at Rome.⁶⁴ The tablets here were excavated from the cistern (not the fountain itself) in 1999 in the Piazza Euclide, in the Parioli district.⁶⁵ In total, 51 curses were found, 24 in the form of tablets (6 inserted into lamps) and 27 were in the form of cylinders.⁶⁶

⁶¹ Mark 8: 22-25 and John 9.

⁶² Genesis 22. *The Uley Shrines*, 109.

⁶³ *The Uley Shrines*, find 4281 figure 93, number 6.

⁶⁴ No parallel has been found for these leaden beakers, which are made between 6 and 16 cm high and 5 to 9 cm in diameter and come in Russian-doll-like sets, with one or two concealed within the outer beaker and the lid sealed with resin. These artefacts do not immediately appear to be curses because all except one have no inscriptions on the outer beaker. On four of these beakers, we have depictions of the oriental *daimon* Abrasax/ Abraxas. The images found on the curses from the fountain of Anna Perenna are reminiscent of the roughly contemporary illustrations from the cache of tablets from Porta S. Sebastiano, as they seem personal to the professionals creating them. For more see: Richard L. Gordon, "Getting it Right: Performative Images in Greco-Egyptian Magical Practice," in *Seeing the God: Image, Space, Performance and Vision in the Religion of the Roman Empire*, ed. Martis Arnhold, Harry O. Maier, Jörg Rüpke (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 101-124, 101.

⁶⁵ The excavation was published at J. Polakova, Ida A. Rapinesi, "I materiali magici," in *Il santuario della musica e il bosco sacro di Anna Perenna*, ed. M. Piranomonte (Milan: Mondadori Electa, 2002), 38-52.

⁶⁶ For the publication of these tablets, see: Jürgen Blänsdorf, "The Texts from the Fons Annae Perennae," in *Magical Practice in the Latin West. Papers from the international conference held at the University of Zaragoza, 30. Sept.-1st Oct. 2005*, (Leiden: Brill, 2010a), 215-244; Jürgen Blänsdorf, "segno alla scrittura. Le defixiones della fontana di Anna Perenna (Roma, Piazza Euclide)," *SMSR* 76/1 (2010b) 35-64; Jürgen Blänsdorf, "The Social Background of the defixion Texts of Mater Magna at Mainz and Anna Perenna at Rome," in *Contextos mágicos/ Contesti magici. Atti del Convegno Internazionale, Roma, 4-6 novembre 2009*, (Rome: Soprintendenza Speciale per i Beni Archeologici di Roma, 2012a), 147-160; Jürgen Blänsdorf, "La tecnica e l'arte della scrittura su piombo e rame. Le iscrizioni magiche della Fontana di Anna Perenna (Rome) e la tipologia dei

The tablets are dated to between the third and fifth centuries CE. The deities invoked are: Iao, Salomon (both Jewish), Nymphs, the *daimon* Abrasax/ Abraxas, and Jesus.

One tablet, dated to between the third and fifth century CE, inscribed on a copper sheet which was rolled and then inserted into a lamp before being deposited in the sanctuary, invokes Jesus Christ.⁶⁷ The use of the expression *gaudeant, timiant* (that is, *qui gaudeant timeant* – let them rejoice, let them fear) is argued by Blänsdorf to confirm the Christian influence, as the only equivalent formula comes from Luke 6.25: “Woe to you who laugh now (*qui gaudeant timeant*), for you will mourn and weep.”⁶⁸ Salvo, however, suggests an alternative parallel could be offered with a Greek curse tablet from Amorgos (dated sometime within the Hellenistic to early Imperial periods) where the *defigens* asks Demeter to “punish those who rejoice in our misery” (κολάσαι τοὺς ἡμᾶς τοιούτους ἡδέως βλέποντας)⁶⁹ It is not necessarily the case that one argument excludes the other, however, as ideas and motifs from across the ancient Mediterranean were included in Christian thinking and imagery.

This copper tablet is not the only instance of a text with Christian elements being deposited at the fountain of Anna Perenna site.⁷⁰ A further example is a container

caratteri tardoantichi,” *Sylloge Epigraphica Barcinonensis* 10 (2012b): 17-39; Blänsdorf, “The Curse Inscriptions”; Jürgen Blänsdorf, Marina Piranomonte, “IX,49. La fontana di Anna Perenna,” in: *Terme di Diocleziano. La collezione epigrafica*, ed. Rosanna Friggeri, Maria G. Granino Cecere, Gian Luca Gregori, (Milano: Electa 2015), 617–639; Marina Piranomonte, “La fontana sacra di Anna Perenna a Piazza Euclide tra religione e magia,” *MHNH revista internacional de investigación sobre magia y astrología antiguas* 5 (2005): 87–104; Marina Piranomonte, “Le ultime scoperte nel territorio del II Municipio,” in *Roma, memorie dal sottosuolo. Ritrovamenti archeologici 1980/2006*, ed. Maria A. Tomei, (Rome: Mondadori Electa, 2006), 184–211; Marina Piranomonte, “I contenitori di piombo della fontana di Anna Perenna e la loro valenza magica,” *SMSR* 76/1 (2010), 21-33; Marina Piranomonte, “Religion and Magic at Rome: The Fountain of Anna Perenna,” in *Magical Practice in the Latin West. Papers from the international conference held at the University of Zaragoza, 30. Sept.–1st Oct. 2005*, (Leiden: Brill, 2010b), 191–213; Marina Piranomonte, “La fons Annae Perennae, un’illustre antenata,” in *La Fontana dell’Acqua Acetosa a Roma. La storia, il restauro e il nuovo parco*, Cinisello Balsamo 2011, ed. Lusia Cardilli, Marcello Fagiolo (Silvana Editoriale, Cinisello Balsamo, 2011), 137–140; Marina Piranomonte, “Anna Perenna. Un contesto magico straordinario,” in *Contextos mágicos/ Contesti magici. Atti del Convegno Internazionale*, (Roma, 4–6 novembre 2009, 29-32. Rome: Soprintendenza Speciale per i Beni Archeologici di Roma, 2012), 161–174.

⁶⁷ *TheDefix.* 522. Blänsdorf, “The social background,” 158.

⁶⁸ Blänsdorf, “la tecnica e l’arte,” 32; “Curse Inscriptions,” 24. Gospel of Luke 6.25: οὐαί, οἱ γελῶντες νῦν, ὅτι πενθήσετε καὶ κλαύσετε. *Væ vobis, qui ridetis nunc: quia lugebitis et flebitis.*

⁶⁹ Irene Salvo, “Experiencing Curses: Neurobehavioral Traits of Ritual and Spatiality in the Roman Empire,” in *Lived Religion in the Ancient Mediterranean World*, ed. Valentino Gasparini, Maik Patzelt, Rubina Raja, Anna-Katharina Rieger, Jörg Rüpke and Emiliano Urciuoli, (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 157–180, 174, and note 52 on IG XII, 7. 1, B.

⁷⁰ The practicing of Christian ideology within this previously pagan space appears to stretch beyond just cursing rituals. A number of lamps inscribed with the Chi-Rho symbol have been

(*TheDefix.* 497) where the Greek letters *IXNOΠ/ XNKΘ/ΘΘ* are repeatedly inscribed on the belly of Abraxas. Németh has argued strongly that this is an acronym for: “Jesus Christ the Nazarene Son, Jesus Christ the Nazarene, God, God, God.” (Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς Ναζωραῖος ὁ παῖς Χριστὸς Ναζωραῖος καὶ Θεός, Θεός, Θεός).⁷¹ There may have been a sense that these sanctuaries were appropriate for the deposition of a curse tablet, irrespective of the deity invoked, as we have tablets from Bath addressed to Mars and Mercury as well as Sulis and Minerva.⁷²

Sara Chiarini has argued that the tablets from the fountain of Anna Perenna, which include Christological abbreviations, were “adopted by non-Christian practitioners, who added [Christ] to the heterogeneous pantheon of supernatural forces involved in the harming rituals performed...”. With this in mind, it seems that a similar thought process was occurring in Bath, that it was acceptable to use labels from within a Christian lexicon despite the *defigens* not belonging to that group. We can see that Christian ideas in this period in Britain were broadly enough known to be useful, even for those without specialist knowledge.

VIII. Conclusions

The fact that an individual felt that the goddess invoked on this tablet, Sulis Minerva, could carry out the desired retribution against an individual who seems to have cast aside her existence is interesting for the study of late-Roman Britain and early Christianity. The concept of Christians being a group with solid enough

discovered within the fountain, which must be a clear indication that there were Christians engaging with these previously pagan rites. See Attilio Mastrocinque, *Sylloge gemmarum gnosticarum*, (I-II. Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali. Bollettino Di Numismatica. Rome: Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato Roma, 2003-2008), 90.

⁷¹ György Németh, “Il Demone e Gesù,” in *Terme di Diocleziano, la collezione epigrafica*, ed. Maria G. Granino Cecere, Gian Gregori, 619. (Milan: Mondadori, 2012), 619, 619; Marina Piranomonte, “The Discovery of the Fountain of Anna Perenna and Its Influence on the Study of Ancient Magic,” in *The Wisdom of Thoth: Magical Texts in Ancient Mediterranean Civilisations*, ed. Grażyna Bąkowska-Czerner, Alessandro Roccati, Agata Świerżowska (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2015), 71–85, 80; Good evidence for this claim comes from the Codex Sinaiticus (fourth century CE) where Jesus Christ is always written in an abbreviated form. See György Németh, “Jesus in ancient pagan magic: the Anna Perenna drawings,” in *The Wisdom of Thoth: Magical Texts in Ancient Mediterranean Civilisations*, ed. Grażyna Bąkowska-Czerner, Alessandro Roccati, Agata Świerżowska, (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2015), 55-60, 45. Furthermore, the early Church Fathers attest to the fact that the Gnostic Basilides in the second century CE had proclaimed that Jesus was not the son of God, but of Abraxas. This idea appears to have spread from Egypt across the Mediterranean specially to Rome. See Blänsdorf, “The Curse Inscriptions,” 23.

⁷² Mars= *TheDefix.* 163 and 654; Mercury = *TheDefix.* 627; Minerva= *TheDefix.* 634, 164, 165, 621, 162, 197, and 644; Sulis = *TheDefix.* 575 (dat.), 156 (nom. and dat.), 608, 609 (dat.), 610 (voc.), 162 (dat.), 164 (dat.), 165 (dat.), 617 (gen., extremely fragmentary), 266 (gen.), 261 (dat.), 621 (dat.), 624 (nom. or voc.), 625 (dat., extremely fragmentary), 628 (voc.), 634 (dat.), 637 (gen.), 638 (dat.), 197 (dat.), 640 (gen.), 643 (nom. or voc.), 651 (dat.), 652 (gen. and dat.), and 660 (dat.).

boundaries that one either belonged or did not at this early stage (and it could be said neither at any other stage) in this peripheral location can provide us with a launchpad from which to analyze changes on a macro rather than on the micro scale pursued here. The analysis of Christian motifs found more broadly in late-Roman Britain can be especially illuminating here. As the examples presented in this chapter illustrate, there was a wider trend of mixing or blending elements we would consider as belonging to the two binary categories of Christian and pagan. In some instances, there is a blending of Christian with pre-existing pagan iconography, but some, such as the mosaic from Hinton St Mary, illustrate that there were novel creations with this blending included from their inception. The personal decision-making and broader lived experience (both religious and social) of the individual behind this curse illustrate the level of understanding of this new cult and the diversity of this location. Integrating case studies such as this one into the wider study of the spread, acceptance, and codification of the new religious sect can help illuminate how rituals were undertaken at a small-scale level and aided the spread of new ideas.

More broadly, the invocation of Christian powers in curse tablets in no way marks a shift in the overall conception of curse tablets by ancient individuals; it seamlessly fits in with the evolution and innovation of curse tablet creation across the centuries. Tablets were made across a wide religious, linguistic, and cultural area, which incorporated different deities. Their creation was influenced by the perceived powers of local deities with whom individuals had pre-existing relationships, the process of *interpretatio*,⁷³ and the use of new deities from outside locations. The invocation of Judeo-Christian powers in Bath is no different from the use of Isis on tablets from Germania, far from her original Egyptian home; these supernatural figures had become familiar across the Roman Empire and were no longer geographically isolated. The examples presented from Bath illustrate a ritual practice that appears to have had a sense of community in that there were shared, traditional methods of engaging with divine powers. Yet the ritual creation of a curse tablet remained immensely personal, which led to innovations and variations on individual tablets.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to both reviewers for their suggestions and guidance, which immeasurably improved this piece. Further thanks must be extended to Dr Amin Benaissa (President) and Dr Tim Smith (Secretary) of the Oxford Philological Society for inviting me to give a paper on this topic, which not only helped me solidify my ideas but also, during the question period, provided some extremely valuable feedback and insights. In particular, I must thank Revd. Professor Martin Henig for

⁷³ See Gian Franco Chiai, Ralph Häussler, Christiane Kunst, *Interpretatio. Religiöse Kommunikation zwischen Globalisierung und Partikularisierung*. (Pisa: Fabrizio Serra Publisher, 2012), 159.

his generosity in time and ideas regarding the wider landscape of Christianity in Roman Britain.

List of Abbreviations

AE	<i>L'Année Épigraphique</i>
CT	Gager, J. G. 1992. <i>Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World</i> . Oxford: Oxford University Press.
CSEL	<i>Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum</i>
dfx.	Kropp, A. 2008. <i>Defixiones. Ein aktuelles Corpus lateinischer Fluchtafeln</i> . Speyer: Books on Demand.
LCT	Urbanová, D. 2018. <i>Latin Curse Tablets of the Roman Empire</i> . Innsbruck: Innsbrucker Beiträge zur Kulturwissenschaft.
SD	Sánchez Natalías, Celia. <i>Sylloge of Defixiones from the Roman West</i> . Oxford: BAR Publishing, 2022.
<i>Tab. Sul.</i>	Tomlin, Roger S. O. "The Curse Tablets." In <i>The Temple of Sulis Minerva at Bath: Volume 2 The Finds</i> , ed. B. Cunliffe, 59-270. Oxford, Oxford University Committee for Archaeology, 1988.
<i>TheDefix.</i>	<i>Thesaurus Defixionum</i> (Previously <i>TheDeMa</i>)

Bibliography

- Adams, J. N. "British Latin: The Text, Interpretation and Language of the Bath Curse Tablets." *Britannia* 23 (1992): 1–26.
- Blaise, Albert. *Dictionnaire Latin-Francais des Auteurs Chrétiens*. Turnhout: Brepols, 1954.
- Blänsdorf, Jürgen, Piranomonte Marina. "IX,49. La fontana di Anna Perenna." Rosanna Friggeri, Maria G. Granino Cecere, Gian Luca Gregori, 617-639. Milan: Electa, 2015.
- Blänsdorf, Jürgen. "Gods and Demons in Texts: Figures and Symbols of the Defixion Inscriptions of the Nymphaeum of Anna Perenna at Rome." In *Ancient Magic and the Supernatural in the Modern Visual and Performing Arts*, ed. Filippo Carlà, Irene Berti, 19-37. New York: Bloomsbury, 2015.
- Blänsdorf, Jürgen. "The Curse Inscriptions and the *Materia Magica* of the Anna-Perenna-Nymphaeum at Rome." In *The Materiality of Magic*, ed. Dietrich Boschung, Jan. N. Bremmer, 293- 308. Morphomata, Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2015.
- Blänsdorf, Jürgen. "The Social Background of the defixion Texts of Mater Magna at Mainz and Anna Perenna at Rome." in *Contextos mágicos/ Contesti magici. Atti del*

- Convegno Internazionale, Roma, 4–6 novembre 2009*, 147-160. Rome: Soprintendenza Speciale per i Beni Archeologici di Roma, 2012a.
- Blänsdorf, Jürgen. "La tecnica e l'arte della scrittura su piombo e rame. Le iscrizioni magiche della Fontana di Anna Perenna (Rome) e la tipologia dei caratteri tardoantichi." *Sylloge Epigraphica Barcinonensis* 10 (2012b): 17-39.
- Blänsdorf, Jürgen. "The Texts from the Fons Annae Perennae." In *Magical Practice in the Latin West. Papers from the international conference held at the University of Zaragoza, 30. Sept.–1st Oct. 2005*, 215-244. Leiden: Brill, 2010a.
- Blänsdorf, Jürgen. "segno alla scrittura. Le defixiones della fontana di Anna Perenna (Roma, Piazza Euclide)." *Studi e Materiali di Storia delle Religioni* 76/1 (2010b) 35–64.
- Bowman, Marion and Valk, Ülo. *Vernacular Religion in Everyday Life: Expressions of Belief*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2012.
- Bowman, Marion. "Belief, Legend and Perceptions of the Sacred in Contemporary Bath." *Folklore* 109: 1-2 (1998): 25-31.
- Branigan, Keith. *The Roman Villa in South-West England*. Bradford-Avon: Moonraker Press, 1976.
- Brown, Peter. "Society and the Supernatural: A Medieval Change." *Daedalus* 104 (1975): 133-151.
- Brown, Peter. *The Cult of Saints: Its Rise and Function of Latin Christianity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981.
- Champlin, Edward. *Final Judgements: Duty and Emotion in Roman Wills, 200 BC-AD 250*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991.
- Chiai, Gian Franco, Häussler, Ralph, Kunst, Christiane, ed. *Interpretatio. Religiöse Kommunikation zwischen Globalisierung und Partikularisierung*. Pisa: Fabrizio Serra Publisher, 2012.
- Chiarini, Sara. "Early Christianity and Cursing Rituals." In *Antike Fluchtafeln und das Neue Testament*, ed. Michael Hölscher, Markus Lau, Susanne Luther, 243-274. *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament* 474, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
- Cleary, A. Simon Esmonds Cleary, "Britain in the Fourth Century," in *A Companion to Roman Britain*, ed. Malcom Todd, 409-427. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2004.
- Dreher, Martin. "'Prayers for Justice' and the Categorization of Curse Tablets." In *Contextos mágicos/ Contesti magici. Atti del Convegno Internazionale, Roma, 4–6 novembre 2009*, 29-32. Rome: Soprintendenza Speciale per i Beni Archeologici di Roma, 2012.
- Dreher, Martin. "Gerichtsverfahren vor den Götten? – "judicial prayers" und die Kategorisierung der Defixionum tabellae." In *Symposion 2009, Akten der Gesellschaft für Griechische und Hellenistische Rechtsgeschichte Bd. 21*, ed. Gerhard Thür, 303-337. Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences Press, 2010.

- Foster, Paul. "British Curse Tablets and Their Implications for the Study of the New Testament and Early Christianity." In *Antike Fluchtafeln und das Neue Testament*, ed. Michael Hölischer, ed. Markus Lau, Susanne Luther, 93-109. Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 474, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021.
- Gassman, Mattias. "Semi-Pagans? Some Mutations of Non-Christian Thought in Late Antiquity." *Studies in Late Antiquity* 9 (2025), 85-116.
- Gordon, Richard L. "Getting it Right: Performative Images in Greco-Egyptian Magical Practice." In *Seeing the God: Image, Space, Performance and Vision in the Religion of the Roman Empire*, ed. Martis Arnhold, Harry O. Maier, and Jörg Rüpke, 101-124. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018.
- Harris, William V. *Ancient Literacy*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989.
- Hassall, Mark W. C., Tomlin, Roger S. O. "II. Inscriptions." *Britannia* 13 (1982): 404-5.
- Henig, Martin. "Printer's Corrections." *Kent Archaeological Review* 140 (2001): 219.
- Henig, Martin. "The secret of the Lullingstone mosaic." *Kent Archaeological Review* 139 (2000): 196-7.
- Jordan, David R. "New Greek Curse Tablets (1985-2000)." *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 40.1 (2000): 5-46.
- Jordan, David R. "Three Curse Tablets." In *The World of Ancient Magic. Papers from the Norwegian Institute at Athens 4-8 May 1997*, ed. David R. Jordan, Hugo Montgomery, and Einar Thomassen, 115-124. Bergen: Norwegian Institute at Athens, 1999.
- Jordan, David R. "A survey of Greek *defixiones* not included in the special corpora." *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 26 (1985): 151-197.
- Kiernan, Philip. "Did Curse Tablets Work?" In *Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference 2003: Proceedings of the Thirteenth Annual Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference, Leicester 2003*, ed. Ben Croxford, Hella Eckardt, Judy Meade, Jake Weekes, 123-134. Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2004.
- Kindt, Julia. "Personal Religion: A Productive Category for the Study of Ancient Greek Religion?" *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 135 (2015): 35-50.
- Kindt, Julia. *Rethinking Greek Religion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- Kindt, Julia. "Polis Religion- a critical appreciation." In *Entre Asclépios et Hippocrate: Etude des cultes guérisseurs et des médecins en Carie*, ed. Cécile Nissen, 9-34. Liège: Presses universitaires de Liège, 2009.
- Kropp, Amina. "Schriftlichkeit in der Schadenzauberpraxis am Beispiel der vulgärlateinischen *defixionum tabellae*." In *Literacy in Ancient Everyday Life*, ed. Anne Kolb, 261- 288. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018

- Marco Simón, Francisco. "Hercura and her Diving Consorts." In *Litterae Magicae: Studies in Honour of Roger S. O. Tomlin*, ed. Celia Sánchez Natalías, 159-164. Zaragoza: Libros Pórtico, 2019.
- Mastrocinque, Attilio. *Sylloge gemmarum gnosticarum*, I-II. Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali. Bollettino Di Numismatica. Rome: Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato Roma, 2003-2008.
- Mawer, C. F. *Evidence for Christianity in Roman Britain: The Small-Finds*. Oxford: BAR Publishing, 1995.
- McKie, Stuart. "Distraught, Drained, Devoured, or Damned? The Importance of Individual Creativity in Roman Cursing." In *Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference 2015: Proceedings of the 25th Annual Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference 2015*, ed. Matthew J. Mandich, Thomas J. Derrick, Sergio Gonzalez Sanchez, Giacomo Savani, Eleonora Zampieri, 15-27. Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2016.
- Millett, Martin. "Christianity in Roman Britain," In *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Britain*, ed. Martin Millett, Louise Revell, Alison Jane Moore, 660-680. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Németh, György. "Il Demone e Gesù." In *Terme di Diocleziano, la collezione epigrafica*, ed. Maria G. Granino Cecere, Gian Gregori, 619. Milan: Mondadori, 2012.
- Németh, György. "Jesus in ancient pagan magic: the Anna Perenna drawings." In *The Wisdom of Thoth: Magical Texts in Ancient Mediterraena Civilisations*, ed. Grażyna Bąkowska-Czerner, Alessandro Roccati, Agata Świerzowska, 55-60. Oxford: Archaeopress, 2015.
- Pearce, Susan. "The Hinton St Mary Mosaic Pavement: Christ or Emperor?" *Britannia* 39 (2008): 193-218.
- Petts, David. *Christianity in Roman Britain*. Stroud: Tempus, 2003.
- Piranomonte, Marina. "Anna Perenna. Un contesto magico straordinario." In *Contextos mágicos/ Contesti magici. Atti del Convegno Internazionale*, 161-174. Roma, 4-6 novembre 2009, 29-32. Rome: Soprintendenza Speciale per i Beni Archeologici di Roma, 2012.
- Piranomonte, Marina. "La fons Annae Perennae, un'illustre antenata." In *La Fontana dell'Acqua Acetosa a Roma. La storia, il restauro e il nuovo parco*, Cinisello Balsamo 2011, ed. Lusia Cardilli, Marcello Fagiolo, 137-140. Silvana Editoriale, Cinisello Balsamo, 2011.
- Piranomonte, Marina. "I contenitori di piombo della fontana di Anna Perenna e la loro valenza magica," *SMSR* 76/1 (2010a), 21-33.
- Piranomonte, Marina. "Religion and Magic at Rome: The Fountain of Anna Perenna." In *Magical Practice in the Latin West. Papers from the international conference held at the University of Zaragoza*, 30. Sept.–1st Oct. 2005, 191-213. Leiden: Brill, 2010b.

- Piranomonte, Marina. "Le ultime scoperte nel territorio del II Municipio." *Roma, memorie dal sottosuolo. Ritrovamenti archeologici 1980/2006*, ed. Maria A. Tomei, (Rome: Mondadori Electa, 2006), 184-211. Rome: Mondadori Electa.
- Piranomonte, Marina. "La fontana sacra di Anna Perenna a Piazza Euclide tra religione e magia." *MHNH revista internacional de investigación sobre magia y astrología antiguas* 5 (2005): 87-104.
- Polakova, J., Rapinesi, Ida A. "I materiali magici." In *Il santuario della musica e il bosco sacro di Anna Perenna*, ed. Marina Piranomonte, 38-52. Milan: Mondadori Electa, 2002.
- Primiano, Leonard Norman. "Manifestations of the Religious Vernacular: Ambiguity, Power and Creativity." In *Vernacular Religion in Everyday Life: Expressions of Belief*, ed. Marion Bowman and Ülo Valk 382-394. Abingdon: Routledge, 2012.
- Reynolds, Joyce and Volk, Terence. "Gifts, Curses, Cult, and Society at Bath." *Britannia* 21 (1990): 379-391.
- Rodwell, Warwick ed. *Temples, Churches and Religion in Roman Britain*. Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, 1980.
- Rüpke, Jörg. *On Roman Religion: Lived Religion and the Individual in Ancient Rome*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016.
- Salvo, Irene. "Experiencing Curses: Neurobehavioral Traits of Ritual and Spatiality in the Roman Empire." In *Lived Religion in the Ancient Mediterranean World*, ed. Valentino Gasparini, Maik Patzelt, Rubina Raja, Anna-Katharina Rieger, Jörg Rüpke and Emiliano Urciuoli, 157-180. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020.
- Sánchez Natalías, Celia. *Sylloge of Defixiones from the Roman West*. Oxford: BAR Publishing, 2022.
- Sánchez Natalías, Celia. "Paragraphics and Iconography." In *Choosing Magic*, ed. Richard Gordon, Francisco Marco Simón, Marina Piranomonte, 103-123. De Luca Editori D'Arte: Rome, 2020.
- Sourvinou-Inwood, Christiane. "Further Aspects of Polis Religion." In *Oxford Readings in Greek Religion*, ed. Richard Buxton, 38-55. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000b. (First published 1988 in *AION (archeol)* 10: 259-74.)
- Sourvinou-Inwood, Christiane. "What is Polis Religion?" In *Oxford Readings in Greek Religion*, ed. Richard Buxton, 13-37. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000a. (First published in Murray, Oswyn, Price, Simon, ed. 1990. *The Greek City from Homer to Alexander*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990. 295-322.)
- Spence, Charlotte. "Curse Tablets, Amulets, Spells." In *Ancient Greek Personal Religion*, ed. Julia Kindt, 296-318. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025.
- Spence, Charlotte. "Change and Continuity in Curse Tablets from the Roman World." In *Nemo non metuit: Magic in the Roman World*, ed. Fabrizio Conti and Elizabeth Ann, 53-98. Budapest: Trivent Publishing, 2022.
- Tomlin, Roger S. O. *The Uley Tablets*. Oxford Studies in Ancient Documents, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024.

- Tomlin, Roger S. O. "Literacy in Roman Britain." In *Literacy in Ancient Everyday Life*, ed. Anne Kolb, 201-220. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018.
- Tomlin, Roger S. O. *Britannia Romana: Roman Inscriptions and Roman Britain*. Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2017.
- Tomlin, Roger S. O. "Cursing a Thief in Iberia and Britain." In *Magical Practice in the Latin West*, ed. Richard L. Gordon and Francisco Marco Simón, 245-274. Leiden: Brill, 2010.
- Tomlin, Roger S. O. "Writing to the Gods in Britain." In *Becoming Roman, Writing Latin? Literacy and Epigraphy in the Roman West*, ed. Alison Cooley, 165-179. *Journal of Roman Archaeology*: Portsmouth, RI. 2002.
- Tomlin, Roger, S. O. "Vinisius to Nigra: Evidence from Oxford of Christianity in Roman Britain," *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 100 (1994): 93-108.
- Tomlin, Roger S. O. "The Curse Tablets." In *The Temple of Sulis Minerva at Bath: Volume 2 The Finds*, ed. B. Cunliffe, 59-270. Oxford, Oxford University Committee for Archaeology, 1988.
- Tomlin, Roger S. O. "Inscriptions." *Britannia* 13 (1982): 396-422.
- Versnel, Henk S. "'May he not be able to sacrifice...'" Concerning a Curious Formula in Greek and Latin Curses." *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 58 (1985): 247-269.
- Versnel, Henk S. "Beyond Cursing: The Appeal to Justice in Judicial Prayers." In *Magika Hiera: Ancient Greek Magic and Religion*, ed. Christopher A. Faraone and Dirk Obbink, 60-106. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- Versnel, Henk S. "Prayers for Justice in East and West: Recent Finds and Publications." In *Magical Practice in the Latin West*, ed. Richard L. Gordon and Francisco Marco Simón, 275-356. Leiden: Brill, 2010.
- Versnel, Henk S. "Response to Critique." In *Contextos mágicos/ Contesti magici. Atti del Convegno Internazionale*, Roma, 4-6 novembre 2009, 33-45. Rome: Soprintendenza Speciale per i Beni Archeologici di Roma, 2012.
- Watts, Dorothy. *Christians and Pagans in Roman Britain*. London: Routledge, 1991.
- Woodward, Ann, Leach, Peter, ed. *The Uley Shrines: Excavation of a ritual complex on West Hill, Uley, Gloucestershire: 1977-9*. London: English Heritage in association with British Museum Press, 1993.
- Wiśniewski, Robert. *The Beginnings of the Cult of Relics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.
- Wünsch, Richard. *Sethianisch Verfluchungstaflen aus Rom*. Leipzig: Teubner, 1898.