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MAGIC SYMBOLS (*CHARAKTÈRES*) ON NORTH AFRICAN CURSE TABLETS AS A REGIONAL FEATURE

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Abstract: This study examines the practice of magic symbols in North Africa to find out whether there was a regional peculiarity in the use of charaktères that distinguished this area from other parts of the Roman Empire. Two phenomena appear to be more common in North Africa, though they may also occur elsewhere: first, charaktères as encrypted names, and second, charaktères as framing devices. First and foremost, though, some introductory remarks concerning charaktères in general are made.

Keywords: magic, charaktères, North Africa

I. Charaktères in North Africa and beyond

Charaktères are signs invented for magical purposes as tools of communication with demons.² Most of them can be traced back to thirty-one basal signs, whereas the others are usually ad hoc inventions of individual magicians.³ Many of the charaktères can be derived from the Greek (and some from the Latin) alphabet, differing from the corresponding letters only in the tiny decorative circles placed at the end of the strokes: these are called ring letters. Charaktères are closely connected with magical “handbooks” and professional scribes or sorcerers.

Charaktères can be found in five source types: a) curse tablets,⁴ b) amulets,⁵ c) magic gems,⁶ d) magic papyri⁷ and e) miscellaneous inscriptions of magical context (e.g. the magical kit of Pergamon).⁸ This paper focuses on curse tablets.

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² Martin 2016, 265; Hopfner 1924, 1183.

³ Gordon 2011, 28. See Frankfurter 1994, 207: ‘The magical charaktères used throughout Graeco-Roman, Graeco-Egyptian, and Coptic ritual texts and amulets have enough formal diversity to suppose that they were, like artificial writing, often improvised.’

⁴ Wunsch 1898; Wunsch 1900; Audollent 1904.

⁵ E.g. Kotansky 1994.

The earliest known charaktêr was found in a grave at Augustodunum (today Autun) in Gaul, dated to the first third of the 2nd century AD. It has a list of names in Latin on one side (one of them is identified as the grandson of a certain Verax) and a list of magical names in Greek on the other, the first of which, the well-known *vox magica* ἀβρασαξ, is bracketed by two ring letters (Fig. 1).

A
Onesiforus
Musclosus
Carpus
Attianus
nepos Veracis
Titus

B
αβρασα

X αβρασαξ X⁹
δαμναμευς
κομπωθ
θιφεριθ
γωματου
σαβαλθωθ
βισωτορθ
δεθερθ¹⁰

A. Onesiforus, Musclosus, Carpus, Attianus, the grandson of Verax, Titus

B. Abrasa, X Abrasax X, damnameus, kompoth, thipherith, gomatou, sabalthouth, bisotorth, detherth.

The tablet is opisthographic. H. 0.105, W. 0.048. 2nd century AD (based on letter forms of the Latin text).¹¹

Adding the numeric values of the letters in the name of the Abrasax daemon (A = 1; B = 2; P = 100, A = 1; Σ = 200; Ξ = 60) results in exactly 365, i.e. the number of days in a year. Therefore, Abrasax was master of everything that could happen in the world within a year: birth, death, victory, defeat, etc. The two charaktêres (X with circles at each end) encompassing the daemon's name

⁶ Michel 2004. See http://www2.szepmuveszeti.hu/talismans/visitatori_salutem.

⁷ Preisendanz 1973–74; Martín-Hernández 2012, 496–497.

⁸ Dzwiza 2011, 239–241.

⁹ The X's are ring letters. The structure of the line corresponds to the Bouchet phylacterion, which is dated to the 2nd c. AD: X Θωσουδερκυω X. Bevilacqua 2010, 31.

¹⁰ Marcillet-Jaubert 1979, 185.

¹¹ Jordan 1985, 183.

will turn out to be the most common type. The name Abrasax is followed by a series of voces magicae. The first item, ‘damnameus’ is an abbreviation of the name of Damnameus, the mythic Phrygian ‘daktylos’ (divine smith). Damnameus is a common vox magica in magical papyri.¹² Sabalthouth is a variation of sabaoth, a vox magica of Hebrew origin. All these indicate that the magician who prepared this simply-structured (list of names, series of voces magicae) curse tablet was rather well-informed about the elements of the latest magical toolbox of his time. As we shall see, this was not the case with the practitioners who produced the North African tablets.

Charaktères are mostly considered to be common tools of curse tablets, along with voces magicae (letter combinations with no reference to spoken language)¹³, magic drawings, and pterygomata, but this approach is not quite correct. Out of the 1716 curse tablets currently known to us, only 5.8% include drawings depicting accursed people (mostly charioteers) or demons.¹⁴ The number of defixiones with charaktères is only 118 (6,8%).¹⁵ As it stands today, one-third of the tablets with charaktères have been found in North Africa.¹⁶ The greatest number of ancient defixiones containing charaktères come from the city of Rome (65/81), but the second and third most significant sites are Hadrumetum (25/52) and Carthage (12/61).

¹² PGM II 183; III 494; IV 2774; 2780.

¹³ Frankfurter 2016, 10. 13.

¹⁴ Németh 2019, 320.

¹⁵ Data is from the Magdeburg catalogue of curse tablets: *Thesaurus Defixionum Magdeburgensis* (TheDeMa). I express herewith my gratitude to Prof. Martin Dreher for providing access to the database. I have supplemented the data of the catalogue with the material of unpublished curse tablets.

¹⁶ The number of North African tablets is 38, while the number of tablets outside Africa is 79.

Sites of curse tablets with charaktêres in North Africa

<i>Site</i>	<i>Tablets with charaktêres</i>	<i>All tablets</i>
Hadrumetum ¹⁷	25	52
Carthage ¹⁸	12	61
Leptis Magna ¹⁹	1	1
Haydra (Ammaedara) ²⁰	1	1
Hammam Lif ²¹	1	1
Total	40	116

From the currently known corpus, the 49 curse tablets containing both charaktêres and magic drawings were found only in a few places. Thirty of them come from the city of Rome,²² and 11 from North Africa.²³ Therefore, the combination of charaktêres and drawings is not a North African feature, as drawings containing inscriptions or magic signs have also been attested both in Rome and in Hadrumetum.²⁴

II. Charaktêres as Encrypted Names

What is a real North African peculiarity is the use of the so-called ‘magical words’ or ‘magical sentences’. Consisting exclusively of magic symbols, these ‘sentences’ are repeated several times on the tablet, and they turn up again on other tablets belonging to the same series. To the best of my knowledge, the earliest ‘magic word’, where the same sequence of signs returns on the same tablet, comes from Mylasa, Asia Minor, dated to the 2nd century AD.²⁵ The sentence probably consists of 12 signs (today 11 are visible), and its most common symbol (also attested elsewhere) is X in ring letter form, whereas the

¹⁷ Audollent 1904, Nr. 266 272; 273; 274; 275; 276; 277; 278; 279; 280; 281; 282; 283; 284; 285+Jordan 2005; 298; Audollent 1905a; Audollent 1905b; Audollent 1906; Audollent 1906; Audollent 1908a; Audollent 1908a; Audollent 1908b; Németh 2013b, 220; Németh 2013b, 221; Németh 2013b, 224; Németh 2013b, 226, Sánchez Natalias 2019, cover page.

¹⁸ Audollent 1904 Nr. 241; 243; 245; 256 (amulet?); 258; 260; 262; Jordan 1996, 115–123.

¹⁹ Rea 1972/73, 92–97.

²⁰ Audollent 1904, 413–414, Nr. 299. With a new reading, see Audollent 1910b, 545–556.

²¹ Audollent 1910a, 137–148.

²² These numbers are skewed, because the “Sethian” tablets were copied from a handbook and thus for statistical purposes they should only be counted as a single “text”. See Wunsch 1898.

²³ The major edition of drawings on tablets from the city of Rome is Wunsch 1898. and Blänsdorf, Piranomonte 2012. Sanchez 2011; Sanchez 2012. There are 6 tablets from Carthage, 4 from Hadrumetum, and one from Hammam Lif.

²⁴ Audollent 1905a; Preisendanz 1926.

²⁵ Dörner 1940, 63–72.

others are mostly ad hoc symbols. (Fig. 2.) The text of the defixio refers to the charaktêres as inscribed names: κατὰ τοῦ ἐγγεγραμμένου ὀνόματος. It is important that the magic word occurs twice on the tablet, in the first line and in the last, thus forming a kind of a frame. Besides Hadrumetum, similar sequences of signs in North Africa come from Leptis Magna. A defixio found in the circus starts with 12 charaktêres inscribed in one line, followed by 12 *voces magicae*, and then it continues with the cursing of four horses and a charioteer. The identification of individual charaktêres and voces magicae is not self-evident, since the reversed E sign occurs twice in the sequence of charaktêres (items 3 and 9), but there are no identical voces magicae. It is possible, however, that the magician made a mistake. Among the charaktêres, only the 6th sign is a ring letter (Z). The 12th sign is a Z without rings; thus we can observe a certain visual rhyming in the two sequences of signs.²⁶



στραβαν̄ (vac.) αλωθι ταξᾱ (vac.)
 ωννυθηρ̄ (vac.) αχουηρ̄ (vac.) δαξαρ̄ αχαω̄
 ιαω̄ν̄ (vac.) αωω̄ῑ (vac.) αεοιᾱῑ (vac.) υοιαω̄ο̄
 ιαω̄ο̄ (vac.) Βεντικολαν, Γαμέτην,
 Βίκτορα, .οπ. .λατ. .α, καῑ
 Ἡβέντ{ντ}ιν τὸν ἡνίοχον
 αὐτῶν.²⁷

Strabau alôthi taxa ônnnythêr achoyêr daxar achaô iaôu aôyôî aeoiiai yoiaaôo iaÿôo Venticola, Gametes, Victor, Populator and Ebention, their charioteer.

In his recent book on Greek amulets, C. Faraone discussed some items where we find a magical name written in a certain number of letters, accompanied by the same number of charaktêres, suggesting that the charaktêres are a secret alphabet into which a powerful name can be ‘translated’ or, better yet, ‘encrypted’.²⁸

The Hadrumetum ‘magic words’ often encompass the most important opponents (e.g. the most dangerous charioteer) from two sides, and they are repeated several times in the inscription. This is typical of charioteer tablets found in Hadrumetum.²⁹ The best examples are three Latin defixiones from Hadrumetum, each of them starting with the vox magica Sarbasmisarab, continuing with

²⁶ Tremel, J. 2004, 180.

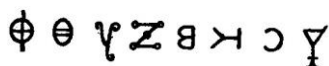
²⁷ Rea 1972/73, 92–97.

²⁸ Faraone 2018, 181.

²⁹ ‘Magic sentences’ from Hadrumetum: Audollent 1904, Nr. 264; 266; 272–285; Audollent 1906, 380; 382. For further details, see Németh 2011. 95–110.

8 charaktères followed by the curse against 35 or 26 horses, obviously belonging to rival racing teams.³⁰ (Fig. 3.)

The tablets were found in the same Roman cremation grave; therefore, it can be assumed that these defixiones match because they were produced by the same magician. The charaktères on these tablets are rare even as individual signs: e.g. the 4th symbol is a Z with four circles at the end of strokes and a fifth one in the middle, or the 6th symbol that also occurs rotated and with three rings in another sequence of charaktères.



The series DT 276–283 was also found in the Hadrumetum cemetery, and each of the tablets contains the following five charaktères:



MAGICAL SIGNS

*Naucelliu Superstianu Heliu
Privatianu Zenore Castore.*

MAGICAL SIGNS

*. e aratore cadant,
Macedone Atquestitore cadant,
Hellenicu Virgineu cadant,
Comatu Indu cadant,
Fariu Ama[t]u cadant,
Ideu Centauru cadant,
MAGICAL SIGNS*

*cadant frangant dis-
frangantur ma[le] girent
palma yincere non [p]ossint
nec frenis audiant cadant.³¹*

MAGICAL SIGNS

*Naucellius, Superstianus, Helius,
Privatianus, Zenor, Castor,*

MAGICAL SIGNS

*...e Arator, may they fall,
Hellenicus, Virgineus, may they fall,
Comatus, Indus, may they fall,*

³⁰ Audollent 1904, Nr 272–274. See Nr 273.

³¹ Audollent 1904, Nr. 280.

Farius, Amatus, may they fall,
Ideus, Centaurus, may they fall,
MAGICAL SIGNS

may they break, may [their chariots]
be smashed apart, may they turn wrongly,
may they be unable to win and get the palm of victory,
may they not react to the bridle, may they fall.³²

It should be noted that the spell pivots around two verbs: *cadare*, ‘to fall’, and *frangere*, ‘to break’.³³ Modified forms of the 2nd and 3rd signs appeared in the previous sequence as well, and the 5th symbol is attested in a Carthaginian curse tablet.³⁴ This sequence also targets charioteers, whose names are partly identical. In addition to these eight tablets, two more were found to have the same sequence: one has the ‘magic sentence’ twice, the other one four times.³⁵ The targets of the curses are again charioteers and horses, and some of the names are also identical, belonging to racers of the red team. On side B of the second tablet, published in 1906, another series of six *charaktères* appears, which also occurs on side B of DT 278, but there it stands alone without text.³⁶ This ‘name’ may have been created by the same magician who produced the previous sequence of five symbols.³⁷

○ Ψ ε Ϛ ∨ ⊕

It is clear that we are presented with the products of a relatively short period and that the wizard is the same person, who specialized in manipulating chariot races. An additional ‘magic name’, consisting of 24 *charaktères* and repeated seven times, will be discussed below, among the framed tablets.³⁸ The question is: what is the explanation for repeated ‘magic names’? Was there an identical topic or an identical magician? Unfortunately, we cannot provide a reassuring answer to this question. Outside North Africa, ‘magic names’ can be observed in the city of Rome or in Casabermeja in Spain,³⁹ but the example of the Mylasa tablet shows that they may originate in the Greek magical tradition, and they are characteristic of individual magicians. Though these magicians knew

³² Urbanová 2018, 121.

³³ Lecouteux 2015, 64.

³⁴ Audollent 1904, Nr. 241. The third sign in line 1.

³⁵ Németh 2013, 115.

³⁶ Audollent 1906, 382.

³⁷ Audollent 1906, 382.

³⁸ Audollent 1904, 382.

³⁹ CIL II/2/5, 729.

that defixiones could include charaktêres, they were not familiar with particular symbols (except for the omnipresent X ring letter), so the signs of repetitive sequences can often be the root of an ad hoc sequence at a given place and time.⁴⁰ ‘Magic names’ were formulated not only from charaktêres, but also from voces magicae. These are often called logoi or ephesia grammata, e.g. *aianagba-*, *aktiôphi-*, *arponchnouphi-*, *bakaxichych-*, etc.⁴¹ These logoi can return several times within a defixio, and their function is to accentuate the curse or to highlight certain elements of it. (Fig. 4.)

III. Charaktêres as Framing Devices

Another North African peculiarity is the ‘framing’ of tablets. The frame surrounding the curse text may be:

- a) Latin text, which is actually part of the curse,
- b) Greek text,
- c) voces magicae in the Greek and/or Latin alphabet, and
- d) sequences of charaktêres.

What may also occur is that some charaktêres get mixed with Greek or Latin words or with voces magicae.

1) The frame is written in Latin as part of the curse text.

A curse tablet found in Mogontiacum, Germania was deposited in an Isis sanctuary, so the site had a connection with North Africa.⁴² The Mainz finds are dated between 65 and 130 AD, thus this framed tablet is older than any North African framed curse tablet that we know of.⁴³ The Latin text of the frame forms part of the curse:

⁴⁰ A magical recipe book (*PGM VII*) proves the existence of some connection between North African sorcerers and professional Egyptian magicians, cf. the study of C. Faraone in this volume.

⁴¹ Logos: Michel 2004, 482–487; Ephesia grammata: Audollent 1904, 499–516.

⁴² Blänsdorf 2012, 137. provided only the following explanation for framing: ‘Fluchtäfelchen mit Rand- und Mitteltext DT 218; 227; 244.’ As we have seen, the work of Auguste Audollent includes significantly more framed curse texts from North Africa.

⁴³ Blänsdorf 2012, 1.

*Prima Aemilia Nar-
cissi agat, quidquid co-
nabitur, quidquid aget,
omnia illi inuer-
sum sit.*⁴⁴

Whatever Aemilia Prima, (the lover?) of Narcissus
may do, whatever she
attempts, whatever she does,
let it all go wrong.

The curse then continues within the frame without interruption: ‘May she get up (out of bed) out of her mind, may she go about her work out of her mind...’⁴⁵

Another similar curse tablet was found in Crucinianum (Germania). The Latin text of the frame forms part of the curse.⁴⁶ There is also another Latin text as a frame on a curse tablet from Hadrumetum.⁴⁷

*Obligat et gravat equos veneti et russei ne currere possint nec frenis – left
audire possint nec se moere possint – bottom
set cadant frangant dis[fr]rangantur, et agitanes veneti et russei – right
vertant nec lora teneant nec agita – top
re possint nec retinere equos possint nec ante se nec adversarios suos – left
videant nec vincant vertant. – bottom*

Bind up and oppress the horses of the blue and red [teams], so that they cannot run nor obey the reins, nor be able to move, but may they fall, break, [may their chariots] be smashed apart, may the charioteers of the blue and red [teams] fall over, may they not be able to hold the reins, nor drive, nor restrain [the horses], nor see [what is] in front of them or their adversaries, nor win, let them crash over!

The Latin frame is part of the curse; the middle curse text is framed by a magic name consisting of 24 characters at the bottom and at the top, and the same string interrupts the text five more times. The main target persons, Privatianus and Naucellius, are preceded by the magic name at every mention. (Fig. 4.)

From Hadrumetum, we know three further examples of frames with Latin text or in the Latin alphabet,⁴⁸ one of which is presented below. The frame is in the Latin alphabet.

⁴⁴ DTM 15.

⁴⁵ Transl. by J. Blänsdorf. Blänsdorf 2010, 170.

⁴⁶ DTAud 101.

⁴⁷ DTAud 275. Tremel 2004, 294.

⁴⁸ DTAud 276; 277.

IAO ADONAEI OIO A – top
RTHORICHOTAVCREA . . . EC – right
SOECHESOO · OCSIOSE – bottom
OSOSNANOSCACOSDAEMON – left⁴⁹

The apparently meaningless string of letters includes usual voces magicae, e.g. Iao, Adonaei, cacos daemon. The Latin curse text mentions the names of seven charioteers and sixty horses.

2) The frame is in the Greek alphabet

The following judicial defixio was found in Carthage. The top of the tablet is lost; therefore, the Greek frame survived only on the left and right sides and on the bottom of the lamella.

The frame on the right: α ρ α σ β ε θ. On the bottom: α ρ α β η σ π ι γ ο ε. On the left side: ψ ι ν τ ι β ο ρ. The magician may not have been familiar with genuine voces magicae. The text within the frame is probably a judicial curse:

*[Sex]tiliani et gula .
Pudentis et P. . ora .
Acuti et Mf. ai .
Silvani et Sextilian-
a
et L Caecili Ma[g-
ni
ni?]; adligate lingu-
[a]s horum quos suprascri-
psi ne adversus
nos respondere.⁵⁰*

The inscription is aimed at eight target people (Acutus, Gula, Lucius Caecilius Magnus, Pacora, Pudens, Sextilianus, Silvanus), and their tongues have been bound presumably to stop them in a lawsuit from harming the makers of the curse, who were probably also many.

A short love spell from Carthage is surrounded by a frame in the Greek alphabet, consisting of meaningless strings of letters:

α π η ι η ν ι α ρ α φ – top
α ρ α κ σ ω – left
β α ρ ε μ α ε β σ – right

⁴⁹ DTAud 284.

⁵⁰ DTAud 218.

*Uratur
Sucesa
aduratur
amo vel
desideri
Sucesi.*⁵¹

Let Successa be lit afire and burn with love and desire of Successus!

There is a defixio with a drawing and frame from Carthage. The frame is in Greek letters, with syllables resembling certain voces magicae. Letters in the top frame: Βακβρακκαβρακκα. Based on Audollent's drawing, some of the letters may be charaktères.⁵² The Greek text does not contain intelligible words. Under the drawing of a man holding a whip, the starting position of the chariot races is depicted. On side B, a Latin word (*retinete*) can be deciphered.

A strange curse tablet constraining love was found in Hadrumetum.⁵³ It has a drawing of two swords or keys (?) in the middle. The frame is made up of fragmentary voces magicae in Greek letters. The short curse text itself is in Latin, including Greek voces magicae and charaktères.

*Victoria
quem peperit
Suavulva
puella[rum deli-
[ciae?]*

Victoria,
whom
Suavulva bore,
the sweetest of girls.

The mother's name is probably fictitious, since it does not seem very likely that anyone could be called *Suavulva* (her own vulva). According to another possible interpretation, the name of the mother of the cursed person was unknown to the author of the curse, so the term *suavulva* was used.⁵⁴

An especially aggressive defixio was also found in Hadrumetum. The frame and the curse are in Greek. The text, written with rather poor Greek grammar, is targeted on *Esychis* (i.e. *Hesychios*), son of *Hypereia*.⁵⁵ The magician wished

⁵¹ DTAud 227.

⁵² DTAud 244; Németh 2013b, 164.

⁵³ DTAud 264.

⁵⁴ Urbanová 2018, 23.

⁵⁵ Audollent 1908a, 10–21.

Hesychios to be underground, and his soul to be taken away from him within 7 days. At the same time, however, the magician cursed his mouth as well; thus, the defixio can also be interpreted as a judicial curse.

του κατακλεινον το[ν / Εσυ]χιν ον [εθεκεν Υ]περεια . Ενεμε[ρεσ]επτα/κε με αφες τον
 ψυχεν. / βυη στεγακ τροαικ / ροετηγγα να / (MAGICAL SIGNS) ο κροηερε . / πορο
 . . ενχαρηεα / ρπο αναγκη θοη // (MAGICAL SIGNS) συνεχε/τε τον Εσυχιν ον εθεκε /
 [κ]αταχθονιον οληη

Two of the three curse tablets, found in Fontaine aux mille amphores in Carthage, are directed against the bath in Falernas or Falernae (the magician writes the name of the bath in three different forms).⁵⁶ The Latin curse text is framed by Greek voces magicae on both tablets. The following is a quote from one of them in a translation by J. Gager:

ARTHU LAILAM SEMESEILAM AE[ÊÏOYO BACH]UCH BAKAXICHUCH
 MENEBAICHUCH ABRASAX BAZABACHUCH [ME]NEBAICHUCH ABRASAX
 Lord Gods restrain and hinder the Falernian baths, lest any person go there to bathe; bind the Falernian baths from this day, bind and bind up the Falernian baths, lest anyone be able to go to that place from this day.⁵⁷

The third curse text is in Greek, framed by four lines of Greek demon names and voces magicae.⁵⁸ The three tablets are the work of the same magician. He knew about the existence of framed curse tablets, yet he did not follow a definite pattern in making his own multiple frames. Instead, he worked out his own formal features: the frame is in Greek letters, consisting of demon names but no caractères.

3) The frame is in the Greek and Latin alphabets

A curse tablet with disputed interpretation was found in Carthage. The frame is Greek according to Audollent, but Wunsch interpreted it as Latin names and Greek voces magicae.⁵⁹

[. . . La]ertiadem [quem pepe]rit Ter[entia] – top
 [La]ertiad[em] [qu]em peper[it] Teren[tia] – bottom
 Μιχαναγαθε – right
 οκρηδυχυμε ουαικαι . . ηθ . ας μελανοκισεργος – left

⁵⁶ Audollent 1933.

⁵⁷ DTAud 255. Gager 1992, 173–174.

⁵⁸ Audollent 1933, 132.

⁵⁹ Wunsch 1900, 265.

In the place of the curse text, there is a drawing of a beast shown in the middle, and in front of it, to the left, a human head is depicted on the ground. The body of the beast resembles a tiger.⁶⁰

4) The frame consists of charaktêres

A circus curse that was found in the cemetery of Carthage has a frame made up exclusively of charaktêres.⁶¹ The long Greek curse text is directed against a charioteer named Victoricus and his nine horses: Iuvenis, Advocatus, Bubalus, Laureatus, Pompeianus, Baianus, Victor, Eximius, and Dominatus.

Audollent did not publish a drawing of the tablet; thus, the drawing quoted by others comes from *CIL*.⁶² However, the drawing in *CIL* is not accurate: in Clermont-Ferrand the unpublished drawing by Audollent shows that there is no space between the penultimate and the last sign (a Z ring letter) of the upper frame, but that they closely follow each other.⁶³ The upper line of the frame consists of 14 signs according to *CIL*, but 15 according to the drawing of Audollent. The first two signs are identical: an N with not two but three vertical strokes. The third sign is identical to the fourth charaktêr of the five-digit ‘magic name’ of DTAud 276 from Hadrumetum (a double circle with two legs below). The *CIL* then gives four different shapes of E: the first two are square, and the next two are lunar. The 4th sign in Audollent’s drawing is rather a Greek Ξ. The 8th sign is a triangle or a Δ crossed in the middle, then ENE with lunar Es, the second one underlined. This is followed by the same N as the first two charaktêres of the line, but Audollent’s drawing rather shows NT. The line is closed by the Z ring letter. The signs of the lower frame are written upside down. They include a H, two lunar Es, a crossed-out Z, and an N similar to those at the beginning of the upper frame. There is an oblique cross written in a circle, resembling an ancient theta. Then there are two complex signs as well. One of them is a double ring letter Y, connected with a line at the bottom (something like YY), whereas the other is a combination of two reclining Es, one facing up and the other facing down. The charaktêr string on the left runs from the bottom up. The first sign is a tiny θ (identical to the lowermost sign in the right frame), the second symbol is an N, similar to those at the beginning of the line in the upper frame, then comes a lunar E ring letter and a T ring letter. This is followed by three combined symbols made up from reclining Es, and

⁶⁰ The image is published in Németh 2013, 176.

⁶¹ DTAud 241.

⁶² *CIL* VIII 12509.

⁶³ Németh 2013, 160.

two combined K ring letters. The string of signs on the right consists of seven symbols. They might be read from top to bottom: a reverse E, a ring letter T, a ring letter cross, then a large ring letter N. The 5th sign is a square with an inscribed little ε. The 6th sign is a cursive alpha written inside a square, and the line is closed by a θ. The magician apparently knew about the existence of charaktêres; however, he did not use a single sign known from magic papyri or from Roman curse tablets. Instead, he created the individual signs of the frame himself. (Fig. 5.)

There is a curse tablet with a drawing that was found in the cemetery of Carthage.⁶⁴ According to Audollent, there is a frame made up of charaktêres, at least on the left and right sides. On the left, an X (or star) crossed in the middle can be recognized. On the right, we can see a ring letter S, a ring letter U, and a P inserted into a Π. From the lowermost sign on the left, only a fragment of a ring letter is visible. In the middle of the tablet, there is a drawing of a man with a breastplate with a snake wrapped around him. This type of breastplate (called lorica) was used by charioteers. (Fig. 6.)

In the collection of the Musée Bargoin (Clermont-Ferrand), there is an unpublished North African curse tablet from the private collection of Auguste Audollent.⁶⁵ The tablet contains no intelligible text. In the middle, there is a circle with three star-shaped signs and with the fragments of two or three curved marks. The circle is surrounded by a frame of charaktêres. In the upper line, we can see two Xs and traces of a ring letter. On the left, reading top to bottom, there are two Xs and a small lambda, followed by two uninterpretable signs and an X. In the bottom line, we can perhaps see an X and fragments of a ring letter. On the right, reading top to bottom, we find 7, A, ε, Θ, and 7. The magician probably did not even know how to write, but obviously he heard about charaktêres and charaktêr frames (or he may have seen such a tablet). From the 17 signs that make up the frame, 7 items are Xs, perhaps because this is the simplest mark to inscribe into a lead lamella, and because the magician must have seen many of these signs even in stone inscriptions. The fragmentary ring letters indicate that the magician may have seen such signs, but he did not add the rings at the edges of actual letters. (Fig. 7.)

We can conclude that although one-third of the curse tablets containing charaktêres come from North Africa, the magicians in Carthage or in Hadrumetum did not know the magic symbols used in papyri or even in the city of Rome. The only piece of information that they positively obtained was about the existence of ring letters. Perhaps they had seen something similar in magic

⁶⁴ *DTAud* 245.

⁶⁵ Inv. nr. 72-1-224. Measures: 85 x 90 mm.

gems or in amulets, and they tried to apply these themselves.⁶⁶ Therefore, charaktères in North Africa occur repeatedly only if a magician used the same ‘magic word’ or ‘magic name’ several times. Another North African feature is the creation and frequent use of magic words or names on curse tablets, primarily due to the work of some magicians in Hadrumetum. A third characteristic is the framing of curse tablets. Although two framed curse texts were found in Germania, both used a part of the curse text as a frame. Frames made up of voces magicae or even of charaktères, as we have seen, do not occur outside North Africa.⁶⁷ This must have been the innovation of magicians in Carthage and Hadrumetum.

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⁶⁶ Kotansky 1994, 24; 45; 56; 76; 83; 95; 370 (from Zian, Tunisia); 374 (Carthago, Tunisia).

⁶⁷ A recipe in a magical papyrus from Egypt (*PGM* VII. 925–939, 3rd c. AD) has magical symbols on all four sides of the text, but the top and the bottom lines do not run until the right margin: they consist of 4 standing charaktères each, which are rather like an opening formula and a closure. There are seven symbols to the left of the text, but these do not reach the edge of the text box, and the five symbols on the right may correspond with the first five voces magicae of the text. Therefore, we can conclude that magic symbols on all four sides of a text do not necessarily constitute a frame, because the symbols must completely surround the magic text. This recipe (as all others in *PGM* VII) is considered by C. Faraone to be of North African origin: see his study in this volume.

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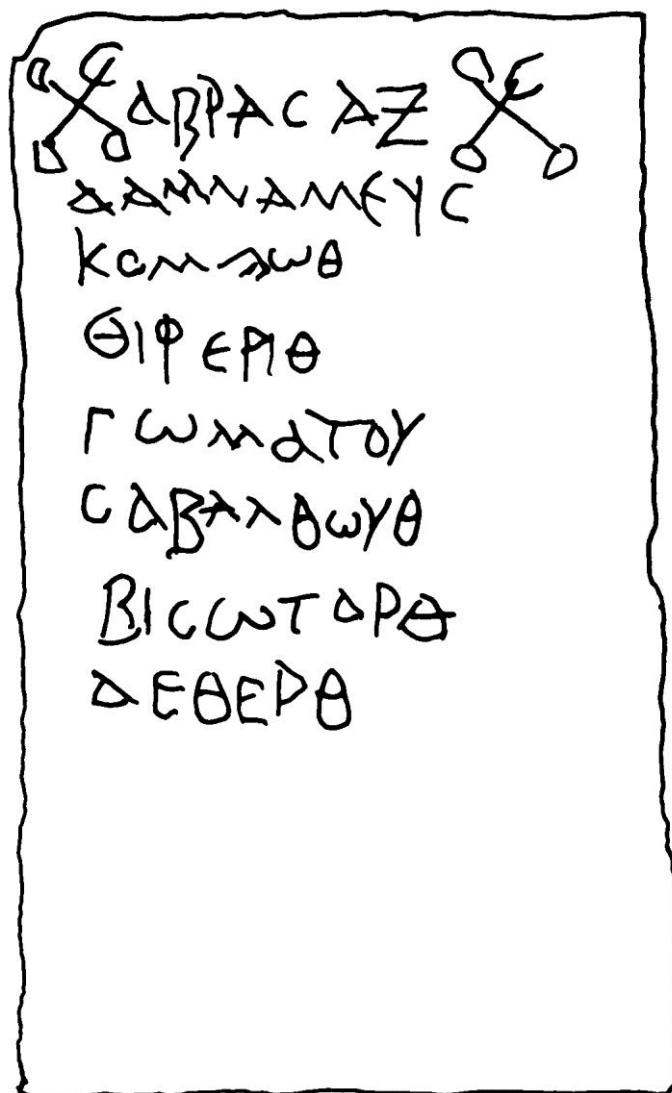


Fig. 1. The first known charaktères from Augustodunum. Drawing by G. Németh.

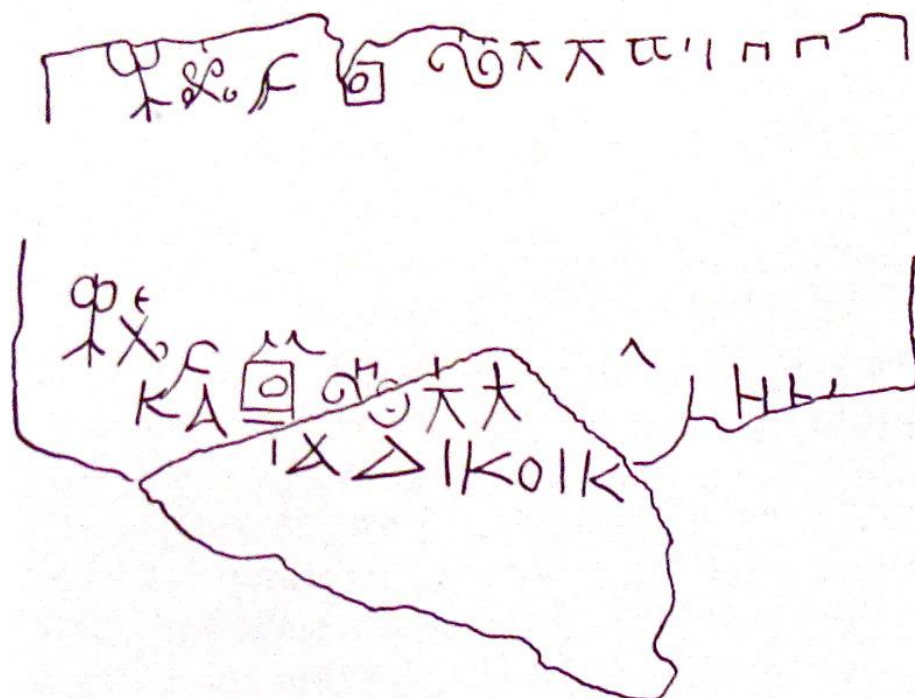


Fig. 2. The magical charaktères from Mylasa (Dörner1940.)

György Németh

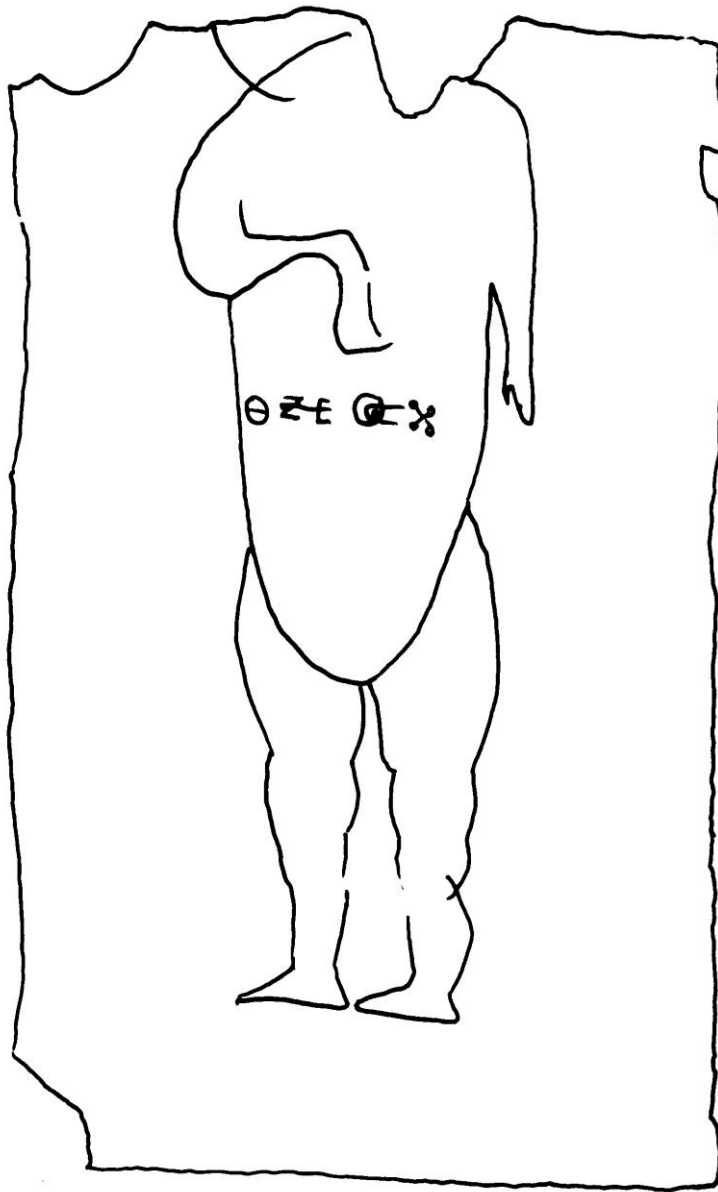


Fig. 3. Akephalos with five magic signs inscribed on its chest, from Hadrumetum (Audollent 1905a). Drawing by G. Németh.

33	29	<p>agita nec leniant lora nec vertant</p> <p>KKKΛΔΔΔΔΔΔ Δ ~ Δ Δ ΦΙΟΙΙΑΙΑΙΑΟ</p> <p>Privatianu Supeſtianu russei qui et Naucelliu Salutare</p> <p>Supeſtite russei ſervu Reguli Eliu Caſtore Repentinu.</p> <p>KKKΛΔΔΔΔΔΔ Δ ~ Δ Δ ΦΙΟΙΙΑΙΑΙΑΟ</p> <p>Glaucu Argutu veneti Deſtroiuğu Glauci cadant, Lydu</p> <p>Ahmnu cadant, Italu Tyriu cadant, Faru cadant, Croceu cadant,</p> <p>Elegantu cadant, Prancatiu Oclopecta Verbosu cadant,</p> <p>Adamatu cadant, Securu Mantineu Prevalente cadant,</p> <p>Paratu Vagarſita cadant, Divite Garulu cadant, Cesareu</p> <p>Germanicu veneti cadant, Danuviu cadant,</p> <p>KKKΛΔΔΔΔΔΔ Δ ~ Δ Δ ΦΙΟΙΙΑΙΑΙΑΟ</p> <p>Latrone Vagulu cadant, Agricola cadant, Cursore</p> <p>Auricomu cadant, Epafu cadant, Hellenicu cadant,</p> <p>Ideu Centauru cadant, Bracatu Virgineu cadant,</p> <p>Ganimede cadant, Multivolu cadant, E[o]lu</p> <p>Oceanu Eminentu cada[nt, T]agu cadant,</p> <p>Eucles cadant, Verbosu cadant.</p> <p>KKKΛΔΔΔΔΔΔ Δ ~ Δ Δ ΦΙΟΙΙΑΙΑΙΑΟ</p> <p>Privatianu cadat vertat frangat male giret,</p> <p>KKKΛΔΔΔΔΔΔ Δ ~ Δ Δ ΦΙΟΙΙΑΙΑΙΑΟ</p> <p>Naucelliu Supeſtianu russei cadat vert[at fran]gat,</p> <p>KKKΛΔΔΔΔΔΔ Δ ~ Δ Δ ΦΙΟΙΙΑΙΑΙΑΟ</p> <p>Supeſtite russei ſervu Reguli cadat vertat fran[gat,]</p> <p>Salutare cadat vertat frangat,</p> <p>Eliu cadat vertat frangat vertat,</p> <p>Caſtore cadat vertat frangat vertat,</p> <p>Reptentinu cadat vertat frangat.</p> <p>KKKΛΔΔΔΔΔΔ Δ ~ Δ Δ ΦΙΟΙΙΑΙΑΙΑΟ</p> <p>nis audire poſſint nec ſe moere poſſint</p> <p>videant nec vincant vertant.</p>	32	<p>russei</p> <p>et</p> <p>veneti</p> <p>agitantes</p> <p>et</p> <p>disfrangantur,</p> <p>frangant</p> <p>cadant</p> <p>set</p> <p>31</p>
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Fig. 4. Framed curse tablet from Hadrumetum with a magic name repeated seven times (DTAud 275)

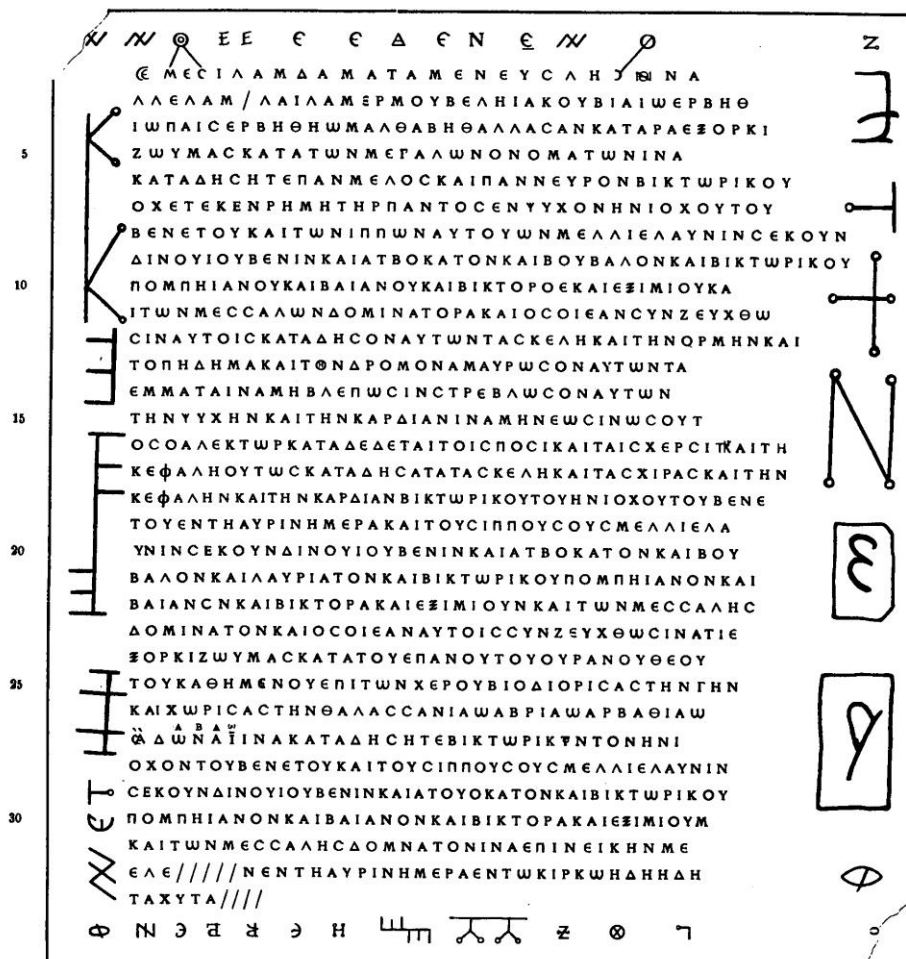


Fig. 5. The curse tablet from the cemetery of Carthage with a frame made up of caractères (DTAud 241)

György Németh

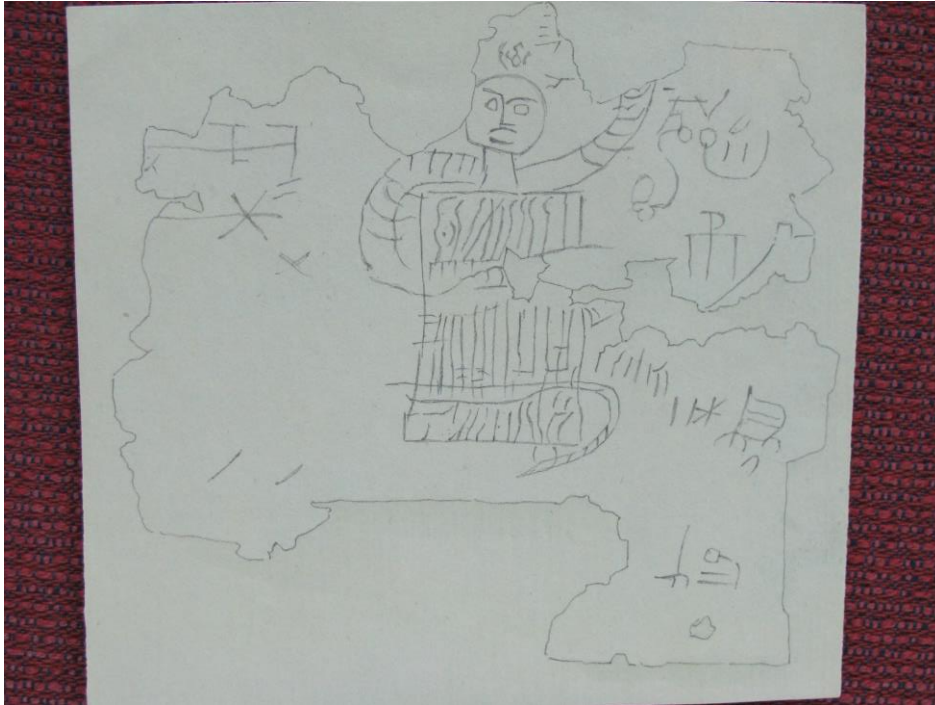


Fig. 6. The drawing of a charioteer attacked by a snake on a Carthage curse tablet. Drawing by Audollent (DTAud 245)

György Németh

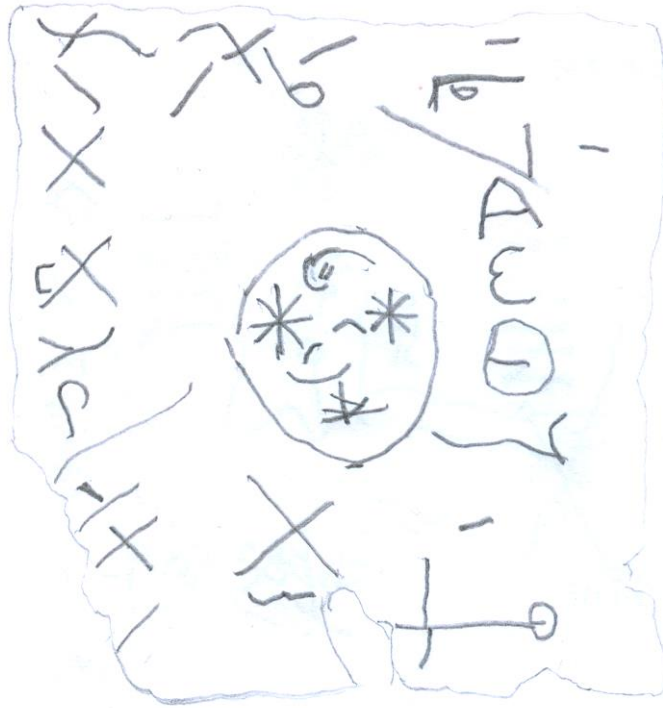


Fig. 7. Unpublished North African curse tablet from the private collection of Auguste Au-dollent.
Drawing by G. Németh.