Cultural Hybridization: the Case of the Curse Tablets

by Carly Silver

In the first century C.E., Emperor Claudius established Roman control over most of what we today consider Great Britain. In the subsequent centuries, residents of the island produced many inscribed artifacts, ranging from monumental votives to more humble offerings. Some examples of the latter are curse tablets, on which devotees would invoke supernatural powers in order to influence an individual, group, or animal against their wills.[1] The concept of the curse tablet was a Greek innovation that the Romans continued; it appeared from the fifth century B.C.E. to the sixth century C.E.[2] Along with the Vindolanda tablets, the British curse tablets, which date from the first several centuries C.E., provide some of the only primary, non-monumental sources that the average inhabitants of Roman Britain themselves wrote or dictated.

In this essay, I will use the word "British" to indicate a culture or group of people specific to a geographic area: the island of Great Britain. I do not suggest that there was a singular "British people" or a "British culture" at this time, for there was not. I simply use the term "British" to indicate the cultural concerns of residents of this part of the world. It is beyond the scope of this paper to consider in-depth cultural and ethnic make-up of Roman Britain, which would likely have included influences from various cultures.

Called defixiones in Latin, the curse tablets were petitions to the gods to help the locals in their affairs. For economic and magical reasons, they were almost always written on lead tablets. The first curse tablet found in England was unearthed in 1805 at Lydney Park near the Welsh border.[3] It recorded the complaint of a man named Silvianus, who asked the god Nodens to bring Senicianus, who stole Silvanius' ring, to justice.[4] Since then, archaeologists have found about two-hundred fifty tablets across Britain,[5] mostly in the south and west.[6] The farthest north where an archaeologist has excavated a tablet is Ratcliffe-on-Soar in Nottinghamshire.[7] Curiously, no tablets appeared at legionary fortresses farther north, like Chester and York, where large populations of civilians lived, though one was found at Caerleon, which was a military site.[8]

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[1] David R. Jordan, "A Survey of Greek Defixiones Not Included in the Special Corpora," Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies 26:2 (1985): 151. For the two most comprehensive and recent studies of curse tablets, see John G. Gager, ed., Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World (New York: Oxford, 1992) and Daniel Ogden, "Binding Spells: Curse Tablets and Voodoo Dolls in the Greek and Roman Worlds," in Witchcraft and Magic in Ancient Europe: Greece and Rome, ed. Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark (London: Athlone Press, 1999).

[2] Jordan, "Survey," 151.

An examination of the curse tablets at Bath and Uley, two religious sanctuaries from the Roman period, will demonstrate that the interaction between Roman and native British cultures produced a new religio-cultural artifact: the British curse tablet.[9] Roman influences did not subsume indigenous British society, but merged with the native British culture to produce a new item that was wholly of neither, but was its own culture, that of Roman Britain. This process is called cultural hybridization. The "Roman" aspects of the tablets were their formulaic expressions and concept of a quasi-contract between human and god. It combined with a predominant British concern for theft in the curse tablets to create culturally-mixed artifacts.

Trans-cultural exchange between Rome and its provinces has long been known as "Romanization."[10] Over the past century, scholars have proposed varying models of Romanization, many of which emphasize "the gradual replacement of one way of life [native]" by the Roman way of living, a truly drastic, and perhaps unrealistic, point of view.[11] In her article "Creolizing the Roman Provinces," scholar Jane Webster proposes to replace past models of Romanization with "Creolization," which addresses the creative agency of the lower classes, rather than the elite-focused models of the early twentieth century.[12] The concept of Creolization originated with the academic study of the Creole slave culture in the Americas, the members of which, like the residents of the Roman provinces, lived in a colonial context and mixed their own beliefs with those of their conquerors to create a new faith. The "Romanization" and "creolization" models apply mainly to the creation of new cultural identities, not the creation of cultural products by and for those living in the provinces. Of course, those who were involved in the generative processes of making new identities may have been those who were creating artifacts like the curse tablets. I will, however, use such models to understand the creation of multi-cultural artifacts: the curse tablets.

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[3] Roger S.O. Tomlin, "Curse Tablets in Roman Britain," in XI Congreso Internazionale di Epigrafia Greca e Latina: Roma, 18-24 Settembre 1997: Atti, Vol. 1 (Rome: Edizioni Quasar, 1999), 554.

[4] Tomlin, "Roman Britain," 555.

[5] Tomlin, "Roman Britain," 556.

[6] "Curse Tablets from Roman Britain," Center for the Study of Ancient Documents, Oxford University, http://curses.csad.ox.ac.uk/sites/index.shtml (accessed March 28, 2012).

[7] Tomlin, "Roman Britain," 557.

[8] Tomlin, "Roman Britain," 557.

[9] Greg Woolf, "Beyond Romans and Natives," World Archaeology 28.3 (February 1997): 340, accessed October 4, 2011, doi:10.1080/00438243.1997.9980352.

[10] Jane Webster, "Creolizing the Roman Provinces," American Journal of Archaeology 105.2 (April 2011):209.

Most of the texts from Bath and Uley asked their gods to hunt out criminals who relieved them of their property and promised the deity a gift in return. These texts, which dated from the late second to early fifth centuries C.E.,[13] engaged in the Roman quasi-contractual relationship between men and gods, similar to those of other ancient societies. An individual would request that a deity perform an action on his or her behalf; in exchange for that favor, the devotee would give the god a sacrifice or offering as compensation.[14] These tablets usually mentioned stolen objects that were most often personal goods, including bathing tunics, cloaks, and gloves.[15] Often, the stolen items were dedicated to the goddess as payment.

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[11] Webster, "Creolizing," 218.
[12] Webster, "Creolizing," 218.
[13] Alex Mullen. "Linguistic Evidence for 'Romanization': Continuity and Change in Romano-British Onomastics: A Study of the Epigraphic Record with Particular Reference to Bath." Britannia 38 (2007), 37.

[14] Martin Henig, Religion in Roman Britain (London: Batsford, 1994), 12.

The supplicant described the stolen item and, if he or she did not know the thief's identity, included a variety of phrases that would allow the deity to find the culprit, regardless of his social status, age, or gender. The formulaic phrase used to encompass the thief's all possible identities is "whether man or woman." This Greco-Roman turn of phrase was expanded to include such perimeters at Bath as "whether slave or free," "whether boy or girl," or "whether pagan or Christian." Such a binary appears across Greek and Roman texts everywhere from St. Paul to curse tablets from the Greek island from Delos. The devotee explicitly requested the gods to "direct your anger" towards the thief and his accomplices, "whether man or woman."[16] By combining Mediterranean phrases and concepts with the British cultural concern of theft, the devotees at Bath and Uley managed to create a culturally hybridized artifact.

Devotes would use the "whether…whether" formula not only to discuss potential thieves, but also to wish down corporeal punishments on the thief. These tablets sought justice and vengeance, which would mean "the recovery of the stolen goods, as well as punishment of the alleged thief."[17] Such a trope that appeared also on Greek and Roman curse tablets[18] and remained a common trope during the first several centuries C.E.[19] For example, Tablet 41 requested that Sulis Minerva should not allow the thief and his family to drink, eat, defecate, or urinate before the culprit is punished.[20] Uley 4 was even more elaborate in its request, asking that the thief should neither "urinate nor defecate nor speak nor sleep nor stay awake nor [have] well-being or health" nor "gain consciousness"[21] until the item was given back.[22] Uley 76 forbade the thief from standing, sitting, drinking, eating, or buying off provocations[23] until the goods were returned.[24] Uley 72 used a similar formula, prohibiting the thief from lying, sitting, drinking, or eating.[25] In this way, bodily punishment was an inducement for the thief to return the items[26]

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[15] Tabs. Sul. 5, 32.

[16] H.J. 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 (New York: Oxford, 1991), 67.

[17] Gager, Curse Tablets, 175.

[18] Henk S. Versnel, "And Any Other Part of the Entire Body There May Be…:An Essay on Anatomical Curses," Ansichten Griechischer Rituale: Geburstags-Symposium fur Walter Burkert, ed. Fritz Graf (Stuttgart, Germany: B.G. Stuttgart und Leipzig, 1998), 237-238. Comparable examples appeared at Cnidus in Asia Minor and Amorgos in Greece.

[19] Bernard Mees, Celtic Curses (Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2009), 32.

British devotees turned the request for harm to come to the thief into a form of payment to the goddess. Tablet 44 requested that the thief spill his or her blood into a vessel as compensation.[27] On Tablet 65, the devotee stated, "To Minerva, the goddess Sulis, I have given the thief who has stolen my hooded cloak…."[28] Tablet 99 cursed whoever stole items from Deomiorix's house, asking the goddess to have the thief buy back the item with "his blood and his own life."[29] This statement implied that Sulis Minerva would take the thief's life if she could not reclaim the stolen goods. Such a gift of blood suggested that the thief would become analogous to a sacrifice to the goddess.[30] Interestingly, Uley featured tablets on which the devotee granted the god part of the stolen item if he recovered it. The act of "vowing a proportion of the value of a stolen item" to a god on a curse tablet was a Greco-Roman innovation seen as early as the third century B.C.E in Italy.[31] Such a concept did not appear at Bath.

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[20] Tab. Sul. 41.

[21] Versnel, "Beyond Cursing," 67.

[22] Uley 4.

[23] M.W.C. Hassall and R.S.O. Tomlin, "Roman Britain in 1994," Britannia 26 (1995):373.

[24] I am not sure what exactly this phrase means. Tomlin put a question mark after it in his translation and does not proceed to explain its meaning.

[25] M.W.C. Hassall and R.S.O. Tomlin, "Roman Britain in 1991," Britannia 23 (1992):311.

[26] Tab. Sul. 60.

[27] Tab. Sul. 44.

[28] Tab. Sul. 65.

[29] Tab. Sul. 99

[30] Tomlin, "The Curse Tablets," 70.

The curse tablets at Bath and Uley are analogous to those from elsewhere in Britain, most of which also of them refer to theft. Out of all the curse tablets found across Rome and Greece, only twenty that discussed theft came from areas outside Britain.[32] In contrast, the majority of curse tablets found in Britain recorded complaints about theft and requests for the deity to track down the stolen items.[33] Other forms of cursing, like erotic or legal magic, seen elsewhere in the Roman Empire did not appear often in Britain.[34] For example, all but one of the legible tablets at Bath seek vengeance for stolen goods, as do at least twenty out of the remaining thirty deciphered tablets found elsewhere in Britain.[35]

Why does theft appear primarily on British curse tablets? To protect one's property in an era without lockers would be difficult. If a bather could afford such a service, he or she might hire a "clothes guard," a man who, for a fee, would protect the individual's garments and trinkets from being stolen.[36] Alternatively, one could use one's own slave to guard one's clothes, but, if one was too poor to either own a slave or hire a guard, one's property went unprotected.[37] The fact that people needed clothes guards shows that theft was a rampant problem.[38] Most of the stolen goods named in the Bath tablets were portable items or clothing, which would be vulnerable to theft when the bathers undressed to take the waters. In fact, the so-called

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[31] Gager, Curse Tablets, 192.

[32] R.S.O. Tomlin, "The Curse Tablets," in The Temple of Sulis Minerva at Bath: The Finds from the Sacred Spring, Vol. 2., ed. Barry Cunliffe and John Davenport (Oxford: OUCA, 1988), 62.

[33] Tomlin, "The Curse Tablets," 62. At the time in which the Bath tablets were deciphered and published, Tomlin stated that, "if we ignore the lists of names," all British curse tablets could be definitively categorized as "curses against thieves." If we include the name lists as curses against particular thieves, then these tablets, too, count. Since then, the Uley tablets were published, most of which also concern theft. Therefore, as Tomlin concludes, most British curse tablets were prompted by theft.

[34] Tomlin, "The Curse Tablets," 62.

[35] Ogden, "Binding Spells," 38.

[36] Fagan, Bathing, 36.

[37] Tomlin, "The Curse Tablets," 81.

[38] Fagan, Bathing, 36.

"bathhouse thief" was a real-life character that plagued Roman baths across the empire.[39] With so many flocking into the bathhouse and temple complex daily—a number which might increase at times of festival or pilgrimage—it is no wonder that the criminally-minded might decide to pocket others' possessions, especially if the worshippers were too poor to afford guards.

One cannot be sure why theft appeared so frequently in curse tablets on Britain. Scholars have suggested that Britain was under-policed and, because there were few authorities to whom the locals could turn for help property, so they appealed to the gods.[40] All Roman provinces were probably under-policed, though, so that does not explain why Britain, rather than another area, featured so many curse tablets about theft.

The answer to this curiosity may lie in the economic and social statuses of the devotees at various shrines. Based on the supposition that bath-goers could not afford bath guards to protect their items, the usually small value of the items mentioned in the tablets, and the colloquial Latin on the defixiones, scholars have concluded that the supplicants at Bath were of the lower class.[41] Their counterparts at Uley might have been more prosperous.[42] Indeed, the items taken at Bath were often smaller and less valuable—such as cloaks and small amounts of money—than those stolen at Uley, which included cows and bridles. The evidence from Uley did not indicate that the devotees worshipping there were astoundingly rich, though. As non-elites, both populations likely could not afford legal counsel and, instead, would turn to the gods for help.

Because local authorities might not have been available or willing to help locals find their small, stolen items, the devotees appealed to a supernatural patron, rather than a human one. Using a Greco-Roman format of supplicating the gods, the lower-class residents of Britain asked for divine aid in obtaining vengeance and getting their stolen goods back. Therefore, divine revenge substituted for human justice that the devotees could presumably not get in the real world. For a reason scholars cannot define, the lower classes of Britain chose to address matters of theft on curse tablets rather than through other media. Perhaps individuals from other provinces addressed theft on curse tablets, as well, but, if they inscribed them on perishable materials, like wood, rather than lead, such artifacts may well not have survived to the modern era. Thus, the picture that we have of the ancient British curse tablets might be a mere trick of the archaeological record.

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[39] Fagan, Bathing, 36-37.

[40] Tomlin, "The Curse Tablets," 74.

[41] Geoff W. Adams, "The Social and Cultural Implications of Curse Tablets [Defixiones] in Britain and on the Continent," Studia Humanoria Tartuensia 7A, no 5. (2006):8-10.

[42] Tomlin, "The Inscribed Lead Tablets," 116.

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