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## CURSED HORSES

by

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*Abstract:* A small lead tablet with the drawing of a horse's head is kept in the collection of the Musée Bargoin in Clermont-Ferrand. This study examines depictions of horses on curse tablets and magic gems and concludes that no examples of such depictions have been found so far.

*Keywords:* Musée Bargoin, curse tablets, Carthage, horse head, hippalektryon, Gryllos, magical gems

In the collection of the Musée Bargoin in Clermont-Ferrand, there is a small lead tablet folded into a cylindrical shape around its longitudinal axis, therefore its interior is difficult to study.<sup>1</sup> However, a faint drawing of a horse's head can be seen on its outer surface.<sup>2</sup> In the middle of the horse's eye, there is a round hole, which the maker of the tablet used for the depiction by drawing around it an almond-shaped line, i.e. the contour of the eye. Its nose is somewhat narrow compared to its neck and is slightly phallic in shape. Dimensions of the tablet: height 140 mm, width 50 mm. Its finding location is uncertain, but the inven-

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<sup>1</sup> This study was supported by the Hungarian Research Fund (Corpus of the curse tablets of Clermont-Ferrand: NKFI 134319).

<sup>2</sup> Musée Bargoin, Clermont-Ferrand, n° d'inventaire 72-1-228.

tory book claims it was found in Bir el Djebbana, Carthage. Its dating is equally uncertain, according to the inventory book: 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD.<sup>3</sup>



To the best of our knowledge, a drawing similar to this cannot be found on other curse tablets, but we have known partial depictions of horses either on the basis of drawings or relying on descriptions. Many horse depictions have recently been treated in a study by Christopher Faraone, but he added no figures representing horses.<sup>4</sup> Faraone points out that the text of a Carthaginian curse tablet mentions the depiction of cursed horses: “Bind the horses, whose names and images (*eidaias*) I have entrusted [to you] in the implement (*skeuei*)”.<sup>5</sup> In other words, the magician drew the horses. Faraone also mentions a practitioner of Antioch who made lead statuettes of horses and carved the name of the cursed animal into each one.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, H. Seyrig published the study without illustration. The very roughly cast (“très grossièrement coulés”) 4-cm long figurines had the name of a horse, but in the case of three horses we find two names. On the nine figurines, we can thus see a total of twelve names, which correspond to the horses of three four-horse chariots.

3 Fabre 2010, 190. The manuscript study of Emilie Fabre offers the following description of the tablet (p. 190): “Musée Bargoin, Clermont-Ferrand, n° d’inventaire 72-1-228. — Plomb. — Long. 14 cm. Larg. 5 cm. — Afrique du Nord, Bir el Djelbana, 1906. — Epoque romaine, IIe siècle apr. J-C. Cette petite lamelle incomplète, elle aussi peut-être retrouvée dans un plat, est recroquevillée sur elle-même avec des bords fendus et abimés. Quelques inscriptions se devinent néanmoins.” Fabre saw traces of letter on the tablet, but she does not mention the drawing.

4 Faraone, 2019, 165–186.

5 DTAud 237, 3–4.

6 Faraone 2019, 173–174.

- 1) Ὑπέροχος
- 2) Πολυκλῆς
- 3) Πολύδροσος
- 4) Διθύραμβος
- 5) Σύνδικος
- 6) Πεμφρηδών<sup>19</sup>
- 7) Εὐάσπις
- Δαμαστιῆς
- 8) Ἀριστένετος
- Ποντοῦχος
- 9) Ἀνχίθεος
- Θέτις

Faraone adds that the magician may have run out of lead, which is why he did not make 12 figures.

In Hadrumetum, in the cemetery next to the hippodrome, a 2<sup>nd</sup> century curse tablet was found, on which a drawing of a horse could be seen.<sup>7</sup> The horse's name (Laureatus) was also written into the drawing. According to Faraone, the maker of the tablet may have drawn only the head of the horse, or perhaps the whole animal, but the layout of the tablet did not allow space larger than 25 Greek letters wide. The tablet was published by A. Audollent, but he did not attach a drawing, and unfortunately we cannot find the drawing of this tablet among the documents in his bequest. This complex curse inscription included voces magicae, names of demons and divinities, charaktēres and a drawing, too.

Αλιμβευ-κολουμβευ-  
 πεταλλιμβευ λέγει σοι Ἀδωναι  
 Σαβαωθ Σεμεσίλαμι, ἵνα  
 βαρύνῃς τὸν ἵππον  
 Λαυρεᾶτον



[Drawing of a horse, within it Λαυρεᾶτος]  
 μηδὲ τρέχῃ μηδὲ τοὺς πόδας  
 κινήσῃ, μὴ σταθῇ. κατὰ-  
 βαλε αὐτὸν καὶ κάτε-  
 χε αὐτοῦ πόδας.

Alimbeou-kolumbeu-  
 petallimbeu, Adonai Sabaoth  
 Semesilam speaks to you,  
 so that you weigh down the horse  
 Laureatus



[Drawing of a horse, within it “Laureatus”]

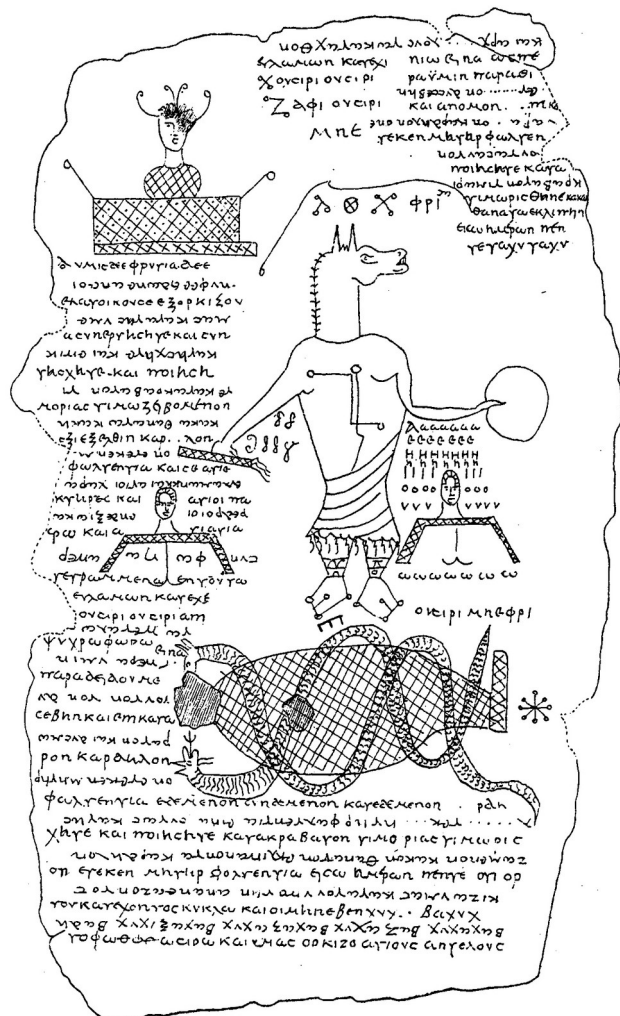
<sup>7</sup> DTAud 285; Jordan, D. 2005. Three notes, ZPE 152, 2005. 155–56.

so that he neither run nor move  
his feet, nor stand firm. Throw  
him down and  
restrain his feet.<sup>8</sup>

Further partial depictions of horses can be found on the Roman curse tablets published by Richard Wünsch. The horse-headed demon of horse and chariot racing has a human torso and two legs. However, its feet cannot be interpreted as either horse hooves or human feet.

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<sup>8</sup> Translation by Jordan 2005. 155–156. Faraone refers to five magical symbols (Faraone 2019. 175), but there are six symbols on the tablet.

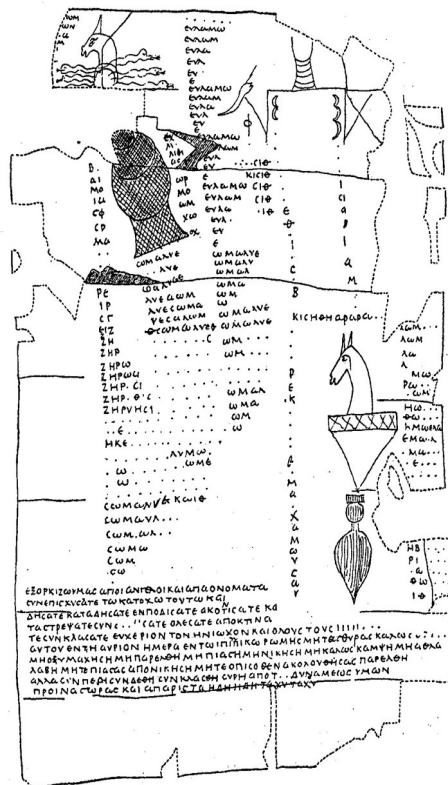


Caption: Drawing on side A of Wünsch's tablet nr. 16

In Wünsch's collection, the horse-headed demon can be seen in whole or in part on the following tablets:

Wünsch 16	=	DTAud 155a
Wünsch 20A + B	=	DTAud 159
Wünsch 29	=	DTAud 167

Tablet nr. 49 (DTAud 187) shows not the horse-headed demon, but a horse's head emerging from a triangle upside down.



Caption: A detail of Wünsch's tablet nr. 49

On sides A and B of Wünsch's tablet nr. 20, the demon has the same foot, and on tablet nr. 29 we can see the same foot, though it is much more blurred. In the ancient magical tradition, a representation similar to the Roman horse-headed demon may be found on magic gems that show a hybrid creature called Gryllos. Gryllos has the head of a horse, the upper body of a human and the legs of a bird, but the greatest difference compared to the horse-headed demon is that a human face emerges from its chest.



Caption: CBd-725: Gryllos (hippalektryon) striding in profile, to left.<sup>9</sup>

A similar Gryllos, or hippalektryon, can be seen in a gem of the Campbell Bonner Magical Gems Database (CBd-726).<sup>10</sup> Roman depictions of the horse-headed demon are the closest relatives of this hippalektryon. The depiction of Gryllos is dated to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, and the Roman horse-headed demons to the turn of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries. Of course, the dating of both the gems and the curse tablets is uncertain, but it seems that the two types of representation are not separated by a significant time gap.

Horse depictions similar to the horse head from Carthage are not known in the world of curse tablets or magic gems. It is possible that the Carthaginian magician did not rely on earlier models, but created the representation himself according to his own intentions and talent, and it could have been part of a curse text for manipulating a horse race or a chariot race.

<sup>9</sup> British Museum G 1986,5-1,89. For the figure of Gryllos, see Sagiv, Idit 2018. *Representations of Animals on Greek and Roman Engraved Gems. Meanings and Interpretations*. Archaeopress, Oxford. 144.

<sup>10</sup> British Museum G 1986,5-1,116. The Campbell Bonner Magical Gems Database includes altogether nine representations of Gryllos. Beside the mentioned items, see CBd 724; 1082; 1226 (post-antique); 2522; 3816; 3819; 4237.

## Abbreviations and bibliography

- DTAud = Audollent, August: *Defixionum Tabellae quotquot innotuerunt tam in Graecis Orientis quam in totius Occidentis partibus praeter Atticas in corpore inscriptionum atticarum editas*, Paris, 1904.
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