WHO WROTE GREEK CURSE TABLETS?*

Many scholars of ancient Greek religion would probably agree that the use of curse tablets in the ancient Mediterranean world “cut across all social categories.”¹ In practice, however, it is also a common working assumption that the use of curse tablets was typical of the non-elite, i.e. of those who were not actively participating in politics or who could not accumulate surplus wealth.² I believe this last assumption to be dominant in part because these two hypotheses can

* The following abbreviations will be used throughout:


**DTA** Richard Wünsch, IG III, Appendix: *Defixionum Tabellae Atticae* (Berlin, 1897).


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easily turn out to be the same: if one were to think that curse tablets were produced at a similar rate by each social class, one would also have to assume that non-elite classes wrote or commissioned most curse tablets. This is indeed the assumption which readers are sometimes expected to hold. In the following, I argue that the bulk of published Greek curse tablets, which come from Attica in the fourth century BCE, do not support this assumption.

To test the assumption that, generally speaking, the writing of Greek curse tablets from the Classical and Hellenistic period was a non-elite phenomenon, I had to reconstruct the missing argumentation. This reconstruction forced me to consider a subsidiary question: since it is generally agreed that illiteracy was common in ancient Greek societies, it would be impossible to assume that curse writing spread across all social classes if we would not also imagine that those who were illiterate or insufficiently literate acquired curse tablets from literates. In other words, the claim that the use of curse tablets cut across all social categories is inextricably linked to the idea that those without sufficient writing skills acquired curse tablets from those possessing an adequate level of literacy. It is not surprising, therefore, that scholars typically assume that specialists wrote many if not most curse tablets. Consequently, I will also consider the assumption that curse tablets were generally written by professional curse writers and I will argue that this second assumption is similarly impossible to substantiate for the Classical and Hellenistic periods.

The goal of this study is to address the question of the social distribution of curse writers directly and to suggest at least two different avenues of research. On one hand, the evidence of curse tablets could come in support of the hypothesis that democratic institutions stimulated the expansion of literacy in Athens. It could well be that Athenians in the Classical and Hellenistic

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4 The only explicit theory of this kind was first proposed by Walter Burkert, *The Orientalizing Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997), p.69-70, who argued that professional curse writing evolved from the practice of eastern religious professionals. This theory was adopted by Sarah Iles Johnston, *The Restless Dead* (Berkeley, 1999) p.119. For a different interpretation, see, Marcello Carastro, “Quelle altérité pour les Grecs? Les katadesmoi et l’invention de la notion de magie,” *Monitor ISH* 5 [2003], p.1-14 and *La cité des mages* (Grenoble, 2006), p.163-188, who made the case that the language of Greek curse writing is better explained by Greek representations of binding. On curse tablets as the work of religious specialists, see also Dickie, *Magic and Magicians*, p.47, Fritz Graf, “Fluch und Verwünschung,” in *Thesaurus Cultus et Rituum Antiquorum*, Vol. 3 (Los Angeles, 2005) p.257, 269-270 and *Magic in the Ancient World*, p.134, Veit Rosenberger, *Religion in der Antike* (Darmstadt, 2012), p.72. Henk S. Versnel (in *Brill’s New Pauly*, s.v. *Defixio*) notes that the existence of professional curse writers can be guessed from “series of identical defixiones … found together and written by the same hand.” Versnel, however, did not point out that most of these series of tablets are rather small (from 2 to 5 tablets) and that all large series (c. 12 tablets or more) date to the second century CE or later and were all written in Greek (see below). Gager, *Curse Tablets*, p.5, provides the only discussion of professional curse writing, and looks for professional curse writers beyond the realm of the religious professional (see discussion below). For similar approaches see Ogden, “Binding Spells,” p.54-60, David R. Jordan, “Defixiones from a Well Near the Southwest Corner of the Athenian Agora,” *Hesperia* 54 (1985), p.205-255 and Derek Collins, *Magic in the Ancient Greek World* (London, 2008), p.71.

periods were exceptionally literate and that people from all classes came to see the writing of curse tablets as an effective way to solve problems. The fact that most of the earliest curse tablets come from Attica could be a manifestation of exceptionally high literacy levels in Athens. On the other hand, if one is to assume that ancient Greek or Latin literacy was connected with the possession of wealth or political power (an assumption that must be partly accepted by those assuming that democracy influenced literacy levels positively), one should rather consider the hypothesis that the writing of curse tablets was typical of ancient literate milieus. I have chosen to explore the second avenue of research.

Richard Wünsch bought most of the tablets studied here in 1894 from a certain Rhousopoulos, who acquired them in unknown circumstances. The majority of the tablets date from the fourth century BCE and come from Attica and were published by Wünsch in the Defixionum Tabellae Atticae (DTA). They are currently being re-edited by Jaime B. Curbera. In addition to these works, I have consulted Auguste Audollent’s Defixionum Tabellae (DT), which includes Greek tablets that were missing from Wünsch’s edition. I have also consulted David R. Jordan’s catalogues (SGD and NGCT) as well as the Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum, covering the rest of the evidence published up to 2006 at the time of writing.

The most common way to classify curse tablets is to divide the material according to the occasion for which they were assumed to have been written. Curse tablets are usually classified in four different categories: 1) “relationship” curses, also called amatory or erotic curses; 2) “judicial” curses (a group in which scholars usually count tablets that simply restrain speech abilities without leaving any hint that they were composed in the context of court proceedings); 3) “competition” curses, used in the context of dramatic competitions and games; and 4) “commercial” curses targeting businesses.

The fact that curse tablets from the last category targeted shopkeepers (καπηλοί), women, servitors and craftsmen must have contributed to the impression that curse tablets cut through all social categories. This material, however, represents only a fraction of the evidence. Moreover, the four categories do not inform us about cursers since cursers did not necessarily targeted individuals from their own social class. Even if they did and if the use of Classical and Hellenistic curse tablets offered a true cross-section of Athenian society, we would expect to find references to peasant or agricultural work. Rather, these are conspicuously absent from the tablets. In fact, most Classical and Hellenistic curse tablets (around two-thirds) only list names and do not provide enough information to be classified in any of the four categories above. Curse writers rarely referred to themselves and the literary tradition does not explicitly discuss the writing of curse tablets (see below).

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7 This is also the case for curse tablets for all places and all periods. See, however, Tab. Sulis 31 (from Bath, UK, and written in Latin c. 175-275 CE) concerning a lost ploughshare.
In sum, curse tablets tell us next to nothing about the social context in which they were written. This observation emphasizes the importance of an obvious fact: those who wrote curse tablets were literate to some degree. I see two ways in which curse writers could have come from every social classes. First, we would need to consider that literacy was widespread in Athens and that high levels of literacy were achieved in first-century BCE Athens (and elsewhere), the time at which the simplest of Greek curse tablets (i.e. those listing names and lacking in sentence structure) stopped being written. The second and more realistic hypothesis would be to consider that curse writing was the product of a specialized trade that was run by literates. Ancient literacy plays a fundamental role in this argument and I will (1) discuss this issue before (2) looking at literary and (3) epigraphic evidence that could tell us more about the social origin of curse writers. Finally, (4) I will present the only three sets of tablets that were most certainly written by professional curse writers. These all date to the second century CE or later. In short, I argue that the assumption that curse tablets were generally written by professional curse writers who worked on behalf of the non-elite cannot be substantiated for the Classical and Hellenistic periods. Rather, evidence suggests that the professionalization of curse writing was a post-classical phenomenon.

1. Ancient Greek Literacy

From a comparative perspective, it would be surprising if high levels of Greek literacy had been achieved by all social classes in Classical and Hellenistic times. There are, however, different types of literacy since people learn how to read and write for different reasons and in different situations. Since two-thirds of Classical and Hellenistic curse tablets only list names, “name literacy” (the ability to read and/or write names) could have been sufficient to write the majority of ancient Greek curse tablets. To know who could have written these curse tablets, we consequently need to evaluate the spread of name literacy in ancient Athens.

The level of name literacy can be approximately gauged by the fifth-century BCE practice of ostracism in Athens. If each person wrote their name individually, the ostracism quorum of

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9 To my knowledge, the only authors to have expressed the view that curse writing was further professionalized in later times are Collins, *Magic*, p.71, Gager, *Curse Tablets*, p.4 (increase in professionalization starting in the first century CE) and Christopher Faraone, *Ancient Greek Love Magic* (Cambridge, Mass., 1999), p.16 (increase starting in the first century BCE).


6,000 suggests that at least 20% (6,000 out of c. 30,000) of Athenian citizens were expected to possess name literacy. Again, if we assume that democratic institutions and wealth increased the chance of obtaining higher levels of literacy, we can further assume that this represent the minimum level of Greek literacy possessed by Athenian citizens in the fifth century BCE. It is more complicated to estimate the rate of name literacy of the total population of Attica. First, population estimation for the fourth century BCE, which are based on the estimation of the total number of citizens, vary between c. 75,000 and c. 250,000. If we assume that for each Athenian citizen there was one woman and two adult metic or slaves, we can estimate the total adult population at an average of 120,000. The minimum percentage of name literacy among the inhabitants of Attica would then have been somewhere around 5% (6,000 citizens out of a total population of 120,000). Following the same reasoning, we could also concede name literacy to all those who were part of the hoplite class. The percentage of the population of Attica able to write two-thirds of Classical and Hellenistic tablets (i.e. name-only tablets) was then probably somewhere between 5% (the minimum percentage of the population of Attica with name literacy) and 7.5% (the proportion of the population of Attica expected to have been of hoplite class or higher). Simply considering the practice of ostracism, we can consequently estimate that two-thirds of Classical and Hellenistic curse tablets from Attica could have been written by 7.5% of the population or less.

These estimates, however, depend on the hypothesis that Athenian citizens took democratic institutions seriously enough to learn how to read and write. There are signs that the democratic regime of Athens might not have increased the general level of literacy. Athenians did leave many public inscriptions and certainly expected some to read them but they did not take public measures to spread the use of writing. In fact, it was not necessary to possess any level of literacy to participate in basic Athenian democratic institutions. Arguments based on ostracism should also be qualified by epigraphic and literary evidence showing that some ostraka were pre-written for illiterate citizens. In any case, if we are to assume that c. 5% to 7.5% of the Athenian population could have written name-only curse tablets—and which disappeared by the first century BCE—it would be difficult to affirm that the ability to write curse tablets cut through all social classes and through all periods.

The poorly drawn letterforms, aberrant orthography, and deficient grammar found on some private inscriptions and curse tablets do not prove that basic literacy was widespread in Athens since non-official writing standards are unknown. As Mabel Lang showed, the letterforms

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13 I.e. 9,000 citizens out of a total population of 120,000. See n.3.
14 Thomas, “Reading, Writing,” p.23-24. As noted above, he fact that the earliest Greek curse tablets mostly come from Attica could further support the theory that Athenian citizens were exceptionally literate. For a recent argument on the effect of democratic institutions on literacy levels in Classical Athens, see Anna Missiou, Literacy and Democracy in Fifth-Century Athens (Cambridge, 2011) together with the reviews by Theodora S. F. Jim, Bryn Mawr Classical Review 2011.11.02 and Konrad Stauner, Gephyra 9 (2012), p.152-155.
15 See Thomas, “Reading, Writing,” p.18-19.
and orthography of almost all types of official and non-official writing fluctuated during the fifth century BCE and only stabilized toward its end.\(^\text{16}\) This means that writing in Attica around the fourth century BCE had been fixed only three or four generations earlier. If even those who had experience with writing did not think much about orthographic norms in non-official writing, we cannot take variations in handwriting, orthography, and grammar seriously when establishing literacy levels.

The obscurity and sheer illegibility of some tablets can also give the misleading idea that curse writers were barely literate. Many curse writers throughout antiquity apparently thought that curse texts should be encrypted or at least anomalous.\(^\text{17}\) In Classical and Hellenistic times, this mostly involved the misplacement or reversion of words and letters.\(^\text{18}\) The practice of sealing tablets shut with nails was perhaps caused by the assumption that reading the curse would dispel its power, as mentioned on a fourth-century BCE tablet from Pella.\(^\text{19}\) Other curse writers might have attempted to make their curses difficult or impossible to read in order to ensure their efficacy.\(^\text{20}\) The unpredictable nature of curse texts could have induced Wünsch in assuming that curse writers were barely literate. For instance, the text found on DTA 66, and which Wünsch said was “written by an illiterate,” is strangely placed and sometimes leaves out or misspells vowels. Its handwriting, however, does not appear to be less practiced than those of most tablets from the oracle of Dodona (c. 500-250 BCE)\(^\text{21}\) or than those from a fourth-century cavalry archive from Athens.\(^\text{22}\)

There are other reasons to believe that letterforms, orthography, syntax and the general appearance of curse tablet texts are not good indicators of the literacy levels of curse writers. The lead tablets recording consultations of the oracle of Dodona all appear to have been written by different persons and show a general fluidity in orthography and grammar.\(^\text{23}\) Some consultants wrote on behalf of communities, some planned to acquire ships or to do business and could have been educated. At least one appears to have been a peasant, and one a fisherman.\(^\text{24}\) Except in the


\(^\text{17}\) On what Ogden calls the “twistedness” of curse tablets, see “Binding Spells,” p.29-30.

\(^\text{18}\) E.g. DT 60, DTA 24, 86, 95.

\(^\text{19}\) See Curbera, “From the Magician’s Workshop,” p.105-107. This notion is expressed on at least three Greek tablets from the Hellenistic period: NGCT 31 (Pela, 4th cent. BCE), DT 42-43 (Megara, 4th cent. BCE) and DT 52 (Attica 3rd or 2nd cent. BCE).

\(^\text{20}\) See Curbera, “From the Magician’s Workshop,” p.105-106.

\(^\text{21}\) See Σ. Δάκαρη, Ι. Βοκοτοπούλου, Α.Φ. Χριστίδη, Τα χρηστήρια ελάσματα της Δωδώνης. Των ανασκαφών Δ. Ευαγγελίδη, 2 vols. (Athens, 2013).


\(^\text{24}\) Eidinow, _Oracles, Curses, and Risk_, ch.5.
case of one writer who appears to have been exceptionally learned, the spelling and grammar of the tablets do not follow the rules of official inscriptions.\textsuperscript{25}

In other words, the range of writing styles, orthography, grammar or spelling found in Classical and Hellenistic Greek curse tablets is similar to that found on comparable inscriptions, such as the oracular tickets from Dodona and an archive of the Athenian cavalry. Neither of these sets are representative cross-sections of Athenian society or of the ancient Greek-speaking world. If anything, they show that the writing of texts that were not supposed to be put up in a city did not usually follow strict writing norms.

Letterforms moreover appear to be a particularly poor indicator of the social origins of curse writers. For instance, we would expect that the handwriting found on DTA 66, categorized as “ignorant of letters” by Wünsch, would have been inferior to that of an Athenian cavalry archive. The only reason for this judgement appears to have been the misspellings found on the tablet and the strange disposition of the text. The first anomaly is in fact common to all types of non-official inscriptions and the second might have been an encryption method. We will have to wait for the publication of Curbera’s new edition of Wünsch’s tablets to judge the level of literacy of Classical and Hellenistic curse writers with more precision. For the time being, considering that the general appearance of curse tablet texts cannot give reliable information about the social origin of the writers, we should turn to the Greek literary tradition to see if it can help determine who wrote Greek curse tablets.

2. Literary Sources and Curse Tablets

Athenian women—especially courtesans and procuresses—were often associated with cursing in Classical and Hellenistic literature.\textsuperscript{26} Greek literature, however, always represent these women using non-literary cursing techniques. As I will argue in the next section, this is not specific to the representation of ancient witches. While references to curses or bindings are relatively common in ancient Greek texts, no explicit mention of curse tablets can be found in texts from the Classical and Hellenistic eras. In fact, the only representation of a professional curse writer, Pamphile, in Apuleius’ \textit{Metamorphoses} (3.17), dates from the second century CE.

\textit{Curse Tablets and the Idiom of Ancient Greek Cursing}

\textit{Katadesmos}, one of the technical terms now used for curse tablets, comes from the verb καταδέω, which primarily means the action of physically binding something to something else. In Homer, the verb can also denote how divinities “bind” the “path of the winds.”\textsuperscript{27} The verb was used on one third of legible tablets from Wünsch’s collection and it must have been intended in the sense

\textsuperscript{25} \textit{Id.}, p.130.

\textsuperscript{26} Dickie, \textit{Magic and Magicians}, p.77-92.

found in Homer.\(^{28}\) It is certainly because of the presence of the verb on curse tablets that Plato’s use of its past participle (καταδέσμοις) in Republic 364 is sometimes understood to refer to the writing of curse tablets rather than to the action of stopping or binding. In support of this interpretation, scholars have also noted the occurrence of the past participle form of καταδέω in the collection of recipe books from late antique Egypt known as the Papyri Graecae Magicae (PGM).\(^{29}\) A first problem with this reading is that we cannot assume that the practice of curse writing in Attica around the fourth century BCE was similar to that found in Egypt six or seven hundred years later.\(^{30}\) Moreover, when the PGM writers and a late antique curse writer denoted a curse tablet, they used κάτοχος rather than καταδέσμος.\(^{31}\)

Elsewhere, Plato used the verb καταδέω to refer to the binding of the soul with the body. Once again, the reference to the Homeric use of the word seems more likely although Plato did add an important detail. The soul, Plato wrote, is bound (καταδείπται) to the body through pleasure and pain “as though with a nail” (δόσπερ ἡλον).\(^{32}\) By this metaphor, Plato was most probably alluding to cursing but it would be difficult to tell to which type since curse figurines were also sometimes run through with nails. Moreover, even if this practice was relatively common, less than half of Classical and Hellenistic curse tablets were found sealed with nails.\(^{33}\)

While the use of figurines and of spoken words are common features of ancient Greek cursing,\(^{34}\) specific mentions of curse writing are absent from Classical and Hellenistic sources. Evidence suggests that καταδέω and cognates could designate the act of cursing in general rather than the act of cursing through writing. We need to look into the Latin tradition for the first explicit references to written curses.\(^{35}\) The only ancient term for curse tablets come from the PGM, a collection of recipe-books from late antique Egypt. The word used there, however, was always κάτοχος.

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\(^{29}\) See, e.g. PGM IV.2175-2178. See Watson, “Binding Spells,” p.5.

\(^{30}\) Gager, Curse Tablets, p.5-7. A comparison of curse tablet recipes from the PGM with Classical and Hellenistic curse tablets also make this point clear. Cf. PGM V.304-369; VII.396-404, 417-422 and 429-458; IX, X.24-35 and 36-50; XXXVI.231-255; LVIII.1-14.

\(^{31}\) PGM III.1-164; VII.396-404, 417-422, 429-458; XXXVI.1-34. A professional curse writer operating in Rome in the late fourth century also used κάτοχος to refer to a curse tablet (DT 187, line 55).

\(^{32}\) Phaedo, 83d. See also Timaeus, 73c.

\(^{33}\) Plato refers to this practice in the Laws, 933a. Curbera “From the Magician’s Workshop,” p.105, counts 75 nailed tablets out of the 200 complete tablets in the DTA corpus. Examples of figurines pierced with nails are listed in Christopher Faroone, “Binding and Burying the Forces of Evil: The Defensive Use of ‘Voodoo Dolls’ in Ancient Greece,” Classical Antiquity 10 (1991), p.200-205. See items No. 7 (found in a grave, Attica, third century BCE), 12 (Sanctuary of Zeus Hyspistos, Delos, first century BCE), 21 (unknown provenance, with Latin inscription, first century CE) and 27 (Middle Egypt, fourth century CE).

\(^{34}\) See Watson, Arae and Faroone, “Binding and Burying.”

\(^{35}\) Neglecting passages mentioning devotions or defigere only—two words referring to forms of cursing not necessarily implying the use of curse tablets (see, e.g. Livy, 8.9 and Ovid, Heroides 6.91-94)—we can list the following passages: Ovid, Amores, 3.7.27-30; Tacitus, Annals, 2.30, 69; Apuleius, Metamorphoses, 3.17. Apuleius provides the only evidence implying professional cursing activity.
Professional Curse Writers in Literary Sources

The text from Plato’s *Republic* mentioned above is one of the only two passages that could be used in support of the assumption that professional curse writers were common in Classical and Hellenistic Greece. In the *Republic*, Socrates’ interlocutor Adeimantos mentioned the activities of “itinerant priests and seers” (ἀγώρται δὲ καὶ μάντες) who were said to have peddled “enchantments and bindings” (ἐπαγωγαῖς τισιν... καὶ καταδέσμοις) to the rich and to have claimed that they could convince the gods to serve them. Adeimantos added that these individuals also brought forward books attributed to Orpheus and Musaeus and convinced citizen bodies as well as individuals of their capacity to purify them from wrongdoings (ἀδίκημα), or from those of their ancestors (364e-365a).

It is unproblematic to claim that Athenian religious professionals would have “driven the practice” of curse writing, or that this practice could involve the work of “different kinds of specialists.” It is less so, however, to base the argument that curse tablets were usually written by religious professionals or so-called magicians on the evidence provided by Plato.

Support for this theory can also be sought in a passage of the *Laws* concerning healers and religious professionals injuring others with φάρμακα (“drugs”). Under that heading, Plato classified a first type of offence “in which injury is done to bodies by bodies according to nature’s laws.” The second group includes cases in which harm was done “by means of trickery, incantations and by what are called bindings” (ἢ μαγγανείαις τέ τισιν καὶ ἐπωδαῖς καὶ καταδέσεσι λεγομέναις). Those targeted by Plato here are μάντες and τερατοσκόποι (“seers” and “interpreters of portents”) whom he assumed to have harmed others through the use of the second type of φάρμακα. Plato must have been referring to the same individuals he targeted in *Republic* 364. The exact meaning of κατάδεσις, however, is difficult to ascertain. Apart from the *Laws* passage, it occurs in only two other texts, where it refers to knots. The meaning appears to be very similar to that of καταδέσμος. Again, nothing indicates that Plato referred specifically to written curses.

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36 Plato, *Republic*, 364b-c: ἀγώρται δὲ καὶ μάντες ἐπὶ πλουσίων θύρας ἱόντες πείθουσιν ὡς ἔστι παρὰ σφίσι δύναμις ἐκ θεῶν ποικιλομενή θυσίας τε καὶ ἐπωδάς, εἴτε τι ἀδίκημα τοῦ γέγονεν αὐτοῦ ἢ προγόνον, ἀκείσθαι μεθ᾽ ἡδονῶν τε καὶ ἐρτῶν, ἔιν τε τινα ἐχθρὸν πημὴν ἑθάλη, μετὰ σμικρῶν δαπανῶν ὄμοιως δίκαιον ἀδίκος βλάψει ἐπαγωγαῖς τισιν καὶ καταδέσσις, τοὺς θεοὺς, ὡς φασίν, πειθοντές σφισίν ὑπηρετεῖν.


38 Ogden, “Binding Spells,” p.54.


40 See *Laws* 932e-933e.

The problem is not simply that the words used by Plato do not specifically refer to curse tablets. By implicating diviners and “itinerant priests” (i.e. ἀγύρται, a term which meaning is far from being clear), Plato was making indirect accusations that supported his claims and his position in Athenian society. The cathartic rites that Plato ascribed to religious professionals contradicted the theodicy he presented in his dialogues since their presumed efficacy would have enabled one to commit injustices without facing universally sanctioned consequences. Those Plato opposed provided means to cope with past and present injustices in the same way that his theodicy provided readers with a reason to pursue a life according to justice. The distance created between Socrates and those Plato criticized was perhaps not as great as it might seem. Like Plato’s Socrates and Plato himself, those criticized by Adeimantos also had recourse to myths to frame their claims about the afterlife. Trials for impiety in Athens were often related to the Eleusinian mysteries, which, for Plato at least, were related with the afterlife. We can expect that these trials raised the stakes of engaging critically with popular soteriological practices. Moreover, if we are to follow the dialogue to the letter, Athenians did not consider the so-called diviners and itinerant priests charlatans. On the contrary, Greek cities welcomed them and celebrated their rites. Plato appears to have been contradicting religious professionals who garnered popular support and it is probable that the citizens who profited from their rites were not ready to accept Plato’s criticisms and the ethics he advocated.

This antagonism suggests that Plato’s mention that diviners practiced bindings were not incidental remarks about Athenian society. On the contrary, it was particularly clever of Plato to suggest that those who pretended to remove ἀδίκημα — which manifested themselves in the form of a curse — would have also sold curses. His accusations should be read in the same light as any rhetorical defense. That he made a similar association in the Laws is not further evidence but a repetition of a similar claim in a more explicitly normative tone.

3. The Social Distribution of Curse Writers and Epigraphic Evidence

Literary texts do not provide us with evidence to back up the double assumption questioned here, namely, that curse tablets were generally written by professional curse writers who worked on behalf of the non-elite. Curse tablets do not give more conclusive evidence.

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44 Plato, Gorgias 493a-b.


46 For a similar observation, see Graf, Magic, p.23.
As argued above, inferences drawing upon the handwriting, orthography or grammar of curse tablets are unconvincing. To infer social classes on literacy levels implies a drastic simplification of reality; jumping from handwriting alone to social class is even less likely to be accurate. Another problem is that Wünsch and Audollent (the editors of the two main curse tablet corpora) only informally gauged writing proficiency. It is also problematic that they mixed writing proficiency together with other criteria such as orthography and grammar to describe the education level of writers.

Of the complete and legible tablets from DTA, Wünsch noted that only three or perhaps five writers were particularly experienced while three were not.47 One might assume that Wünsch studied differences in handwriting but that he did not systematically annotate the tablets since he also claimed that most writers ignored grammatical rules.48 Surveying the same corpus, Curbera mentioned the presence of many clumsily written tablets and cited four examples.49 He also noted that the DTA inscriptions were similar to those found on monuments.50 From the reports of these two scholars, it appears that the handwriting of the majority of Classical and Hellenistic curse tablets from Attica was unremarkable. We can conclude that most of those who wrote the tablets had some experience with writing.

Scholars mentioning the large distribution of handwriting types found on curse tablets usually cite three curse tablets. Statistically, this small and mixed sample does not tell much about the penetration of curse writing in Attica in the Classical and Hellenistic age.51

To get a better idea of the social distribution of cursers, we can also look at the content of the curses themselves. While we can assume that curses were aimed at people known by those who wished them ill, the targets were not necessarily competitors. The mention of the target’s craft, for example, could have been a way to identify them. As Esther Eidinow pointed out, it is unlikely that curse tablets were mainly caused by the agonistic nature of ancient Greek society when curses meant to influence the result of dramatic or athletic competitions represent only a fraction of the evidence.52 In any case, to assess the only argument that could support the idea that the use of curse tablets cut across all social classes, it was necessary to follow the assumption

47 Well written tablets: DTA 55 (“very elegant writing imitating the beauty of those found on public monuments”), 87 (“most beautiful writing”), 109 (“example of those [tablets] that are written with care”). One could also count DTA 68 (“written with very small letters”) and DTA 107, which show some level of literacy (and perhaps even an attempt at imitating classical examples); Badly written tablets: DTA 66 (“judiciary inscription written by an uneducated man and consequently full of mistakes”), 75 (“very badly written, perhaps by a foreigner”), 94 (“If the tablet is genuine—which I do not doubt at all—it is a very curious example of an attempt [at cursing] done by an unlearned man”).

48 DTA, p.2.

49 Curbera, “From the Magicians’ Workshop,” p.113.

50 Id., p.109.

51 Eidinow (Oracles, Curses, and Risk, p.143) and Ogden (“Binding Spells,” p.59) point to DT 85 (Beotia, third or second century BCE, no later than the Hellenistic period, or second/third century CE), SGD 48 (Athens, c.323 BCE) and 173 (Olbia, between third and first century BCE).

52 These are DTA 33, 34, both from Attica and third or fourth century BCE; DTA 45, Athens, third or second century BCE; SGD 91, Gela, c. 450 BCE). See Oracles, Curses, and Risk, p.156.
that cursers at least shared the same social environment as their targets. I have separated these
curses in three groups: curses related to theft, curses related to craftsmen or to service-providers
and curses related to lawsuits. I have rejected curses related to relationships and those related to
competitions. The number of tablets related to competitions is too small to be representative of
any class interest. I have also assumed that relationship curses could be intended for almost any
target and not necessarily to those belonging to the curser’s social milieu.

Curses Related to Theft

Curses related to theft give tantalizing information about the socio-economic origin of cursers.\(^5^3\)
Some stolen items, such as bathing clothes or cloaks, might suggest that the cursers were not
particularly rich.\(^5^4\) Market price, however, was not the only value that these garments could have.
Curses mentioning the theft of money provide a better way to assess the economic level of
cursers. DT 42 from Megara, undated but certainly written after the Roman occupation, cursed an
individual who accused the curser of borrowing twenty denarii. This seems to have been a
relatively small sum for the first century CE.\(^5^5\) The other example, DT 212 (third century BCE,
found in Bruttium), involves the theft of three gold coins. This category might show a relatively
wide social distribution depending on the various degrees at which the economy was monetized
in these two different places. In regions where coins were not usually circulating, the simple
possession of coinage would suggest a wealthy individual. However relevant the comparison with
theft-related curses might be, the proportion of Classical and Hellenistic tablets in this group is
insignificant (14 out of the 156 providing enough information besides the name of the targets; i.e.
9\(%\)).\(^5^6\) It does not consequently offer a representative sample of the spread of the use of curse
tables among different social groups.

Curses Related to Craftsmen or Service-Providers

These curses, the few tablets that targeted artisans, shopkeeper (κάπηλοι) and prostitutes, appear
to illustrate non-elite interests if we assume that they were written by professional rivals.\(^5^7\) Curse


\(^5^4\) Bathing clothes: *Tab. Sulis* 63; cloaks: *Tab. Sulis* 62; DT 6, 212. We might compare these with the lost blankets requested on tablets from Dodona. See Parke, *The Oracles of Zeus*, p.272.

\(^5^5\) The expenses for food for a Roman soldier’s salary in 81 CE (in Egypt) was of 240 drachmas (roughly 240
denarii) a year, which means that the price of food for one day was evaluated at 0,7 drachma. See the *P. Gen. Lat. 1*

\(^5^6\) Following Audollent: DT 2-4, 6, 8, 11, 12 (Cnidus, 300-100 BCE, various items); DT 74-75 (Achaia, no dating
and no indication of stolen object); DT 212 (Bruttium, third century BCE, three gold coins).

\(^5^7\) These are: DTA 12 (leather-worker); DTA 30, 70, 72-73, 75, SGD 43 (shopkeepers and shops); DTA 55 (pipe-
maker and carpenter); DTA 68 (multiple targets, including shopkeepers, a miller, a boxer, pimps, and prostitutes);
DTA 69 (a helmet-maker and a gilder); DTA 71, 74, 84 (workshops); DT 87 (multiple shopkeepers, women, a linen-
tablets binding establishments (καπηλεῖα) or their managers could have been written by people frequenting these places, by corporations as well as by rival owners or shopkeepers. However, if naming a trade was a way to identify targets, we do not know whether the curser targeted them for their business unless he or she targeted the work itself (ἐργασία).

Even if tablets were intended to impede competing businesses, they were not necessarily written by owners of small shops or by their employees. One of the few commercial curse, a fourth-century BCE tablet from Athens (DTA 87), for example, curses a neighbouring shopkeeper along with five more individuals including a woman, a linen-seller (σινδο[ν]πώλην), a carpenter (καναβιο[υ]ργόν), servants, and several other women whose trades are not mentioned. Sosimenes, one of the targets, must have been a business-owner since a shopkeeper and the linen-seller are said to have belonged to him. It would be surprising to find a single artisan or a small retailer who could have been in direct competition with so many people with such a variety of trades. Since the curser mentioned that he/she was a neighbour of his victims, Eidinow has suggested that this and similar curses might have been prompted by animosity coming from living in close quarters, or perhaps by rivalries between clubs or societies.58 This is plausible, as is the hypothesis of a competition between landlords being transferred and fought out between their employees’ or their slaves’ shops.

Tablets targeting non-descript workplaces (ἐργαστήρια) or work (ἐργασία) are more likely to have been written in response to competition.59 These curses targeted different kind of businesses: one cursed a leather-worker (DTA 12), another healers (SGD 124). Since Athenian workplaces could be relatively large, this is still no proof of curses having been written by relatively poor individuals. For example, the orator Lysias owned a shield-making ἐργαστήριον operated by 120 slaves.60 Even if most commercial tablets had been targeting owners of small establishments, two important facts run against using this evidence to argue that curse tablets cut across all social categories. First, to be an artisan, a shopkeeper or a prostitute was not the norm in Classical and Hellenistic Greece. More importantly, only a handful of Classical and Hellenistic tablets could be said to have been targeting artisans, shopkeepers or prostitutes. Even if we were to assume that most of these curses had been written by direct rivals, they still represent only 4% of the Greek tablets available in the two main corpora and in David Jordan’s first survey (DT, seller and a frame-maker); DT 52 (female slaves), DTA 86, 97, DT 41, 47, 72-73, 92, 109, SGD 43, 73, 75 (work); DT 74 (stonemason); SGD 3-4 (blower from silverworks); SGD 11 (stall-holder, household slave, innkeeper, and pimp); SGD 20 (blacksmith); SGD 44 (potters); SGD 48 (scribe); SGD 52 (net-makers); SGD 72 (seamstress); SGD 124 (workplaces and men belonging to healers); SGD170 (helmsman). For a survey of this category, see Eidinow, Oracles, Curses, and Risk, p.191-205.

58 Eidinow, Oracles, Curses and Risk, p.198-199.
59 DTA 71, 74, 75 (also cursing κάπηλοι), 84, 86; DT 41, 52, 72, 73; SGD 75, 124. Following Eidinow, Oracles, Curses, and Risk, p.425, I have excluded SGD 88.
60 Lysias, 12.19.
DTA and SGD). This represents 23% of the Classical and Hellenistic tablets providing information about their targets.61

Curses Related to Lawsuits

The amount of Classical or Hellenistic tablets potentially written in the context of lawsuits is higher than that of any other group.62 As many have argued, Athenian litigation was more of a way to resolve honour-based feuds between powerful groups than an attempt to impose the rule of law on all citizens.63 If we add curses naming Athenian aristocrats to the 55 judicial tablets, this would mean that one out of every four of these curses was probably aimed at an Athenian politician.64 This would also mean that almost half of the Classical and Hellenistic tablets providing information about their targets (43%; 67 out of 156) were aimed at politicians or written in a judicial context.65 Keeping with the assumption that curse tablets were aimed at competitors—or at least, at persons whom the curser knew—we could then conclude that about half of these tablets were probably written in an elite context. On the other hand, scholars have responded to the claim that Athenian courts mainly served the interests of the rich by arguing that legal literature is not representative of the whole spectrum of Athenian legal experience.66 Acknowledging the existence of other legal procedures could also buttress the hypothesis that Athenians of all stripes had access to legal institutions. Eidinow lends support to this position by showing that Athenian judicial curse tablets imply the presence of many attendants at court proceedings. Her discussion of several tablets is particularly interesting as it shows that women were present in courts even if they were not represented in the speeches of Athenian orators.67 However, the question of the representativity of the Athenian courts themselves remain unresolved. Since we are not in a better position to judge of the representativity of curse tablets, one of these two domains of evidence cannot be used to support a hypothesis concerning the other without external support.

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62 I follow the count in Eidinow, Oracles, Curses and Risk, p.168-169, who excluded tablets that do not contain forensic language: DTA 25, 38, 39, 63, 65-67, 81, 88, 94, 95, 103, 105, 106, 129, 158; DT 39, 43, 44, 49, 60, 62, 63, 67, 77, 87-89, 90; SGD 6, 9, 19, 42, 49, 51, 61, 68, 71, 89, 95, 99, 100, 107, 108, 133, 176, 179; NGCT 1, 9, 10, 12, 14, 15, 24, 38. Judicial curses recognized by John Gager (Curse Tablets, p.116-150) to have involved the elite: DTA 38, 103, SGD 14. The names of Athenian aristocrats have also been found together on DTA 24, 26, 47-50 and SGD 14, 48, 107.


64 Considering that, of the 67 judicial curses listed by Christopher Faraone (“The Agonistic Context,”), DTA 24, 26, 38, 47-50, 95, 103, DT 60 and SGD 14, 48, 107, 162 involve aristocrats. On the identification of Greek aristocrats, see the prosopographical studies cited in Faraone, “The Agonistic Context,” p.16, n.76. On the links between curse tablets and Athenian aristocrats, see Parker, Polytheism, p.129-131.

65 See the discussion in Eidinow, Oracles, Curses and Risk, p.172-173.


67 Eidinow, Oracles, Curses and Risk, p.172-173.
In sum, the epigraphic evidence available to claim that curse writing in Classical and Hellenistic Athens cut across all social categories is not particularly good. Assuming that curse writers targeted their rivals, the little that can be inferred is that a minute amount of these tablets were written by workers or business-owners. Workers among this group might have been relatively poor but they are not representative of the population of Attica. Those who worked the land—the majority of the population—are never alluded to on Classical and Hellenistic curse tablets. It is consequently not possible to conclude that the use of curse tablets effectively cut across all social classes or that they were mostly used by the non-elite. Rather, since we know that curse tablets were written documents, we can infer that their authors were literate and consequently more likely part of the elite. To leave the argumentation there, however, would be ignoring that professional curse writers or literates could have provided their skills to the illiterate. The following and final part of the argument assesses what curse tablets can tell about this trade.

4. Professional Curse Writing and Epigraphic Evidence

As was argued in section 2, the only literary source that could support the theory of an ancient Athenian curse tablet market was not conclusive: Plato did not specifically mention curse tablets and his mention of the sale of curses is suspect. It remains to be seen if the epigraphic record can nonetheless support the claim that religious professionals commonly provided literate and non-literate with curse tablets.

John Gager made the most extensive argument for the existence of an ancient curse tablet market. Noting the presence of elegant handwritings among curse writers, of “highly formulaic texts” and of large caches of tablets found in a single place, he concluded that “on balance the scales appear to favor professionals [by which he means either magi or scribes], at least in the Roman period, both for inscribing the tablets and for providing the formulas.” 68 Three assumptions are at work in the argument. First, elegance in handwriting does not provide us with reliable evidence about individuals who wrote curse tablets on a professional basis. As Gager noted, scribes could have written one or several curse tablets. Scribes, however, or any experienced writers, could have also done so for him- or herself. The second assumption associates the use of complex formulas with professionalism. Any literate (or barely literate), however, could have copied a recipe for his or her own profit.69 Moreover, even if late antique curse tablets sometimes show textual or graphic devices similar to those found in the documents from the PGM collection, it appears that no published curse tablet has been (faithfully) copied from one of the extant recipes.70 It is also possible that some curse writers created formulas on the spot.

68 Gager, *Curse Tablets*, p.5.
69 See the comments of Tomlin to *Tab. Sulis* 8.
70 On SGD 152, 153, 155, 156, 159 and NGCT 93 and their similarity to PGM IV.336-406, see Sophie Kambitsis, “Une nouvelle tablette magique d’Égypte” BIFAO 76 (1976), p.213-223 (available online at
Both assumptions ignore the possibility that experienced writers could write curse tablets for themselves. Moreover, Roger S. Tomlin’s edition of the baths of *Aquae Sulis* (modern Bath) cannot be used to support the assumption that curse tablets were written by professional curse writers. As Gager noted, Tomlin mentioned that most of the curse writers from *Aquae Sulis* were experimented, that a few had “calligraphic” hands and that some “where so clumsy as to suggest semi-literacy.” While Tomlin noted the “clerical” appearance of the handwriting found on the majority of the tablets, it was in part to suggest that scribes or clerks from the procurator’s office nearby might have written the tablets, not that tablets had been written by professional curse writers. In fact, Tomlin’s concluded that the tablets must have all been written individually. Considering that a professional curse writer would have certainly left more than one tablet, it is unlikely that even a single one of them worked in late Roman *Aquae Sulis*.

The best evidence for professional curse writing is found when multiple tablets written by the same hand have been explicitly commissioned by different individuals. Only one extant set presents this combination of characteristics (see below). Anybody who wrote a tablet once can be expected to have tried again a few times at least. I expect professional curse writers to have left at least a dozen curse tablets.

Wünsch, the editor of the *Defixionum Tabellae Atticae* (DTA), did not notice the presence of large finds of tablets written by single individuals even though he looked for similar handwritings. He pointed out when a single person had written multiple tablets but he did not notice more than two tablets in each instance. Similarly, Curbera’s preliminary study of the DTA corpus uncovered only four sets of two to three tablets each.

The following section lists the only three sets of tablets that were most probably written on behalf of others according to one or more of the three following criteria: they include a relatively high number of tablets written by the same person (12 or more), a proof that they were commissioned, and/or show very similar or identical formulas. All three sets were written in Greek and date from the third century CE or later.

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1 Tab. Sulis, p.84, 100.
2 Id., p. 88, 98.
3 Id., p.99.
4 See e.g. DTA, p.45 and DTA 35 and 36, which both date from the Roman period.
5 “From the Magician’s Workshop,” p.111-113.
6 I have excluded SGD 91 (c. 450 BCE, from Gela) even though it was written for somebody else since it specifies that it was written on account of friendship.
Tablets from Two Wells on the Athenian Agora, c. 250 CE

According to Jordan, a single person from the mid-third century CE inscribed fifteen curse tablets and deposited them in two wells in the Athenian agora. The tablets were found below a destruction layer associated with the Heruli invasion of 267 CE. Most of the tablets follow the same formulas and the writer probably worked from memory since the wording of the formulas often slightly differs. One tablet calls upon a spirit of the dead in what appears to be an attraction curse, or ἀγωγή. Four tablets attempt to separate women from male acquaintances and one hands over a certain Tyche, daughter of Sophia, to Typhon. The other tablets bind three wrestlers, a charioteer, and one man called Eros son of Isigeneia, who is not otherwise identified. Considering the relatively small number of tablets written, it is not entirely clear at first sight whether their author wrote them for him- or herself or for others.

The tablet targeting Tyche, however, was probably pre-written to be sold afterward. Jordan pointed out that the name of the target was slightly compressed as if somebody had left a space intending to sell the curse in the future but that the space that he/she had left was too small for Tyche’s and her mother’s name. Fifteen tablets are already more than the average number found in most same-hand sets but closer to the small sets of same-hand tablets than to the two other ones listed below (respectively 37 and 16 or more). Nevertheless, the fact that one of the tablets was pre-written indicates the work of a professional curse writer.

Tablets from a columbarium near Rome, c. 400 CE

This set was found among the urns of a columbarium on the via Appia and was published over a century ago by Wünsch. Most of the tablets were written in Greek and targeted charioteers. Comparing the names of the charioteers with the names of Roman charioteers found on contorniati—medallions on which the names of emperors and charioteers both appeared—Wünsch dated the tablets to c. 390 CE.

Of about fifty Greek tablets, thirty-seven were written by the same person. Considering the number of tablets left and the fact that the formulas are very similar, it is likely that the curse writer operated professionally. What kind of professional, it is difficult to tell. Literary evidence relating curses and chariot racing does not suggest that charioteers were expected to know how to

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77 These are SGD 22-35 and 38. For publication and dating, see Jordan, “A Curse Tablet from a Well in the Athenian Agora,” Hesperia (1975), p.245-248 and Jordan, “Defixiones from a Well.”
78 See, e.g., PGM XXXVI.69-160.
79 See discussion in Jordan, “Defixiones from a Well.”
80 See Richard Wünsch, Sethianische Verfluchungstafeln aus Rom (Leipzig, 1898) = DT 140-187.
81 See Wünsch, Sethianische, p.56-63.
82 Wünsch, Sethianische, tablets No. 6-8, 10-11, 16-33, 35-48 (= DT 145-147, 149-150, 155-171, 173-186). Tablets No. 9, 12-15, 34 and 49 show different letterforms. See p.53-56 for handwriting identifications.
write curse tablets. Any literate person with a recipe-book or some imagination may have inscribed the tablets.

*Tablets from Amathous, Cyprus, c. 200 CE*

A large deposit of curse tablets from a shaft near Amathous on Cyprus provides the best evidence of professional curse writing (DT 18-37). Of the twenty tablets published so far, sixteen show the same handwriting. There are, however, 260 tablets in the lot and more tablets with the same handwriting could probably be found. According to preliminary observations and a partial publication, the tablets appear to have been written by several persons with handwritings dated to the late second century or the early third century CE. All of the published tablets show the same prayers, invocations and divine names. These features appear almost in the same order each time. It is also certain that these tablets were written on somebody else’s behalf since they show the same handwriting and list the names of different petitioners. According to Jordan, the unedited tablets bear the same formulas.

5. Conclusion

These three sets of curse tablets are the only epigraphic evidence attesting the practice of professional curse writing. This fact is well worth repeating since the implicit double assumption that I have discussed here—that curse tablets were usually written by religious professionals on behalf of the non-elite—is often generalized to all curse tablets. The only literary evidence that has been brought in support of the first part of the double assumption is problematic. Similarly, epigraphic evidence suggests that professional curse writers were exceptional or existent during the Classical and Hellenistic periods. Clear evidence only surfaces up in sources from the second century CE and later.

Of course, my analysis is also based on assumptions. The first one is that socio-historical studies should value epigraphic corpora over literary traditions. From this, I have also assumed that the absence of epigraphic evidence should be valued over unsubstantiated expectations, e.g. that curse writing or that “magic” in general is typical of the non-elite; that an act which we recognize as religious must have been performed by a religious professional. I expect that my second assumption will be less widely shared that the first since it runs against the testimony of

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83 See the three occurrences of curse accusations involving charioteers in the *Histories* of Ammianus Marcellinus (26.3.3, 28.1.27, 28.4.25) with Dickie, *Magic and Magicians*, p.282-287.

84 For a study of these tablets, their ancient setting and their discovery, see Andrew T. Wilburn, *Materia Magica* (Ann Arbor, 2012) p.169-218.

85 Pierre Aupert & D. R. Jordan, “Magical Inscriptions on Talc Tablets from Amathous,” *American Journal of Archaeology* 85 (1981), p.184. Jordan subsequently mentioned that he saw the work of several hands on those that he studied, cf. Gager, *Curse Tablets*, p.133, n.46. T. B. Mitford, who published the third edition in the 1970s, remarked that the writing of two tablets (IKourion 130 and 132) differed markedly from those of the fifteen remaining *defixiones*, while two others (IKourion 137 and 127) had a very similar handwriting.

86 See Gager, *Curse Tablets*, p.133, n.46.
Plato. However, Plato’s comments appear less reliable once we assume that his sociological imagination was limited by his social position. Since Plato’s own philosophy and theodicy was directly contradicted by the do ut des sacramental theology implied by his opponents’ practices, he must have been particularly interested in believing that the religious professionals in question also sold curses to the rich. More importantly, the verb κατάδεω and its substantivized form (which Plato used in the same sense as κατάδεσις in the Laws passage) referred throughout antiquity to knots or to the act of binding, not to curse tablets. “Curses” (ἄρωι, etc.) and the act of “binding” (κατάδεω) were certainly common in Greek literature but no author described a curse tablet before Tacitus and Apuleius in the second century CE.87

To assume from Plato’s Republic and Laws that it was common to ask the services of professional curse writers throughout the Mediterranean world from the fifth century BCE to the fifth century CE cannot be supported by the evidence provided by published curse tablets. Similarly, to assume that curse tablets were used by people from all social categories cannot be substantiated by literary or epigraphic evidence.

In other words, evidence suggests that, before the second century CE, curse tablets were usually written by individuals who were literate to various degrees and who cursed for their own profit. Both literary and epigraphic sources suggest that the professionalization of Greek curse writing was a late phenomenon. It is difficult to say whether these professionals made their first appearance during the second century CE or if they increased in numbers from that point on. In any case, it is more likely that the use of curse tablets started to reach illiterate or partially literate individuals during the first centuries CE.

The results of this study are not simply negative. They also raise new questions: why did the appearance or popularization of professional curse writing occur around the second century CE? Could larger socio-economic changes be partly responsible for this change? Could the diffusion of new textual devices found on late antique curse tablets and other media be related to the appearance or acceleration of this trade?88 In other words, could the professionalization of curse tablet writing be the symptom of a new trade that involved a new type of professional (religious or otherwise) dealing in techniques such as those found in the Greco-Egyptian recipe books?

Finally, I should also offer some explanation to readers who think that the negative arguments of sections one to three were unnecessary. Unlike many other ancient corpora, the corpus of ancient Greek and Latin curse tablets is in constant evolution. Since new evidence will likely come to light in the future, the study of curse tablets can afford bold hypotheses as well as falsification attempts. First, new tablets are regularly found and the rate of discovery might

87 Tacitus, Annals 2.69 (the mention of mysterious writing in 2.30 also strongly suggests curse tablets); Apuleius, Metamorphoses, 3.17.

88 E.g. voces magicae, palindromes, word-pictures (i.e. carmina figurata), references to exotic or unknown divinities. See Gager, Curse Tablets, p.6-9. Some of these features are also found on engraved gems, others became part of philosophical discussions in late antiquity.
increase as late antique archaeology develops. Secondly, around 750 post-classical tablets have never been edited or indexed. Of the three sets studied in section four, over two hundred tablets from Amathous and around forty tablets from the wells of the Athenian agora are still unpublished. Things are similar with Latin tablets from the UK. According to Daniel Ogden, Tomlin’s publication of the tablets from Bath (c. 100 legible tablets) represents only a sixth of the entire deposit.\(^8\) This means that the number of Greek and Latin tablets still unedited would represent a third of those now listed or edited by modern scholars (about 750 of a total of about 2,100).\(^9\) New editions could radically change the makeup of the corpus. In the event that more late antique tablets are published, the *Thesaurus Defixionum Magdeburgensis* will certainly become useful in tracking these changes.\(^9\)

I would certainly not claim to provide a definitive answer (or refutation) as to who wrote Greek curse tablets. The nature of the field of study, however, gives hope that some hypotheses will one day gain in certainty.

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\(^8\) Ogden, “Binding Spells,” p.4.

\(^9\) See *id.*, p.4-5.

\(^9\) See [http://www-e.uni-magdeburg.de/defigo/wordpress/](http://www-e.uni-magdeburg.de/defigo/wordpress/)