

EÖTVÖS LORÁND UNIVERSITY  
FACULTY OF HUMANITIES  
DOCTORAL SCHOOL OF LINGUISTICS  
DOCTORAL PROGRAM OF ANCIENT STUDIES

**Andrea Barta**

**Roman curse tablets in Pannonia and their language usage  
(Text, language, function)**

**Abstract of Doctoral Thesis**

Consultant: Dr. Béla Adamik PhD

Budapest, 2015.

## **I. Selecting the topic and the aims of the thesis**

The topic of my doctoral thesis is the up-to-date overview of Latin and Latin related curse tablets found in the territory of the Roman province of *Pannonia*, their interpretation on the basis of standardised principles and their linguistic analysis. The starting point of my research was when I processed the piece found in the civic town cemetery in Aquincum. I was confronted with numerous such problems in the course of examining this piece that required the in-depth study of this type of archeological find not just exclusively from a religious history point of view but rather focusing on the linguistic features.

This type of archeological find, which can be found throughout classical antiquity, in Greek territories and all parts of the Roman Empire alike, did not come to life using literary language. Those ordering and writing curse tablets could belong to the leading, educated strata of society, however, according to the surviving curse texts this was often not the case. The characteristics of spoken language appear on the tablets in different forms and to varying extent. Recognising and identifying them is indispensable for understanding the texts wholly from all aspects.

We usually do not possess direct information about the actual creators of the curse tablets, whose language usage is documented by the texts inscribed. It is also not easy to decide whether the customer, author and scribe of the curse represent one or more persons. We can only get closer to them through the in-depth analysis of the text, and as a consequence we can reconstruct a clearer picture of their linguistic and cultural belonging in the given community and their romanisational and educational level.

Preceding the initiation of my research I studied the inscribed magical small finds in Pannonia. I was searching for such texts, as a sort of parallel to the curse tablets from Aquincum, that were probably written locally to local customers and can be linked to the local population. After excluding the impersonal magical gems and amulets which were often imported, I found that besides numerous smaller tablets bearing linguistically irrelevant, uninterpretable magical symbols, characteres and names of gods in

different languages using different types of writings, there were altogether only seven Latin<sup>1</sup> and two Greek curse tablets found in Pannonia, moreover, we can observe strong Latin influence in the case of the latter ones.

However, this relatively limited but in many respects really heterogeneous collection of archeological finds triggers far-reaching questions even at first glimpse:

A) Considering the curse tablet a genre

- can local characteristics be identified, can a certain Pannonian style be outlined,
- if they do not form a unity, can they individually be linked to other parallel archeological finds found in other provinces?

B) Considering the language of the curse tablets

- do they alter our view of the general language conditions in Pannonia reconstructed on the basis of other sources (mainly inscription),
- to what extent do they contribute to getting to know the spoken language of the age: i.e. Vulgar Latin,
- is the statement still tenable that the language of magical communication was Greek in Pannonia?

## **II. The sources and methods of the research**

In order to clarify these questions, the collection had to be examined thoroughly according to unitary principles. These nine tablets were made in seven Pannonian settlements (*Aquincum*, *Savaria*, *Carnuntum*, *Emona*, *Poetovio*, *Siscia* and an unknown settlement) and they cover the first three centuries of the existence of the province and were found in the course of the past hundred years separately and were examined differently in terms of methodology and quality as well. Numerous imprecise references can be found in the relevant literature and in many cases even recent studies reach

---

<sup>1</sup> Three weeks before the submission of this thesis two new curse tablets were found in Aquincum, however, I could not process these in the framework of the current study. I also had to neglect the third curse tablet from Savaria as its publication is not yet accessible.

far back to the oldest versions neglecting the fact that certain problems have been solved in the meantime.

My coordinated analysis has been conducted on the basis of the following aspects. I believed that the in-depth analysis of the external features was really important, and when it was possible I resorted to autopsy. I enumerated the sights; I examined the type of the settlement and the exact location where the archeological finds were found and I made an effort to acquire information about the exact conditions of finding the items. As the curse tablet is often not just a record of the magical rite but also an instrument of it, observing the evidence of procedures the lead tablet underwent (piercing, wrapping, burning) could provide relevant information. The general layout of the text, its neatness, the direction of the writing, the letter types can all be intensifiers of the curse and are not just showing the educational level and fastidiousness of the scribe. These aspects were necessary, because, in addition to obvious collection enhancement purposes, the results could contribute to a more precise and correct interpretation of the text.

In the course of the internal analysis of the tablet, on the one hand, I examined the spelling mistakes of the writers of the text. I emphatically concentrated on uncovering non-normative, substandard (i.e. Vulgar) Latin and Greek linguistic phenomena, as besides inscriptions and the few surviving written documents about daily life, this type of source provides the most untouched data, and we can get a first-hand experience of the language usage that is far from the literary standards. The other method of linguistic analysis was discovering parallel places in the classical ancient literature and in the corpus of curse tablets. Using these two methods side by side could provide an answer to the question whether we may presume the summoning of a magical handbook for help and the curse tablet was created on the basis of its recipe, or we should just assume a common individual behind the text.

In order to draw final conclusions I intensively examined all nine tablets along these aspects.

### III. The evaluation of each tablet

**1. The curse tablet from Aquincum.** This piece is the longest of the surviving Latin curse texts in *Pannonia*. We can witness the proceedings of a lawsuit on the tablet. Presumably, the clientele of two wealthy families were quarrelling with each other and the members of one of the two groups turned to a magus capable of controlling the forces of the underworld in connection with a case not mentioned in the text, and intended to make the members of the opposing group incapable of saying or doing anything against them. The structure of the text can be reviewed with ease: except for two sentences, the same sentence is repeated ten times, but they do not follow one another in a monotonous sequence, merely exchanging the names, instead, the magus tried to use variations where possible without adding any extra meaning, for the sake of breaking monotony stylistically. The difficulty of interpreting the simile starting in line 7 is a result of what is its prime feature: it relates things that do not or just vaguely resemble each other. *Quomodo hoc ego averso graphio scribo, sic linguae illorum aversae ne possint facere contra hos...* The problem is a result of the fact that the usage of the verb *averto* implies retrograde writing, however, the text here progresses neatly from the left side to the right side. Scientific literature has studied the topic of magic inversivity intensively in recent years, and among other questions, it has been attempted to interpret the two parallel places of this *persuasive analogy*. It seems that we can only provide a reassuring answer now with the aid of the tablet from Aquincum and the bent stylus found next to it. The magus knew that the verb is a magic term but for some reason he reassigned a new meaning to it. It is not uncommon in magic or in the magician's linguistic sphere to implement such innovation. Thus the translation of the afore mentioned sentence is: "Just as I write this with a bent, twisted stylus, so, too, may their tongues be bent and twisted similarly and may be unable to act against these men..."

**2. The tablet from Savaria.** It was found a few years ago, just like the piece in Aquincum. Its significance lies in the fact that it was hidden in one of the early layers of the Iseum, just like the 34-piece curse tablet

corpus set in Mogontiacum. The hardly legible, fragmented tablet contains besides some cognomen the name of *Q. Septueius Crescens* in a central position. This gentilicium has not been recorded so far from Savaria, however, we know about a certain period from the history of this family. Their roots go back to Aquileia, and later on they became the representatives of iron mining in Noricum. The other significant detail is that it is so far unparalleled that soldiers and magistrates are mentioned together on a Latin curse tablet. There is, however, a special set of curse tablets that are intended against those currently in power. These texts are typically created in times that are characterised by social change, general instability, and the subjects are those who managed to gain unmerited advantage from new political decisions.

**3. The curse tablet from Siscia.** The most researched Latin curse tablet of Pannonia is the one from Siscia including a judicial binding spell, thanks to the many vulgar phenomena that make its interpretation difficult. The literature knew about this fact, but could not explain several word forms or misinterpreted it, thus it was commonly thought to be written in very bad Latin, and that not only individual sentences but the whole text has a vague structure. In my analysis I have demonstrated that the author knew the vocabulary of binding spells very well. He was using only such expressions that are characteristic of this genre. In some cases we can find expressions that can be interpreted as the writer's own solution. Instead of the regularly used *obmutesco* he uses a newly formed verb form, and similarly, instead of the preposition *contra*, it is used adverbially in two sentences. Phonetic phenomena suggest that in this case the tablet was not directly copied from a ritual handbook but was verbally dictated.

**4. The tablet from Carnuntum.** According to the external and internal features of the tablet it can be claimed that the creator of the text was a professional magus as he knew the special vocabulary and set phrases very well. As he could write in Greek, moreover, the shapes of his Latin letters were rather defined by Greek letters ( $\epsilon$ , and  $e$ ), presumably, he had a primarily Greek education. He did not observe the traditions of language and spelling, on numerous occasions colloquial forms of words are used in

writing both in the Latin (*sa<nc>te, nove<m>, 'q=C'u<om>od'o=I'*) and the Greek part (*φορῖται*), however, he probably received Latin education as well, as occasionally he remembered the traditional signalling of linguistic phenomena not existing anymore at the time (*q<u>i*). The curse tablet is swarming with other Vulgar Latin phenomena: it is not just the phonetic shifts that can be observed in it, but also the novelties in the declension system (*hic plumbus*). Archaic forms in the text suggest that the magus worked from a magical handbook compiled a long time ago and it can be traced back to a Greek original (*celerrime = ἤδη ἤδη ταχὺ ταχύ, pessimo leto = κακῶ θανάτῳ*). The creator of the tablet worked in a Celtic context, the invocation of gods preferred in the Celtic region alludes to that. It is not clear whether the magus and/or the customer can be linked to the Celts, as the more gods are invoked by the magic, the more effective results could be expected from help arriving from different places. In addition, from the cursed person's Greek name we can assume his eastern origin and as a consequence the probable presence of the Greek language around the customer. The Jewish elements appear on the tablet as a consequence of the above mention syncretism, they expected more impact from mentioning Solomon who was notorious for his connections with the underworld.

**5. The curse tablet from Emona.** The lamella belongs to the judicial curses. This is by all means an early example of Latin curse tablets, due to its simple structure and the names on it. The expression *servi atq(ue) publicius* in line 3 breaks the text and makes it difficult to interpret. There are few mistakes in the text that show phonetic errors. The only examples are the *Clodius* form written with an *o*, which can be viewed as a kind of tradition, and the gemination error that is typically viewed as a spelling error in the name *Cornel{l}ius*. On the basis of the layout, the low number of mistakes and the usage of the *atq(ue)* short form it is possible that an experienced, educated scribe wrote this tablet. However, the fact that he used interpunctuation inconsistently and he made the interpretation of the text difficult by making corrections in a line implies that this tablet is not above average considering its quality.

**6. The curse tablet from Poetovio.** This curse tablet can probably be linked to the prostitutes of Poetovio, who were also charged with using seduction spells. At first reading we may group it with the less aggressive ones, but by examining the verbs and their meanings depicted in magic under scrutiny, we may discover exceptional cruelty in these six lines. I present in my analysis with the help of magic sculptures that behind the translation of “Paulina shall turn away from all men and shall be bound by spell, so that she will be unable to do anything bad. Lock Firmina away from all the people” the prospect of death and torture lurks.

**7. The curse tablet kept in the Hungarian National Museum.** This lead alloy curse tablet was placed in the collection of the Hungarian National Museum from an unidentified source. In line 5, instead of the word suggested by the original publication – on the basis of parallel places – I assume a different word. If we exchange it for *capillus*, we get a love curse, which may have been written on the orders of a rejected lover. He curses the pretty looks of *Ursa*, so that others would not desire her and no one would fancy her. The text names such body parts (her eyes, skin, hair, nails) that are basic instruments of seduction and looking after them is a sign of fastidiousness. However, if instead of the word *capillus* we insert the relevant form of *color* into the gap, the curse becomes more aggressive. In that case the curser did not only wish *Ursa* to become ugly but would like *Ursa* to be struck by severe diseases and the words might have even alluded to death.

**8. The Greek curse tablet from Siscia.** Half of the list of names written with Greek letters hides Latin names, and the other half are Greek ones. According to research in most cases the writers of such texts are bilingual, which does not entail that they could also write in both languages. We can observe the vulgar linguistic effects on the Latin names even though they are covered by the Greek spelling; similarly, the Greek names bear certain characteristics of the koiné, therefore the scribe actually lived in a bilingual environment. Based on my investigation, it can be concluded that he had a good command of writing in both languages – and chose Greek for a precisely not identifiable reason (perhaps on the demand of the

customer), which could correlate with the magical force attributed to the Greek language.

**9. The Greek curse tablet from Savaria.** There is a Greek text on this small tablet. An experienced, learned scribe could have possibly inscribed these lines. Although the text includes Latin names (*Adiektos* = *Adiectus*, *Kupeita* = *Cupita*), it was written in Greek, with Greek letters. Probably the slave community where the order came from and the magician's sphere by all means belonged to the Greek layer of the settlement.

#### **IV. The main results of this study**

The examination of the collection of Pannonian curse tablets resulted in the following findings.

1. Although not all classic types of curse tablets are represented in the narrow but constantly widening range of the Pannonian set, the judicial and love binding spells and the prayers for justice make it a prominent collection.

2. I found that the language usage of the Pannonian curse tablets do not differ at all from the texts of Latin curse tablets found in other parts of the Roman Empire, several parallels can be discovered. The creators built the given curses from set phrases, therefore we may assume that they used a ritual handbook.

3. As a word-by-word match can only be found among not just the Pannonian but any curse tablets if there is evidence that they came from the same workshop, there were either no two identical magical handbooks, or they were only listing formularies which the magi could freely use and modify.

4. I managed to clarify a number of questionable places by searching for Vulgar Latin mistakes and parallel places, not just in the Pannonian material but in other corpora as well.

5. The language of the curse tablets does not differ from the language of epigraphy more than to what extent the genre implies.

6. Their linguistic mistakes are generally the same as the ones on inscriptions, but there is simply more room for syntactic and lexical observation.

7. Microphilological methods helped in identifying the place of some words more accurately in vulgar linguistic changes, as a result the curse tablet can make its way into the literature as the textual source of the phenomenon.

## **Publications and conference participations in the topic**

### **Publications**

- Nyelvi és nem nyelvi hibák a pannoniai latin feliratokon (Intercisa). In: Sinkovics B. (szerk.), *LingDok4. Nyelvész-doktoranduszok dolgozatai*. Szeged, 2005. 7-21.
- Római kori feliratos edénytöredékek Zalalövőről. *Communicationes Archaeologicae Hungariae* 2006. 123-148.
- The Language of Latin Curse Tablets from Pannonia. A new Curse Tablet from Aquincum. *Acta Antiqua Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 49 (2009) 23-29.
- Sötét fohászok. Gondolatok a római átokszövegekről egy új aquincumi ólomtábla kapcsán. (társszerző: Lassányi Gábor) *Ókor* 8 (2009/3-4) 63-69.
- Az edénykarcolatok értelmezése. In: Egy kora római sír Savaria területén: Nemesböd-Átalúton-kívül-dülő lelőhelyről. (társszerzők: Fülöp Endre Norbert, Radics András, Tóth Gábor) *Évkönyv és jelentés a Kulturális Örökségvédelmi Szakszolgálat 2008. évi feltárásairól*. Budapest, 2010. 125-128.
- Milites magistratusque. A New Curse Tablet from Savaria. *Acta Classica Universitatis Scientiarum Debreceniensis*. 48 (2012) 167-173.
- Nem normatív szóalakok a szekszárdi Wosinsky Mór Múzeum római kori feliratain. (társszerző: Balogh Roland) In: Bíró Sz.—Vámos P.: *FIRKÁK II. Fiatal római koros kutatók II. konferenciakötete*. Győr, 2012. 143-171.
- Átoktáblák. In: Sosztarits O.—Balázs P.—Csapláros A. (szerk.): *A savariai Isis szentély I. Isis savariai otthona*. Kiállítási katalógus. Sistrum Serie A. No. 1. Szombathely, 2013. 33-34.
- Interpretation of the graffiti. In: Ilon, G.—Kvassay, J. (szerk.): *The early and late Roman rural cemetery at Nemesböd (Vas county, Hungary)*. Archaeopress Roman Archaeology 5. Oxford, 2015. 67-68.

### **Conferences**

- Nyelvi és nem nyelvi hibák a pannoniai feliratokon. *Nyelvész-doktoranduszok 7. Országos Konferenciája*. Szeged, 2003. november 7-8.
- Írásbeliség Sallán. *Fiatal Római Koros Régészek I. Konferenciája*. Győr, 2006. március 8-10.

- Nem normatív szóalakok a székszárdi Wosinsky Mór Múzeum római kori feliratain (társelőadó Balogh Roland). *Fiatal Római Koros Régészek II. Konferenciája*. Visegrád, 2007. október 8-10.
- The Language of Latin Cursetablets from Pannonia. *Bonae memoriae József Herman: „Du latin épigraphique au latin provincial”*. *Symposium zur Sprachwissenschaft der lateinischen Inschriften*. Budapest, 2008. szeptember 11-12.
- Az aquincumi átoktábla (társelőadó Lassányi Gábor). *Fiatal Római Koros Régészek III. Konferenciája*. Szombathely, 2008. november 23-25.
- A New Lead Tablet from Savaria. *Magical Context*. Budapest, 2011. április 15.
- Az elgömbült nyelv – Új adatok az aquincumi átoktábla rítusához (társelőadó: Lassányi Gábor). *Provincialia Romana*. Pécs, 2014. január 29-31.
- Az elgömbült nyelv – Új adatok az aquincumi átoktábla szövegéhez (társelőadó: Lassányi Gábor) *XI. Magyar Ókortudományi Konferencia*. Budapest, 2014. május 22-24.
- Tongue like a sword: some remarks on the Aquincum curse tablet. *Laetae segetes IV*. Brno, 2014. november 19-21.