

Clandestine Curses: Hidden Dangers to Charioteers

Roman Spectacles and Entertainment

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The circus was one of Rome's most popular and impressive spectacles. The noise of the excited crowd, the sharp competition of the charioteer teams, the dangers of the race track, and the symbolic displays of power greatly appealed to the Romans. The free seats at the race track regularly drew thousands of spectators from all social classes. The circus drew everyone from the lowest street worker sitting up high on a wooden bleacher to the emperor himself in his private box. The popularity of this event manifests within the archaeological remains of hundreds of race tracks around the Roman Empire including the Roman Circus Maximus. The Circus Maximus' capacity to hold a third of Rome's population within its seats speaks volumes about the popularity of this event.¹ Evidence of floor mosaics in private Roman homes, such as the Piazza Armerina circus mosaic, show the symbols of wealth and power associated with the circus. Hidden curse tablets further exemplify the popularity of these races. Excavations of lead curse tablets relating to athletic contests, or *Defixiones Agonisticae*, both within the circus arenas and outside of them, have supplied us with a more complete understanding of the circus' importance. Spectators and charioteers buried these curses in an effort to affect the outcome of the race. Inscriptions and drawings on the tablets' surfaces requested the death and failure of certain charioteers or factions within the races. *Defixiones Agonisticae* express Roman investment in the circus contest and the political and social significance of the competitions' outcome. The circus was a spectacle of violence, danger, and victory that the Roman elite used in order to demonstrate their power and importance.

To understand *Defixiones Agonisticae* we must first understand the circus and its players. The "Circus Mosaic" at Piazza Armerina, dated to the 4th century, provides a detailed picture of a

¹ Roland Auguet. "Chariot Races, Stables and Factions." *Cruelty and Civilization: the Roman Games*. (London: Routledge, 1994). 124-125.

typical circus (Figure 1). From the mosaic one can easily make out the oval race track with the long *spina* at its center. Up to twelve four-horse chariot teams would have raced around this *spina* in a counter clockwise direction. The *spina* was typically filled with war trophies and exotic objects to showcase the might of Rome. In the *spina* depicted, we can make out an obelisk as well as a number of other statues that display Roman power over foreign lands. Discreetly to the left of the obelisk is a lap counter with what appears to be seven eggs. At the end of each lap an egg would have fallen-this method allowed spectators to know which lap the leading horse was running. On each end of the *spina* are *metae*, turning posts. These *metae* and the starting gates of the track (represented on the far right of the mosaic) were the points of greatest danger. Teams often crashed at these crucial moments. At the *metae* on the left side of the mosaic we can see one of these typical crashes, known as *naufragium* or shipwrecks to the Romans. These crashes were often fatal to the charioteer or his horses.

Charioteers tied the reins of their horses to their bodies as depicted in the mosaic. This helped them control the team, but, in a crash, it often led to being dragged and trampled. A charioteer always carried a knife in case of this scenario, but just because he escaped death by his own horses did not mean he escaped being run over by another charioteer.² The danger and violence of the circus increased spectator appeal. Victory was all the sweeter when death could be the cost. Romans loved this element of danger and exploited it in the Roman curse tablets discussed in the next section.

The beginning of the race was one of the most dangerous sections of the race and also one of the most symbolic moments of the race. To announce the beginning of the circus, the benefactor of the race, usually a wealthy consul or magistrate, would hold up the *mappa*, a white

² N. Crowther, "Roman Chariot Racing." *Sport in Ancient Times*. (Praeger, 2007) 129.

piece of cloth. All eyes would be on him as he dropped this piece of white cloth to symbolize the beginning of the race. Because of this symbolic opening, the *mappa* became an icon of power and wealth. In that moment, the sponsor of the event made it clear to the thousands of spectators that he was wealthy enough to sponsor this race, that he was important enough to command their attention, and that he was a Roman elite. Political candidates often hosted the games in order to gain popularity and to win support from the masses. Even the wealthy owner of Piazza Armerina depicted the important presence of the crowd in his circus mosaic. They played a key role in the circus spectacle.

The passion of the crowd has been well documented. Romans were avid supporters of the four different factions: the Blue, Green, Red, and White teams. Spectators often knew the charioteers and their horses by name and displayed frescoes and mosaics of them within their homes. Pliny the Younger complains about this fanatical partisanship and the displays of power associated with the circus when he writes,

I am the more astonished that so many thousands of grown men should be possessed again and again with a childish passion to look at galloping horses, and men standing upright in their chariots. If, indeed, they were attracted by the swiftness of the horses or the skill of the men, one could account for this enthusiasm. But in fact it is a bit of cloth they favour, a bit of cloth that captivates them. And if during the running the racers were to exchange colours, their partisans would change sides, and instantly forsake the very drivers and horses whom they were just before recognizing from afar, and clamorously saluting by name.³

The very aspects of the race which Pliny chastises are those which caused Roman spectators and charioteers to commission curse tablets. The fanatical partisanship of faction supporters, the gambling, and political images bound up with the outcome of the race all led to the burying of *Defixiones Agonisticae* lead curse tablets.

³ Pliny the Younger letter 9.6 translated by William Melmoth, H. A. Harris, *Sport in Greece and Rome* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972], 220-21)

Defixiones or binding spells were written on curse tablets in order to carry out a plethora of missions. As Graf states, “The usual objective of ritual binding is, thus, to subject another human being to one’s will, to make the person unable to act according to his or her own wishes.”⁴ To date, over one thousand five hundred curse tablets have been excavated.⁵ However, not all of these are *Defixiones Agonisticae*, curses related to athletic contests. Graf splits the *Defixiones* into five categories: *Defixiones iudicariae* (judicial spells), *Defixiones amatoriae* (erotic spells), *Defixiones agonisticae* (athletic contest spells), *Defixiones* against slanderers or thieves, and *Defixiones* against economic competitors (commerce based spells).⁶ The third group, *Defixiones agonisticae*, was commissioned by charioteers and their fans in order to affect the outcome of the circus. Charioteers placed tablets to curse their opponents. Gamblers used them to secure bets they had placed. Political figures employed them to ensure the victorious image that they desired. Farone explains the motives behind curse tablets when he states, “The intended victims...are not being cursed because they are guilty of any crime or misdeed against the defigens but rather because they are his rivals with regard to social prestige or economic position, and any attack against their social position will result in an increase of his own honor.”⁷ Spectators and charioteers alike craved success and were willing to destroy anyone obstructing their way to victory.

Unfortunately, due to the fact that the commissioners of the tablets never wrote their names on the spells, we will never truly know who placed these tablets or their personal motives.

The most obvious reason for this lack of names is that curse tablets were illegal in the Roman

⁴ Fritz Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1997), 120.

⁵ John. G Gager, *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 3.

⁶ Fritz Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1997), 120-121.

⁷ H.S. Versnel, *Magika Hiera: Ancient Greek Magic and Religion*, ed. Christopher A. Faraone and Dirk Obbink (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 62.

world. As Heinz states, “practicing magic was...a capital offense under Roman law: convicted magicians, as well as their accomplices and customers, faced death by fire or exposure to wild beasts.”⁸ The legal ramifications of being found responsible for a curse tablet probably stopped the majority of commissioners from associating themselves with the tablets. Those that were not afraid of the law seem to have been afraid of the spell transferring to themselves or of counter magic from someone who might have found the tablet.

The authors of these tablets may be unknown, but the process that they used to make them and bury them is not. Curse spells were written on lead tablets. Lead was probably the medium of choice for a number of reasons. Farone explains two of the common theories as to why lead was employed, first that “lead was probably used because it was a cheap writing medium in classical Attica and elsewhere (it is a byproduct of silver mining).” Second, he explains that “the peculiar coldness and color of the metal (like the pallor of a corpse) might have made its use for defixiones especially appealing.”⁹ Once the spell had been written on the lead tablet, it was then folded up and run through with a nail. The meaning behind the process of piercing the tablet with a nail probably “derives from the ordinary function of nails, which is to fasten, to fix, to tie down, and thus to bind.”¹⁰ A symbolic element of adding “pain and death to the spell”¹¹ has also been suggested. This process symbolizes the theme of danger and violence which permeated the circus. The race track abounded with fatal dangers for a charioteer; it was the curse tablet’s job to make the charioteer susceptible to them. For tablets such as the “Circus Tablet from Carthage” (see figure 2) the procedure appears to have been practical. This curse

⁸ Florent Heintz, “Magic Tablets and the Games at Antioch,” in *Antioch: the Lost Ancient City* (2000): 52.

⁹ Christopher A. Farone. *Magika Hiera Ancient Greek Magic and Religion*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 7.

¹⁰ John. G Gager, *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 18.

¹¹ John. G Gager, *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 18.

tablet was affixed to the circus at Carthage's floor by a bronze nail. It is difficult to say whether the practice began as symbolic or practical, but it is clear that piercing tablets with nails became a ritual component of curse tablets.

Once the tablet had been created and nailed closed, it was then buried somewhere auspicious. Many *Defixiones Agonisticae* such as the "Circus tablet from Carthage" were buried or nailed to the circus itself. Often they were placed at particularly dangerous sections of the track, such as the starting gates or *metae*. The Papyri Graecae Magicae give a number of other locations that one might choose to "have (the tablet) buried or [put in] a river or land or sea or stream or coffin or in a well."¹² Water was often a good choice as that was an element associated with death, the underworld, and its deities. Graves were also considered good sites. According to Gager, the "burial sites of those who had died young or by violent means were the preferred choices, because it was believed that their souls remained in a restless condition near the graves until their normal life span had been reached."¹³ Indeed, it seems that some spirits were so helpful that Romans assigned them curse after curse to fulfill.

The "Roman Circus Tablet" (figure 3) was found in a group deposit of such a spirit. The tablet was found in a tomb along the Via Appia with approximately fifty-six other lead curse tablets, all of which were rolled up and pierced with nails according to custom. What is unusual about this deposit is that they were all also placed in miniature terra cotta sarcophagi. From the uniform burial method and their date to the fourth century C.E., it appears that these curses were all deposited by the same curse tablet creator.

¹² Line 451-52 Papyri Graecae magicae, vol 1, ed.k. Preisendanz (stuttgart, 1928);rev.ed., A. Henrichs (1973); vol 2, ed. K. Preisendanz (1931)

¹³ John. G Gager, *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 19.

The “Roman Circus Tablet” itself is extremely elaborate and contains a wealth of details about charioteer curses. In the center of the tablet, there is a horse headed demon figure carrying a chariot wheel in his left hand and a charioteer whip in his right hand. The tablet is inscribed with clear instructions for this demon and the other spirits that it invokes to curse the charioteer Cardelus, saying “I invoke you... so that you may help me and restrain and hold in check Cardelus and bring him to a bed of punishment, to be punished with an evil death, to come to an evil condition, him who his mother Fulgentina bore.”¹⁴

“The Roman Circus Tablet” is a perfect example of how curse tablets attempted to create a sense of confusion and uncertainty through images and words. The reference to the charioteer’s mother was commonly used on curse tablets. Curse tablets often identified the victim by “maternal lineage, a social inversion (from the usual patronymic) to match such tablets’ many linguistic inversions.”¹⁵ Other methods such as the *vocus magicae*, or strings of demonic names, used in this tablet add to the element of chaos. Even the way that it was written promotes the purpose of tangling up and causing confusion. As Gager eloquently puts it, “every other line on the tablet is written upside down and backward manifest[ing] a deliberate attempt, through symbolic action, to ‘twist and turn’ the intended target.”¹⁶ These different approaches were thought to cause chaos and instability and transfer negative energies to the target of the curse.

“The Roman Circus Tablet” also displays the spell’s attempt to restrain and hold Charioteers such as Cardelus in check. In the upper left of the tablet is a tomb with the bust of the charioteer above it. There appear to be nails in both the bust and the tomb. Perhaps the curse

¹⁴ Daniel Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft, and Ghosts in the Greek and Roman Worlds: a Sourcebook*. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009) 212.

¹⁵ Daniel Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft, and Ghosts in the Greek and Roman Worlds: a Sourcebook*. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009) 214.

¹⁶ John. G Gager, *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 67.

was trying to bind the image of the charioteer with his imminent death. The bound figure in a coffin at the bottom of the tablet certainly seems to convey this message. This bound figure, presumably of Cardelus, was purposefully run through with the nail that pierced the tablet itself; symbolically conveying an image of torture and distress. Not only is this figure pierced with a nail, but it is encircled with two snakes about to strike its head. All of this imagery conveys the tablet's goal to make the victim powerless and unable to compete in the circus race.

One sees similar imagery being employed in a third century C.E. tablet discovered near the ancient race course in Beirut Syria (figure 4). On this tablet, one sees a bound figure being attacked by the head of a snake. Carefully marked on the body of the figure are circles to indicate where nails should be placed in the binding process. These images along with requests of a number of holy angels to “attack, bind, overturn, cut up, chop into pieces the horses and the charioteers of the Blue colors- Numphikos, Thalophoros, [long list of names]”¹⁷ are similar to the “Roman Circus Tablet” tablet. Nails are used to link the charioteer with the death and violence of the circus arena and the spell reinforces the message with names to guide evil forces.

However, not all of the tablets chose to use such detailed pictures. Another tablet buried between the first and third century C.E. in the grave of a Roman official in Carthage has much sparser decor (See figure 5). Beyond the writing of the curse, the only decorations on this tablet are the Charaktêres, symbols of great power written in its margins. As Gager explains them, “they embody the classic definition of a religious symbol as embodying and transmitting power from the divine realm to the human.”¹⁸ It is unclear what they actually meant or if the Romans even ascribed a specific meaning to each symbol. It is quite possible that the power of

¹⁷ John. G Gager, *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 55.

¹⁸ John. G Gager, *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 11.

Charaktêres lay in their unknown mysterious symbolism. Despite the power attributed to these symbols, the commissioner of this curse appears to have been afraid to lose the clarity of his curse.

Perhaps, due to the lack of images on this tablet, its author made its written message even more detailed than the others. The spell invokes a number of *vocus magicae* to,

bind every limb and sinew of Victoricus- the Charioteer of the Blue team...and of his horses which he is about to race... Bind their legs, their onrush, their bounding, and their running; blind their eyes so that they cannot see and twist their soul and heart so that they cannot breath. Just as this rooster has been bound by its feet, hands, and head, so bind the legs and hands and head and heart of Victoricus the charioteer of the Blue team... so that they may not reach victory tomorrow in the circus. Now, now, quickly, quickly.¹⁹

This written set of instructions gives a good idea of what the bound figure imagery was trying to portray. Similar to the concept of *Damnatio memoriae* in portraiture, these curses are trying to cut off the sight, mouth/breath, and mobility of the charioteers through words and images.²⁰

A fifth or sixth century curse found in a fill on the Orontes River near Apamea uses all of these methods of binding as well as suggesting practical ways of removing opposing charioteer's strength, such as depriving them of food and sleep (Figure 6). The curse tablet itself has thirty-six Charaktêres and is addressed to the symbols themselves instead of the usual demons and gods. The tablet reads,

Most holy Charaktêres, tie up, bind the feet, the hands, the sinews, the eyes, the knees, the courage, the whip, the victory and the crowning of Pophuras and Hapisicrates, who are in the middle left, as well as his co drivers of the Blue colors in the stable of Eugenius. From this very hour, from today, may they not eat or drink or sleep; instead from the starting gates may they see daimones of those who have died prematurely, spirits of those who have died violently...in the hippodrome at the moment when they are about to compete may they not squeeze over, may they not collide, may they not extend,

¹⁹ John. G Gager, *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 64-67.

²⁰ E. Varner, *From Caligula to Constantine: Tyranny and Transformation in Roman Portraiture* (2000): 14-15.

may they not force us out, may they not overtake, may they not break off (in a new direction) for the entire day when they are about to race. May they be broken, may they be dragged (on the ground), may they be destroyed; by Topos and by Zablas. Now, now, quickly, quickly.²¹

This curse provides us with a better understanding of the strategies used in the circus from the requests that this curse makes to stop the tactics of the Blue team. The curse specifically asks that the Blue team “not collide...not force us out.” These tactics give us an idea of how charioteers might gain an advantage in the arena and the spectacle they created when employing such strategies. This spell also showcases the use of *daimones* and of the restless dead to spook horses and charioteers. Moreover, it includes the typical ending phrase of “Now, Now, quickly, quickly.”

These curse tablets reflect the passionate involvement of the circus spectators and charioteers in the races. The wide variety of curses and victims shows that burying *Defixiones Agonisticae* was a regular occurrence associated with the circus. The time and effort put into these tablets, and the risk involved in being discovered guilty of commissioning such a tablet, shows us the lengths that Romans went to for the chance at victory in the circus. The motive of the tablets is clear: to hold back and hinder one’s opponents. For charioteers and plebian gamblers this translates to simply holding an opposing charioteer back from victory. For the elite, these tablets and their effect on the races was about much more than hindering one charioteer’s success. Procopius, a sixth century historian, writes that “On a ‘visit’ to Apamea, the Persian general Chosroes issued orders for a special series of races in the hippodrome of the city. Knowing that the Roman emperor Justinian favored the Blues, Chosroes decided to support the Greens. When the Blues took an early lead, Chosroes commanded his agents to slow down the

²¹ John. G Gager, *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 57-58.

Blue team in order to guarantee a Green victory.”²² Thus for the elite, these races were about the political factions behind the charioteers. The circus was a great spectacle of social image. From the drop of the *mappa* to the crowning of the winning team, these races were used to portray power and victory. Everyone wished to be associated with such a public triumph. Whether they were plebeians clamoring for the horse that they had bet on or Roman consuls attempting to create a political image for themselves, all of them were intimately invested in the races.

The circus was a spectacle with political connotations that not even the emperor could control. The *Defixiones Agonisticae* represent an attempt to control the uncontrollable. Their complicated creation process, their secretive burial, and the deadly words inscribed on their surfaces show the investment of the Roman population in the circus. Everyone in the crowd craved victory; and, as the curse tablets so accurately state, the desire was, to obtain victory, “Now, Now, quickly, quickly.”

²² Fritz Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1997), 56.

Images

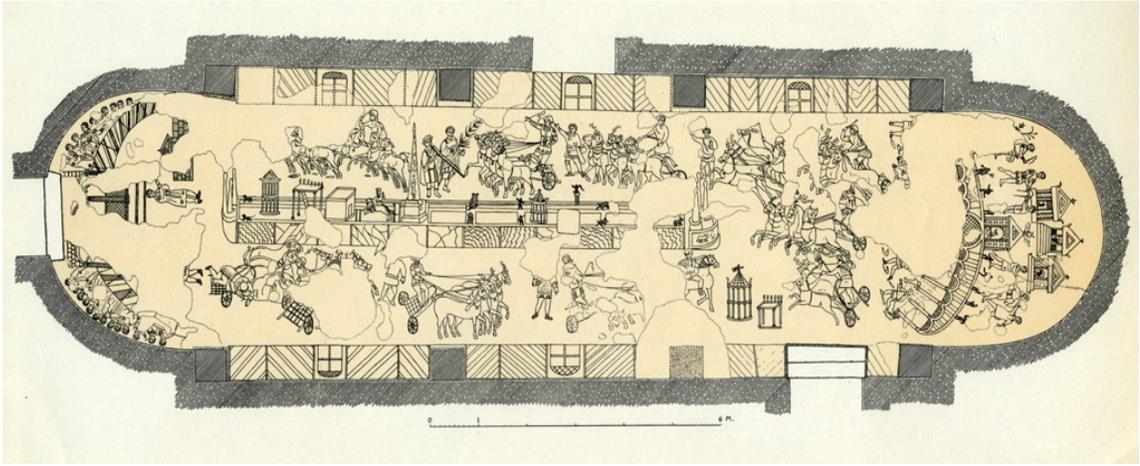


Figure 1: Drawing of the Circus Mosaic at Piazza Armerina, villa in Sicily. Early fourth century CE. Lecture by Professor Molholt.



Figure 2: Defixio from the race track at Carthage.
Photograph by Bill Wood From Gager, Curse
tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient
World pg 19.

1 ΚΑΤΟΧΟΣ ΙΠΠΩΝ ΚΕΗΝΙΧΩΝ
 2 ΦΡΙΞ
 3 ΦΩΞ
 4 ΒΕΙΑΒΟΥ
 5 (ΙΤΩΚΤΑΝΕΩΤΕΡ
 6 ΙΤΕΠΟΧΘΩΝ
 7 ΥΠΟΧΘΩΝ
 8 ΛΑΜΝΩ
 9 ΔΑΜΝΑ
 10 ΛΥΚΟΔΑΗΝΑ
 11 ΗΕΝΙΠΠΑ
 12 ΠΥΡΙΠΙΔΑΝΞ
 13 ΟΡΕΟΒΑΡΖΑΓΡΑΚΡΑΜΑΧΑΔΑΡΙ
 14 ΦΝΟΥΚΕΝΤΑΒΑΩΘΩΒΑΡΑΒΑΥ
 15 ΑΥΤΙΟΙΑΝΓΕΛΟΙΣΥΝΟΙΤΣΑΤΕΚΑΙΚΑΤΑΧΕΤΕ
 16 ΛΥΛΑΤΑΝΑΥΔΩΝΙΚΑΤΑΑΥΤΟΥΣ
 17 ΟΙΑΤΙΤΝΟΥΝΑΜΙΝΤΟΥΝΗΙΑΣΚΕΛΛΙΜΑΣΚΕ
 18 ΦΝΑΝΚΕΤΑΛΩΘΟΡΕΟΒΑΡΖΑΛΛΩ
 19 ΚΕΤΑΙΝΙΝΣΥΝΕΡΘΥΤΕΔΗΝΣΑΤΕΚΑΙΡΑΜ
 20 ΤΕΤΑΣΤΡΕΨΗΤΕΛΕΠΤΟΚΟΠΗΣΑΤΕΙΦΑΛΕ
 21 ΙΠΠΟΥΣΚΕΗΝΙΟΥΧΟΝΣΧΡΟΑΣΚΑΛΑΕΙΝΩΝ
 22 ΝΥΦΙΚΟΣΘΑΛΟΦΟΡΟΣΑΗΤΗΤΟΣΜΟΥΣΟΤΡΟΦΟΣ
 23 ΚΑΛΙΜΟΡΦΣΦΛΟΠΑΡΘΕΝΟΣΠΑΝΤΟΜΕΔΩΝ
 24 ΥΠΑΤΟΣΦΙΛΑΡΜΑΤΟΣΜΑΚΑΡΙΣΟΦΑΛΙΟΣΗΓΕ
 25 ΜΩΝΩΚΕΙΑΝΟΣΤΥΡΑΝΟΣΧΩΡΙΚΙΣΚΑΛΙΜΟΡΦ
 26 ΑΥΡΙΟΣΑΚΤΙΝΟΒΟΥΛΟΣΕΓΔΙΚΟΣΖΑΒΑΔΗΣΧΩΡ
 27 ΙΚΙΣΝΟΜΟΘΕΤΗΣΒΑΡΒΑΡΟΣΕΙΕΡ·ΝΙΚΗΣΞΑ
 28 ΕΣΜΑΚΑΡΙΣΔΩΝΑΤΟΣΑΝΘΕΡΕΤΟΣΨΩΦΟΥ
 29 ΟΛΥΚΟΤΡΑΜΟΣΓΕΡΜΑΝΟΣΟΗΕΛΙΣΚΟΣΑΣΠΡΟ
 30 ΦΟΣΑΝΑΤΥΛΙΚΟΣΑΝΤΙΟΧΟΣΧΡΑΒΔΗΝΟΝΙΣ
 31 ΧΡΑΒΔΗΛΥΣΗΣ
 32 ΧΕΡΑΣΠΟΔΑΣΝΕΥΡΙΑΟΑΣΚΑΛΑΕ
 33 ΙΠΠΩΝΚΕΗΝΙΟΧΩΝΧ·ΟΛΑΥΑΥΑΕΝΩΝ



Figure 4: "Defixio" from Beirut Syria. Gager, Curse tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World, pg 54.

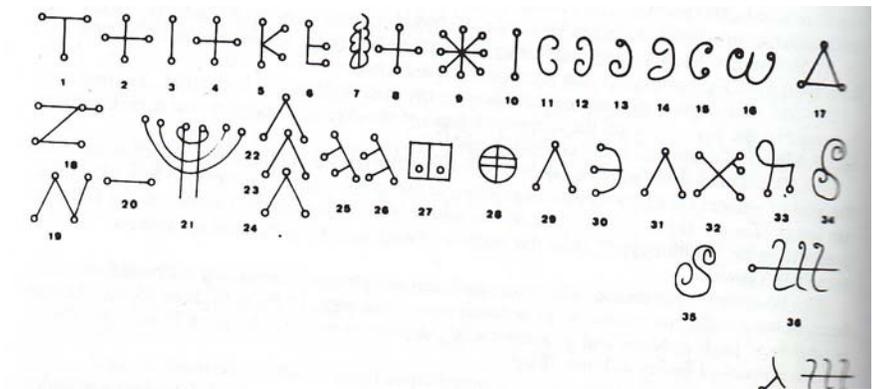


Figure 6: "Defixio" from Apamea in Syria. Gager, Graf, Curse tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World, pg 56.