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CURSING SMERTUCCUS: SOME THOUGHTS ON THE (MIS)USE OF FILIATION IN LATIN *DEFIXIONES**

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Abstract: this paper focuses on a *defixio* against Smertuccus, a text that was found in modern-day Vechten (*Fectio*, *Germania Inferior*) under unknown circumstances. This extremely concise inscription was written in capitals following an unusual *ordinatio*, which runs from bottom to top and right to left. The curse, which was written for unknown reasons, merely contains the *cognomen* of the target together with his filiation. This contribution offers some considerations on these features (i.e. the layout and the presence of the filiation formula), which are rarely attested among Latin *defixiones* from the Roman West.

Keywords: *defixio*, curse tablet, *Fectio*, Vechten, Roman magic, Latin epigraphy, vernacular magical practice, *ordinatio*.

Para mi amigo y colega György Németh,
en su 70 cumpleaños.
Ad multos annos!

Sometime in 1846 or 1847, a mysterious inscription on a small lead tablet (3.24 x 9 cm) was discovered in De Burg, Vechten (ancient *Fectio*, *Germania Inferior*). Although no information survives about the piece's precise archaeological context, we can note that De Burg was the highest part of Roman *Fectio*, a settlement strategically located “on the South bank of a meander of the Rhine, c. 5 km upstream from the bifurcation of the rivers Rhine and Vecht”.¹ Given its elevation, De Burg was the obvious location for constructing Roman auxiliary forts, of which there were at least six. The remaining structures from the site (fig. 1) give us a chronology ranging from the very end of the 1st century

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¹ Polak (forthcoming).

BCE to the end of the 3rd century CE.² So, even if little is known about the circumstances of the curse's discovery, it is likely that this *lamella* originated in the Roman fort(s), as suggested by L.J.F. Janssen in his *editio princeps*.³

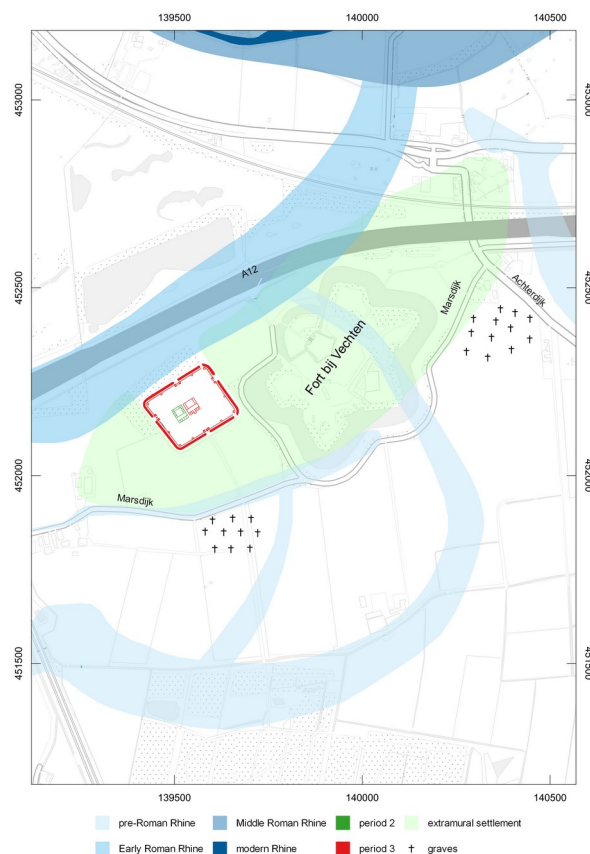


Fig. 1. Location map of *Fectio/Vechten*. Source: Radboud University Nijmegen (NL), Marinus Polak.

2 For a complete overview on this settlement, see Polak 2014. Even if the first Roman remainings of *Fectio* are from the Augustan period (“it seems like it was founded c. 5 BCE, roughly contemporary with Haltern”, according to Marinus Polak [*per litt.*]), archaeological finds suggest that the forts were active from pre-Claudian era until 275 CE.

3 Janssen 1855, 19–20. That said, Marinus Polak (*per litt.*), who wrote his PhD on the pottery of the settlement (and more precisely on potters’ stamps found on South Gaulish *terra sigillata* [nearly 5,000 examples], see Polak 2000²), was struck by the fact that “there were many complete or near-complete vessels, which made me think that part of a cemetery had been destroyed by the works [related to the building of the new fort and the lowering of the adjacent area. Therefore,] a grave might well be the most likely context for a *defixio*”. This hypothesis, even if speculative, would fit well with this type of inscription. For the different deposits for curse tablets in the Roman West, see *SD*, pp. 37–52, and for funerary contexts see specifically pp. 37–41.

The reading of the text has proven trickier than first meets the eye, since it was written from right to left and bottom to top, an unusual *ordinatio*,⁴ which was not recognized by its first commentators.⁵ This layout seems to affect the orientation of some letters, which were mirrored (that is, written from right to left, e.g.: *N* in l. 1, *S* in ll. 1–2.). The *R* at l. 2 provides a different case since it is written upside down (by turning the tablet 180 degrees), perhaps as a further means of distorting the text. Both the inscription's unusual *ordinatio* and the use of lead as a medium⁶ point to the fact that this text is not just any old inscription, as has been thought,⁷ but rather a *defixio*. The curse tablet, nowadays preserved in the Provinciaal Utrechts Genootschap van Kunsten en Wetenschappenv,⁸ reads as follows:

Transcription:	Reading:
1 · F · SINOIA	2 Smertuccus · Am-
2 MA · SVCCVTREMS	1 aionis · f(ilius) ·



Fig. 2. Photograph of the *defixio* against Smertuccus, by Edwin van Hagen (Heritage Team of the Municipality of Utrecht).

4 This sort of reversed *ordinatio*, although paralleled, is only attested in a handful of cases from *Hispania* SD 131 (from *Celti*/ Peñafior, dated to 1st century BCE), 134–136 (from *Emporion*/ Ampurias, all dated to the second half of the 1st century CE,) and 149 (with an unknown provenance, though it seems like it also comes from *Hispania*, dated from the end of the 1st century–2nd century CE); *Britannia* SD 303 (from *Aquae Sulis*/Bath, dated to the end of the 3rd–4th centuries CE); *Germania*, SD 465 (from *Ulpia Noviomagus*/ Nijmegen, with unknown date) and *Raetia*, SD 524–525 (from Peiting and *Abusina*/Eining, respectively, and dated to the 2nd–3rd centuries CE).

5 In fact, as the editor reports in his second postscript (Janssen 1855, 24), it was A. de Longpérier, who was at the time curator at the Louvre Museum, that understood the *ordinatio* of the text, proposing the reading *Smertuccus Amatonis f(ilius)*. His reading was later improved by K. Zangemeister (*apud* CIL XIII, 8822), who corrected *Amatonis* for *Amaionis*.

6 Braun 1857 defined it as a “Bleitäfelchen” and so Byvanck 1935, no. 294 (“Inscriptie op een looden plaatje”), while other scholars do not focus on the medium employed (cf. CIR 57; CIL XIII, 8822; Epigraphic Database Heidelberg (EDH from now on) no. HD082671).

7 *Contra* Janssen 1855, 22.

8 Inventory number: PUG collection, 5494.

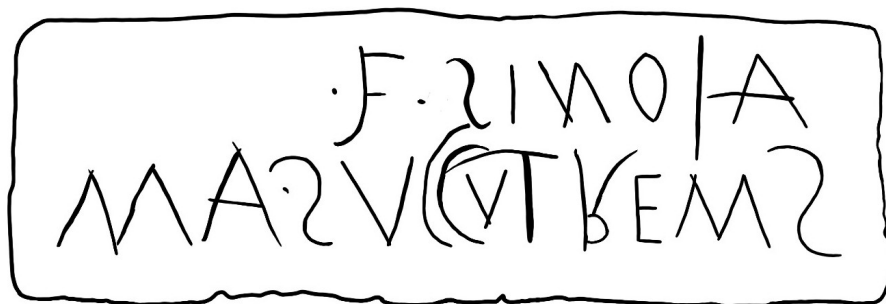


Fig. 3. Drawing of the *defixio* against Smertuccus, by Celia Sánchez Natalias.

A few years ago, aspects of the inscription that are reflective of magical praxis led me to include it in my *Sylloge of Defixiones from the Roman West*.⁹ And I did so with such blind enthusiasm that I may have misunderstood the filiation of the victim, positing a maternal lineage for *Smertuccus*¹⁰ instead of recognising that the text could also contain a patronym. Therefore, another possible translation of our curse could be “*Smertuccus*, son of *Amaio*”.¹¹ *Smertuccus* is a Celtic *cognomen*, while *Amaio* is a Germanic one, according to M.T. Raepsaet-Charlier.¹²

The genitive *Amaionis* could reasonably presuppose a masculine nominative *Amaio*, though we must ask if *Amaio* could alternatively be a feminine *cognomen*? Although rare, *cognomina* ending -o, -onis are also attested for women. For example: *Soiio*, -onis (f.; *Colonia Claudia Ara Agrippinensium*/Cologne, *Germania Inferior*, AE 1904, 23: *D(is) M(anibus) / Verecundinae Placid(a)e / sive Soiioni coniugi / dulcissimae quae vixit ...*), *Matuio*, -onis (f.; *Novaria*/Novara, Transpadana, AE 2002, 591: ... *Albicci f(iliae) matri / et Matuioni / Litonis f(iliae) uxori ...*), *Sicundo*, -onis (f.; *Municipium Splonistarum*, Dalmatia, EDCS-10100674: ... *et Sicundoni c(oniugi) / q(uae) v(ixit) a(nnos) XX ...*)

⁹ Cf. SD 461.

¹⁰ In fact, the nominative *Amaiona* could have the genitive form *Amaionis*, since first-declension nouns and adjectives may exhibit genitives in -ais, -aes, or -es, a phenomenon typically regarded as Vulgar Latin (with more than 1,000 examples in Roman inscriptions). From *Germania Inferior*, for instance, cf. *CHO[]NOVES* (= *cohortis novae*, AE 2000, 1000) and *AELIAES* (= *Aeliae*, AE 1945, 110). A comparable non-classical feature is the spelling of i for e, e.g. *MENSIS* (= *menses*, CIL XIII, 8482).

¹¹ And not just “son of *Amaiona*”, as I wrote in the file of SD 461. Both Feraudi-Gruénais in the Epigraphic Database Heidelberg (no. HD082671) and Raepsaet-Charlier (2024, 230 and 246) reach a similar conclusion.

¹² Other attestations of *Smertuccus* come from *Gallia Belgica* (vid. CAG-51, 02, p. 309) and *Germania Superior* (in feminine, vid. Finke 1929, no. 216). *Amaio* (which is classified as a Celtic name by Delamarre 2007, 18, s.v.) seems to be unparalleled. On both names in the context of the onomastics of the Batavian *civitas*, see Raepsaet-Charlier 2024.

or *Asterio*, -onis (f.: *Roma*, AE 1909, 91): *Helviae l(ibertae) Asterioni uxori ... Helviae Asterionis ...*). The last example is particularly noteworthy: the Greek original Ἀστερίων is masculine and also appears as a masculine *cognomen* in Latin inscriptions (e.g. *M. Domitius Asterio*, *CIL* VI, 16927, *D. Laberius Asterio* EDCS-12201650). Here, however, the repeated forms clearly indicate a feminine form (*Helvia Asterio*).

A few further considerations on this concise text are in order. I will start with its graphic features: as can be seen in the images (cf. figs. 1–2), the inscription was written in capitals. The words are separated by interpuncts consisting of a single dot that are placed halfway up the letters. Thus, it reflects monumental inscriptions as well as some Latin curse tablets.¹³ The textual deployment plays on two widespread principles of ancient magic: 1. the importance of naming the victim; and 2. the so-called *similia similibus* and its significance in terms of ritual analogies.

Concerning the former, it is well known that in Antiquity it was widely believed that a name, *pars pro toto*, could stand in for a victim him/herself.¹⁴ A name was considered an essential part of the person, in fact just as important as any other organ or limb.¹⁵ Therefore, by knowing the name of the victim, the *defigens* would be able to constrain him/her by means of inscribing it on the medium (which was later activated when being deposited).¹⁶ In this way, the victim and his/her destiny would be inextricably linked to the magical artefact and, as a result, cursed, one presumes, forever.

Within this magical logic, it was essential to identify the target in the most precise terms possible in order to achieve the desired outcome. With this goal in mind, it is hardly surprising that the name of the victim might be accompanied by his/her filiation.¹⁷ In about 7% of curse tablets from the Roman West, the

13 Good examples of this would be *SD* 52 (Ostia, 2nd–1st centuries BCE), 83 (*Marsi Maruvium*/San Benedetto, end of 1st century BCE–beginning of 1st century CE), 95 (*Caere*/Cerveteri, 2nd–1st centuries BCE), 121 (*Salacia*/Alcáçer do Sal, second half of the 1st century CE), 129 (*Carmona*/Carmona, second half of the 1st century BCE), among others. On how monumental inscriptions could, at times, influence the writing of curse tablets, see Sánchez Nataliás 2016, 71–73.

14 On this, see McKie 2022, 121–124.

15 Cf. *SD*, p. 28, n. 220 (with references).

16 As stated by McKie 2022, 122–123: “Naming their victims was so important to many cursers that they were the only thing they wrote on the tablet, making them the only part of the ritual that could be manipulated by nailing, folding or depositing, as well as the only permanent reminder that the curse had been placed”.

17 Although this is not the only way to help with the identification of the victim. As highlighted by McKie 2022, 125, spouses, children and/or enslavers could also be used to identify the target of the spell. In *id.*, 262, n. 82, the author recalls also the presence of brothers, sisters, step-mothers or even grandsons. To the latest group we could also add a Greek curse tablet from North Africa in which the victim seems to be identified by both his mother’s name and his grandmother’s, according to the honorand, who published the *editio princeps* of the inscription (cf. Németh 2019).

defigens did just this by specifying the victim's maternal lineage.¹⁸ I will not wade into the different explanations for the use of matronymics in curses, since I have done so elsewhere.¹⁹ Suffice it to say that, in my opinion, the use of a matronymic depended on both in the cultural background of the practitioner writing the spell as well as his/her knowledge of the cursing ritual.

At risk of stating the obvious, matronymics were not the only way to show filiation: in fact (and as it could happen in our case), *defigentes* could also inscribe the patronymic, parroting the conventions of standard onomastic practice. Among the curse tablets from the Roman West, the use of the patronymic is attested less frequently, in just 5% of all cases; that is, of the *ca.* 600 known *defixiones* from this area, paternal filiation is found in 32 of them.²⁰ Even if the earliest cases are Oscan and date back to the 4th–3rd centuries BCE,²¹ most of the examples are Latin and can be dated between the 1st century BCE and the 1st CE. Of these, the vast majority come from Italia, *Hispania Ulterior* and *Germania Superior*. Later examples, dating from the 2nd to the 4th centuries CE, also hail from *Africa Proconsularis*, *Germania Superior* and *Britannia*.²²

Leaving aside the content and various archaeological contexts from which this group of curses have emerged, it is important to highlight how all examples are 'vernacular'. In other words, these texts were written by individuals with a rudimentary knowledge of the cursing ritual. Such *defigentes* knew the medium (i.e., lead) that ought to be used, they also knew where to deposit a curse and were literate enough to write the text. However, when it came to naming his/her victim, the author resorted to ordinary onomastic practice,²³ perhaps because such conventions were familiar in general and were especially widespread in the contexts where the curses were deposited (e.g., sanctuaries or necropolis); additionally, they may have been unaware of the significance of maternal lineage within the realm of (professional) magical practice.²⁴

18 On this, see Sánchez Natalías 2026 with references. The calculations are based on a corpus of *ca.* 600 *defixionum tabellae* from the Roman West, written in Celtic, Gaulish, Etruscan, Oscan and Latin. Similar conclusions are offered by Chiarini 2021, 51–52, who works with a sample of *ca.* 400 texts.

19 Cf. Sánchez Natalías 2026.

20 Of these, it is worth mentioning that 3 are Oscan (*SD* 65, 77 and 84), 1 Etruscan (*SD* 88) and 1 Gaulish (*SD* 172).

21 Specifically, *SD* 77 (from Castiglione di Paludi) and 84 (*Aquilonia*/Monte Vairano). The use of the patronymic in these tablets reflects standard Oscan onomastic practice.

22 Interestingly enough, paternal filiation is used by *defigentes* to identify themselves in three curse tablets from *Britannia* (cf. *SD* 215 [from *Aquae Sulis*/Bath], 419 [from Uley; cf. the full edition by Tomlin 2024, *Tab. Uley* 62], 455 [from Farley Heath], and Tarlton 1 [Tomlin 2024, 348–352]).

23 Either with an abbreviation for *filius/-a* (*f* or *fil.*) or the father's name (in genitive), as noted also by McKie 2022, 124.

24 Cf. Sánchez Natalías 2026, with references.

And yet, despite being far away from formularies and templates, the practitioner who cursed *Smertuccus* seems to have been aware of a set of magical concepts, according to which the practice of writing could alter reality by means of a persuasive ritual analogy. In fact, several Latin curse tablets make explicit the (dangerous) linkages between the way of writing and the spell, by means of ritual analogies built around *similia-similibus* formulae.²⁵ Among these, it is worth mentioning a 1st century CE *defixio* from *Colonia Claudia Ara Agrippinensium*/Cologne that exemplifies the question. The text reads: *Vaeraca sic res tua / perve<r>se agas «c»omodo hoc / perverse scriptu(m) est* (“*Vaeraca*, in this way may you undertake your affairs backwards, just as this text is written backwards”).²⁶

Even though our case is much less explicit, it seems safe to assume that the individual who composed this curse thought that (s)he would be able to disrupt (or even to interrupt) its victim’s life by altering the text’s layout. Thus, by writing the name of *Smertuccus* from right to left and bottom to top, our *defigens* was twisting him, hopefully forever.

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²⁵ On these *defixiones*, see Faraone – Kropp 2010 and Chiarini 2019, esp. 140–146.

²⁶ On this curse tablet, see *SD* 464. English translation by Faraone – Kropp 2010, 383.

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