PARALLEL PHRASES AND INTERACTION IN GREEK AND LATIN MAGICAL TEXTS. THE PANNONIAN SET OF CURSE TABLETS[1]

BY ANDREA BARTA

MTA Research Institute for Linguistics, Budapest
barta.andrea@nytud.hu

Abstract: Magical texts represent an inexhaustible source for the phenomena of an ancient language for special purposes. The scope of this paper is limited to the different kinds of word-borrowings in the Pannonian set of curse tablets. One-language, well written and easily readable magical texts can be difficult to understand while explicit and unambiguous wording is expected in such practical genre like curses which level at definite persons. Harmful curse tablets and protective amulets, however, can be obscure. This study aims to give a comprehensive account of the possible reasons why these texts have a cloudy style, with special outlook of parallel phrases in Greek pieces of evidence.
Keywords: curse tablet, Pannonia, Latin, Greek, loan phrases

1. 'Defixiones are special texts, in which obfuscation was often deliberately sought to enhance the power of the magic'. J. N. Adams (2004, 128) in his widely cited statement properly argues for the obscuring effect of language mixing in the field of magic. Previous research[2] has long ago documented the oriental and Egyptian origins and elements of magical texts, thus various levels of borrowings can be detected in Latin tablets, from vocabulary to general structure. Though Greek and demotic papyri provide ancient recipes for producing magical inscriptions, we are roughly lacking of these in Latin (except certain recipes preserved by classical authors) while the number of the extant curse tablets is quite considerable. As regards their texts, curses which survived either totally or partly differ from each other (and generally from the excerpts of ancient authors), classification can be made mainly on the basis of the structure and the aim of the tablets.

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[2] Graf 1996, 12.

Given the fact that direct Latin sources (formulary books, recipes) are missing for Latin curses, the working process of magi producing Latin texts can hardly be explored.[3] The examination of magical papyri and curses has attested that not only the authors of the source books, but the great majority of practising magicians could be educated professionals who were well aware of the specification that a magical text requires.[4] However, this examination is usually not able to give a general answer to the question of language use: what language the magician spoke, in what language the source was written, what language the persons involved spoke, what language the community spoke, and for what reason they chose Latin. Usually curse tablets tries themselves offer responses to some of these questions, but the issue of source mostly remains open. This paper presents the results of the analysis of the Pannonian corpus of curse tablets[5] concerning the parallel phrases appearing in Greek pieces of evidence throughout the ancient Mediterranean territory. The research was intended to examine whether the classification of parallel phrases can help in deciphering and interpreting the newly found pieces. Similarly to previous studies on translation from Greek,[6] we suggest to make distinction on expressions (1) which are undoubtedly proved to be used and borrowed from the special language of Mediterranean magic and afterwards used repetitively as termini technici (*verto* and στρέφω, usually with prefixes), (2) words which were possibly translated individually and used without knowing the possible terms (*quam celerissime* (!) instead of *iam iam cito cito*, which renders the phrase ἤδη ἤδη ταχὺ ταχύ normally and (3) which have no parallels and seem to be innovations in the creative language usage of Latin speaking magi in the imperial times (*averto graphio* in fact the text was written with a bent stylus, see below).

A key limitation of this research is that in spite of the fact there are much wider corpora of magical text in other ancient languages, they still do not offer parallels to each problematic Latin tablet. The interpretation of the well preserved, easily readable magical tablet found near Carthage,[7] for instance, raised difficulties since all the phrases were in Latin, but in a sense, they sounded foreign. Although further examination is still required to understand every detail of the text, a phenomenon observed in the case of North African Latin inscription[8] might be a justification for the obscurity. In this territory a specific, *interpretatio Romana* of local deities was in use. In stone inscriptions, Roman gods were addressed but the context reveals that they were not the

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[3] At the same time, Roman authors (Pliny, Apuleius) did share numerous details on magi with their readers, but they bestowed limited attention on the linguistical context.

[4] Cf. Graf 1996, 11–12 for the magical papyri, and the Aquincum curse tablets as evidence for the curses (Barta 2015, 110–111, and Barta 2017). The longer a magician write, the better it reflects the level of proficiency.

[5] Barta (in print).

[6] Galdi 2012, 16.

[7] Barta 2019.

[8] Cadotte 2007, esp. 7–12. and 418–425.

gods of Romans but of the local inhabitants bearing Roman names in Latin inscriptions, but still having local functions or characteristics. Pursuing this further to the magical tablet of Carthage, the supposed circumstances can render reasons for the difficulties of interpretation. Provided that someone of unremovable local religion or knowledge was involved in the magical ritual of Mediterranean origin in the deeply Romanized world of North Africa, the ambiguous expressions might be explained on the basis of local sources which is the next stage of that research.[9]

2. The Pannonian curse tablets build up a collection of 12 pieces.[10] 10 were composed in Latin, 2 pieces in Greek in a province which belonged to the Latin part of the Roman Empire.[11] On one hand, most of them were surely produced by professionals, well aware of this genre at a certain level with good command of language and style, on the other hand they were made in a context which reflects a certain level of bilingualism.

Curse tablets from Pannonia

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[9] For example, the invocation *Caele pater* and *Terra mater* must be of foreign origin, because though the divine powers of the sky and earth were known to the Romans, they did not have cults in Rome. Inscriptions venerating Sky as *aeternus* refer to foreign cults (Barta 2019, 42).

[10] Barta (in print).

[11] Adamik 2006, 17–29.

A recent study collected and examined all the bilingual curse texts (89 pieces) of the Latin West.[12] Six different groups were identified by the author, but only 2 magical texts from Pannonia were (could be) involved in this research, because 5 Pannonian tablets were found after the publication of that paper.

 1. Greek & Latin (1 tablet)
 2a. Latin & magical formulae in Greek (33): Carnuntum (TheDeMa 265), Tricciana[13]
 2b. Latin & magical formulae in Greek in Latin script (16)
 3. Latin in Greek script (9)
 4. Latin & local languages (3)
 5. Latin & Celtic (7)
 6. Latin & charakteres (20)

The Carnuntum tablet (now lost) addressed *Dis Pater*, *Aeracura* and *Cerberus*. In the middle of the tablet two Greek lines were inserted among charakteres, mentioning the seal of King Salomon. Owing to the invocation of *Dis Pater* and *Aeracura*, the author of the tablet must have worked in a Celtic context. It is not clear whether the magus and/or the customer can be linked actually to the Celts, as the more gods are invoked, the more effective results could be expected, arriving from as many powers as possible. In addition, on the basis of the cursed person's Greek name *Eudemos*, we can assume he was of eastern origin or at least was living in a Greek-influenced community. The Latin text with a Greek insertion referring to a Jewish magical-mythical power in Salomon, the charakteres and the Greek name of the target person all attest the syncretism which was a requirement of magic. According to Marco Simón the complex text with the hardly understandable elements had a multiplying effect resulting in an artificial language, incomprehensible to most people.[14]

 The Tricciana lamella, a silver amulet, in fact, has similar characteristics. It was written in a mixed language and script, combining Greek, Latin and charakteres, but since the main reason, a serious health condition was mentioned in Greek language and script (ἐλεφαντίασις, a skin-concerned disease), we can consider it a Greek text.

 As regards the rest of the Pannonian curse tablets not mentioned in the study above on bilingualism, their classification ought to be done with reservations. The recently found and published Aquincum tablets[15] must have been produced under similar circumstances to the Carnuntum one's. They were worded in Latin, but the

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[12] Marco Simón 2012, 135–145.
[13] Kotansky 1994, Nr. 18.
[14] Marco Simón 2012, 137.
[15] Barta, Lassányi 2015 (= TheDeMa 1106), Barta 2015 (= TheDeMa 1115) and Barta 2017 (= TheDeMa 1429).

texts suggest bilingual (or multilingual?) context which is attested by the persons cursed (*Decibalus*, *Eunicus Surus*, *Beroe*, *Zosimus*, *Charito*, *Oceanus* etc.), the deities summoned (*Dis Pater*, *Aeracura*, *Mercurius Cyllenius*, *Tricerberi*, *Muta Tacita*) and the script used by the scribe (Latin script with some Greek reminiscence). Only the magical formulae in Greek are missing. The Greek-script curse tablet from Siscia[16] was also produced in similar context, the target persons bear either Latin or Greek names. This tablet is a pure list of names, nothing else was mentioned, except a short series of charakteres at the very end of the text, in the right lower corner. Regarding the indigenous deity, *Savus* addressed, the Latin tablet from Siscia refers to the actual find spot, the river and its river god.[17] The Greek curse tablet from Savaria is another example for using Greek in an alleged Latin community. The insignificant mistakes make us suppose that the magician was a Greek speaking person, with possible bilingualism.[18]

Up to this point, we have seen that, on one hand, (as for the tablet from Carthage) interpretatio Romana can lead to special language usage, a kind of unintentional obscurity even though the text at issue is one-language text and the clear composition is essential in a case of such functional and practical text-type. This forced unity or homogeneity can conceal the original notion. It was either the society's expectations or the Roman practice of magic that urged the magician to use Latin language. On the other hand, sometimes obscurity was intended, since bilingual or multilingual texts were believed to make the ritual more powerful. However, the aim of these two groups are similar, since magicians wanted to execute the ritual the most appropriate way, but their tools might be different, resulting in obscurity for the reader.

3. According to Marco Simón, bilingualism can be detected in different forms. However, beside the apparent bilingualism there is a hidden or indirect form, namely the context of a Latin curse text which refers to a Greek-speaking community or to Greek sources that the magician possibly used or knew.[19] To answer the questions on possible types of parallels in Greek, we present an approach to the corpus of Pannonian curses.

Three levels of borrowings from Greek can be distinguished:

1. The so called technical terms: the magician is well aware of the terminology and he uses them correctly.

2. Individual solutions: The magician uses not entirely appropriate words or chooses words not used before. In this case the magician is either not a skilled

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[16] Curbera, Jordan 2016 (=TheDeMa 443).

[17] Barta 2017b new autopsy (= TheDeMa 778 with previous readings).

[18] Gáspár 1990 (= TheDeMa 350).

[19] Although the magic in the Latin West is a very compound set of phenomena and the different elements originate mostly in the Oriental, Egyptian religion and magic, the nearest parallels can be found in Greek pieces of evidence.

professional or might have relied upon Greek formulary books which he translates in an unusual way.

3. The creative interpretation could have also originated in lack of experience or it was intended with the aim of more effectiveness.

Prior to look over the examples, a point zero should be inserted as a technical evidence for bilingual environment with possible literacy of both Latin and Greek.

0a Although names may reflect only fashion or trend in a community, the use of Greek names in Latin tablets could lead us to assume a bilingual context. In the first Aquincum tablet[20] we can find Greek names (*Oceanus*, *Eunicus Surus*, a Syrian, *Decibalus*, originally a Dacian historical name) among the Latin ones (*Iulia Nissa*, *Gaius Mutilius*, *Respecta*, *Asellio*). Crosswise, on the two Greek tablets from Pannonia we can see Latin names among the Greek ones, showing both traditional transliteration and orthographical mistakes due to Vulgar Latin features: *Cupita* was transcribed as Κουπεῖτα[21], *Privatus* as Πρειβᾶτο[ς] with epsilon iota in the place of a long i, Κρήσκης (*Crescens*) without the nasal part of the ns cluster. The name list of the Siscia tablet perfectly reflect the changes in pronunciation: i-e confusion in unstressed syllables: Γενίῑ=Ηˋᾶλις – *Genialis*, Οὐιτᾶλˊι=Εˋς – *Vitalis*, hypercorrect gemination in Ὀπτ{τ}ᾶτα – *Optata*, Κέρτ{τ}α – *Certa*.[22]

0b Besides the Greek names, sporadically morphological mistakes refer to Greek-bilingual context. Though an n-m confusion could have had phonological reasons, in a word of Greek origin like *antepistula* we may suppose Greek influence (ANTEPISTVLAN).[23] CONTRA BEROVENE must be an accusative form with an intrusive V of the standard common form *Beroe* (*contra Beroen*). This version can be compared to those of *Tyche* and *Nice* from stone inscriptions, where the genitive is Tychenis and Nicenis.[24] RESPECTES LINGVA: the much debated genitive -es in a Greek context tablet may be explained by Graecism (*Respectae lingua*)[25].

0c Even Greek letters could occur in the Latin text, among the Latin letters. As regards the technical features of the Aquincum tablets for example we can assume they were copied from a draft, usually someone who was familiar with both Latin and Greek writing. The generally well organized second and third tablet from Aquincum is entirely Latin, but if we take a closer look at some letters, they look as if they imitate Greek ones at the same time: The letter A as α, the letter S as Σ, or the initial consonant in *Zosimus* which seems to have been difficult to write down, be-

[20] Barta, Lassányi 2015 = TheDeMa 1106.
[21] Gáspár 1990 = TheDeMa 350.
[22] All of them from Curbera, Jordan 2016 = TheDeMa 443.
[23] Barta 2015 = TheDeMa 1115.
[24] Barta 2017 = TheDeMa 1429.
[25] Barta, Lassányi 2015 = TheDeMa 1106.

cause it occurs three times in the tablet, in three different forms, one of them seemingly with a Greek zeta.[26] CIN (*sint*) begins with a C, instead of an S which could be either a semi-finished S or a Greek sigma. The word-beginning H can be a Greek η in the name of the goddess *Eracura*. S{E}IC: the reason of the use of epsilon iota in the place of a long -i-, could be interpreted as an archaic form or influenced by the traditional transcript of the Greek ει.[27]

All these pieces of evidence prove that the majority of the magicians in Pannonia spoke Greek language and/or knew the Greek script at a certain level or worked in a bilingual Greek context or worked with Greek recipes.

The following examples help to determine the extent, the intensity of magic in Pannonia. Identifying the parallelisms could lead the editors to interpret the text the most plausible way.

Type 1: expressions which prove the professionality of the magician who seems to be well aware of the Latin terminology of the Mediterranean magic.

quicunge adversarius surrexerit (Aquincum, TheDeMa 1115 and 1429, 2nd–3rd c. AD)
καὶ εἴ τις ἄλλος ἐμοὶ ἐχθρός καὶ τούτους πάντας — καταδῶ αὐτούς (Athens, TheDeMa 973, 360–330 BC)
'whoever may act like an opponent'

Eunici Suri lingua ne possit adversus Oceanum loqui…
Asellionis lingua et nomen ne possit adversus Oceanum facere (Aquincum, TheDeMa 1106, 2nd–3rd c. AD)
ἡ γλῶσσα αὐτῶν … μὴ δύναιντο φθέγγεσθαι μηδὲ ποῆσαι (Athens, TheDeMa 206, 330–260 BC)
'May the tongue of NN be unable to harm …'

Caius Volusius Maximus Firmi Optati
Proculus Virotouta Constans
servi atque Publicius
Porcius Munitus
Clodius Dexter Tullius
Secundus Cornelius
Priscus quicumque

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[26] Barta 2015 = TheDeMa 1115 and Barta 2017 = TheDeMa 1429. Using Greek letters in Latin texts are usually considered to strengthen the effectiveness of the ritual. ("Sometimes the power of the text written in Latin is increased in a radically economical way by means of the inclusion of simple Greek letters, particularly those – such as zeta, chi and omega – for which there was no exact equivalence in Latin." Marco Simón 2012, 138.) Probably, phonetical reasons may lie behind this phenomenon. However, Zosimus was a common name in inscriptions, the striking hesitation on the correct spelling (Zosimus, Sosimus, Iosimus) may assume a Greek pronunciation which was difficult to render in Latin alphabet, even though the Vulgar Latin phenomenon, the palatalization could make an effect on it.

[27] Barta 2015 = TheDeMa 1115, from the 2nd or 3rd century AD.

> *adversarii sunt*
> *omnes* (Emona, TheDeMa 779, 1st c. BC–1st c. AD)
> Πυθέας
> Πύθιππος
> Ἡγέστρατος
> Σμιδυρίδης
> ὁπόσοί ἰσιν
> ἀντίδικοι (Athens, TheDeMa 398, 4th c. BC)

The structure is composed the same way: a list of names is followed by an expression referring to all possible adversaries who are not named on the tablet.

Type 2 represents all those expressions which seem to be composed from a foreign original, but some elements do not always match.

> *quam celerissime (!) infra dies novem vasum reponat. (=celerrime)* (Carnuntum, TheDeMa 265, 2nd c. AD)
> *iam iam cito cito* ἤδη ἤδη ταχὺ ταχύ (Carthage, TheDeMa 94, 3rd c. AD)

The urgent δη ἤδη ταχὺ ταχύ can be identified behind the superlative celerissime, but the phrase was generally translated word for word: *iam iam cito cito* and structured so that it reminds the Greek original version.

> *eorum nomina ut studeas* (Aquincum, TheDeMa 1429, 2nd–3rd c. AD)
> κάτοχος ἴσθι τούτων τῶν ὀνομάτων (Athens, TheDeMa 973, 360–330 BC)
> *Ea[m] Caeciliam Primam, sive quo alio nomine est, uti eam, Dite Pater, deprimas* (Rome, TheDeMa 517, 1st c. AD)

Studeas is a hapax among the Latin curses, usually the variants of *premo* (*deprimo*, *opprimo*) were used instead.

> *Necetis eum pessimo leto* (Carnuntum, TheDeMa 265, 2nd c. AD)
> τιμωρισθῆνε κακῶ θανάτω (Rome, TheDeMa 74, 4th c. AD)
> *des ei malem mentem, malum exitum* (Mainz, DTM 5, 1st–2nd c. AD)

Pessimo leto refrains the military oath mentioned by Livy: *Si sciens fallo, tum me Iuppiter Optimus Maximus, domum, familiam remque meam pessimo leto adficias.*[28] κακῶ θανάτω became common much later in Greek, with which *malum exitum* seems to agree better. The route of borrowing is not clear, maybe it reflects an inverse way.[29]

Two words, *Tricerberi*, *antepistula*, from one of the Aquincum tablets (TheDeMa 1115) must be considered as a subgroup of individual translation: Up to

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[28] Liv. 22.53.11: 'If I wittingly speak false, may Jupiter Optimus Maximus, utterly destroy me, my house, my family, and my estate.'

[29] I am grateful to Daniela Urbanova for the examples and comments on death.

now, *antepistula* 'a letter in reply, or a curse in reply' and the Greek equivalent ἀντεπιστολή, were never found in classical sources. However, the verb ἀντεπιστελλώ 'to write an answer' was widely used. This piece of evidence attests the first occurrence of this word. Up to the present, Tricerberus has been thought to be a word first used in the Late Antiquity and only some instances are known from the early Middle Ages and the Byzantine period. It appears in Latin for the first time in Fulgentius' works from the 5th–6th century in the singular.[30]

Type 3 is quite difficult to identify in use. In case of the Pannonian curses there is only one instance which goes back to the common ground of Mediterranean magic, with resorting to creative innovations – maybe due to lack of experience or longing for more effectiveness. The structure itself was widely used, but it involved creativity. In line 7 of Aq-1[31] a persuasive analogy begins*: Quomodo hoc ego averso graphio scribo, sic linguae illorum aversae ne possint facere contra hos … ego supra posivi*. According to parallels where *aversus* occurs[32], a part or the whole of text is written abnormally, backwards or upside down. There are a few exceptions where no modification was made and usually *aversus* used to interpreted there as 'hostile'. Thus, the translation could run as follows: 'Just as I write this in hostile style, so may their hostile tongues be unable to act against these … (whom I mentioned above)'. An intentionally bent stilus however was found next to the Aquincum curse tablet, thus the interpretation was to be changed: With the graphium in hand, the interpretation changes: 'Just as I write this with a bent, twisted stylus, so, too, may their bent and twisted tongues be unable to act against these … whom I mentioned above.

From the few examples that has been presented, it is possible to conclude that when we deal with the sometimes quite obscure genre of magical tablets, we must pay attention to the nature of the expressions. Very often archaeological context can be missing, each characteristic can be of special value. We have seen that interpreting and determining parallels can help us to identify the way or methods how the composers of curses worked.

In the first example of Carthage, a specific kind of interpretatio Romana was detected, where indigenous thoughts and ideas were mixed with the Romanized tradition of Mediterranean magic, in a territory, or in a context where Latin seemed to be expected for the author of the text - resulting in an unintended obscurity. Secondly, we have seen that shifting from one language to another may increase the intended obscurity and enhance the power of the magic. And finally, bilingual context cannot conceal the possible incompetency of the author that is in a certain language context the insufficient knowledge of the tradition of magic becomes sooner visible.

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[30] Barta 2015, 109–110.

[31] Barta, Lassányi 2015.

[32] On the terms aversus and καταστρεφώ, see Faraone, Kropp 2010. The Aquincum tablet seems to have offered another solution for the problem of -verto without text modification.

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