

VOICES FROM THE SACRED SPRING

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'Tell His Majesty', the Delphic Oracle replied in Greek verse, 'my elaborate chamber has fallen to the ground; Apollo has a house no more, no prophetic bay-tree, no babbling spring. His stream of eloquence has run dry.' The questioner was the last pagan Roman emperor, Julian the Apostate, invoking the old gods against the upstart cult of Christ. Julian asked in vain: an Arab lance-thrust in a skirmish during his bold invasion of the Persian Empire, and his religious revival died with him. It is ironical that a Christian writer should preserve the words of Apollo's oracle, whose imagery of the choked spring and fallen temple is unconsciously echoed by the famous Anglo-Saxon poem *The Ruin*:

There stood courts of stone, with a gushing spring
Of boiling water in welling floods,
And a wall embosomed in gleaming embrace
The spot where the hot baths burst into air.

This suggests the poet was thinking of Roman Bath:

The roofs are in ruin, the towers are wrecked,
The frost-covered bastions battered and fallen.
Rime whitens mortar; the cracking walls
Have sagged and toppled, weakened by Time.

...

Desolate now are the courts, and the vault
With arches discoloured, is stripped of its tiles.

...

The structure lies fallen and scattered in ruin.¹

When archaeologists in 1979 investigated the Roman sacred spring under the King's Bath, they found the brick rib-vaulting of the roof which once covered it lying as it had fallen. Outside in the temple precinct, now underneath the Pump Room, massive stones were still

lying as they had slumped into the marsh which invaded the sacred spring after the Romans left. Under those tumbled heaps of masonry and rubble, like the faint cries for help after an earthquake, you must imagine the Latin texts I am about to describe. They were found in the sacred spring, and are precious documents of the greatest healing shrine of Roman Britain. Even today the tourists who watch the steam rising from the King's Bath are standing under the very arch through which their Roman predecessors lobbed sheets of lead inscribed with messages to the goddess of the spring.

She was called Sulis, the local Celtic goddess whom the Romans identified with their own Minerva, goddess of wisdom. The settlement which grew up round the hot springs they called *Aquae Sulis*, the Waters of Sulis. When the spa was redeveloped in the eighteenth century, tantalising glimpses emerged of Roman Bath, the first in 1727, when a sewer was dug in Stall Street across the buried remains of her temple, and exposed the gilded bronze head of Sulis Minerva herself. Then in 1790, when the present Pump Room was built, workmen found the steps of her temple and many sculptured fragments from it. In the 1860s, when the old *White Hart* inn on the other side of Stall Street was demolished, the temple podium, or at least its concrete core, was found. Finally, in 1878, investigation of the Roman drain beneath the Pump Room revealed a massive wall enclosing the hot spring itself; next year the King's Bath above the spring was drained and its floor removed, exposing the Roman reservoir underneath. In the mud, sand and rubble which choked it were found some of the votive objects thrown into the water by the worshippers of Sulis. There were coins, pewter vessels, gemstones, a tin ritual mask, and two mysterious lead tablets.²

These tablets were small pieces of sheet lead inscribed with a sharp metal point, probably that of a stilus, the needle-like pen the Romans used on waxed writing tablets. The scratches on one of them, a piece 68 mm square, were recognizable as Roman capital letters, but they made no sense: each word had been written with its sequence of letters reversed, without a space to separate it from the next. It was a primitive encipherment, difficult to unbutton because there was no indication of where each word started; it would be as if I had just written 'erehwicaedrowdetrats'. Its first students conjured up fantasies appropriate to Bath, like this by A.H. Sayce, better known for his decipherment of Assyrian cuneiform: 'Quintus has bathed Vilbia for me with the water; along with Cliquatis he has saved her by means of ... His pay is 500,000 pounds of copper coins or *quinarii*. [Signed] (a list of

names).’ But fortunately a photograph was sent to the German palaeographer Zangemeister, who transcribed it successfully: ‘May the person who has stolen ‘Vilbia’ from me become as liquid as water’, followed by a list of ten personal names. They are the suspected thieves, seven men and three women. Romantic scholars have taken ‘Vilbia’ to be a girl, but this name [?] is otherwise unknown, and it seems odd the writer had so little idea who had ‘stolen’ his lady friend, even whether it was a man or woman. Moreover, the verb *involavit* (‘has stolen’), a word of spoken (not written) Latin from which French *voler* is descended, whose usage and meaning are much the same as modern English ‘swipe’, is used of stealing portable property, not people.

So the ‘Bath Curse’, as it came to be called, did not necessarily voice a lover’s anguish, but was more likely a mundane complaint of theft, the meaningless ‘Vilbia’ being a mistake for the object stolen (possibly a napkin or a brooch). The other piece of scratched lead has had a stranger history. It was inscribed in an unknown script which remained undeciphered for more than twenty years, until it caught the eye of Bodley’s Librarian at Oxford, an eccentric philologist and controversialist called E.W.B. Nicholson. With the encouragement of Sayce, whose sciatica had been ‘miraculously’ cured at Bath after Oxford medicine failed, Nicholson published the tablet as a letter written by Vinisius, a clergyman of Wroxeter, to a lady called Nigra. Her husband’s faults were well known, he assured her, but she should be strong in Jesus. A ‘dog of Arius’, Biliconus the heretic, was visiting Bath, but could be ‘taken in the sheepfold’. Vinisius’ letter is allusive, to say the least, and a German critic thought it was a fantasy worthy of the Transactions of the Pickwick Club (Mr Pickwick stayed at the White Hart); the editors of *Roman Inscriptions of Britain* concluded that it was not inscribed at all, the marks only being intended to look like writing. However, Vinisius has been duly registered as the earliest author in the standard *Bibliography of Celtic-Latin Literature*, followed by St Patrick himself. The editors of the bibliography can hardly be blamed, for Nicholson’s original has not been seen since it was put somewhere safe in 1939. But more of this in a moment.

The ‘Bath Curse’ meanwhile came to be accepted as a Roman ‘curse tablet’, of the sort described in a surviving Greek handbook of magic: ‘Take lead from a cold-water pipe, make it into a sheet, and write on it the following with a bronze pen ...’ Hundreds of ‘curse tablets’ have now been found all over the Greco-Roman world, cursing rivals in law suits and love affairs, or competitors in the circus and arena, gladiators,

charioteers and even their horses by name. Not many of them curse thieves, however, which for some reason has turned out to be a speciality of Roman Britain – not that this was known until quite recently. Until 1979 there was little evidence, even though it goes back to 1805 when an inscribed lead tablet was found at the temple of Nodens in Lydney Park. This is one of the most beautiful and evocative Roman sites in the whole of Britain, a wooded spur of the Forest of Dean overlooking the Severn estuary. The Latin text, neatly inscribed in capitals, reads: 'Silvianus has lost his ring and given half to Nodens. Among those with the name of Senicianus do not allow health until he brings it to the temple of Nodens.' With hindsight we now know that this is typical of Romano-British 'curse tablets': a complaint of theft addressed to a god, with the request that he punish the thief with ill-health and force him to return the stolen property. But until more texts were found, these set phrases or 'formulas' were not really recognized as such. When, for instance, [Sir] Mortimer Wheeler found an inscribed lead tablet in the Roman amphitheatre at Caerleon in 1927, it was for long misunderstood as a curse on a competitor 'and his Blood-red charger', because this sort of thing is common in the Circus at Rome and Carthage. In fact it is another complaint of theft like the Lydney tablet, addressed to the goddess of retribution: 'Lady Nemesis, I give you my cloak and shoes. Let the person who took them not redeem them unless with his life and blood.'

These thefts were obviously much resented, but at this distance of time no one will see them as tragic, and a Cambridge scholar patronisingly commented on the Lydney tablet: 'There is something very humorous to the modern mind in this earnest appeal to divine aid in such cases.' But our knowledge of them does stem from a real tragedy, at Bath, where in 1978 a girl died of amoebal meningitis. She had inhaled a microbe which contaminated the spring water, and it was decided to reinvestigate the Roman reservoir (fig. 1). The Victorian concrete floor of the King's Bath was first demolished to make it possible to remove the contaminated deposits and to underpin the south wall of the Pump Room. Barry Cunliffe, who has done more than anyone to discover Roman Bath, led the archaeologists who carefully lifted and sieved a fraction of the deposits sealed by the collapsed Roman roof. They recovered a rich collection of votive objects: more than 12,000 coins (a cross-section of the 'money supply' of Roman Britain for centuries), pewter and silver vessels, jewellery which included a superb enamelled brooch, part of a small artillery piece, and

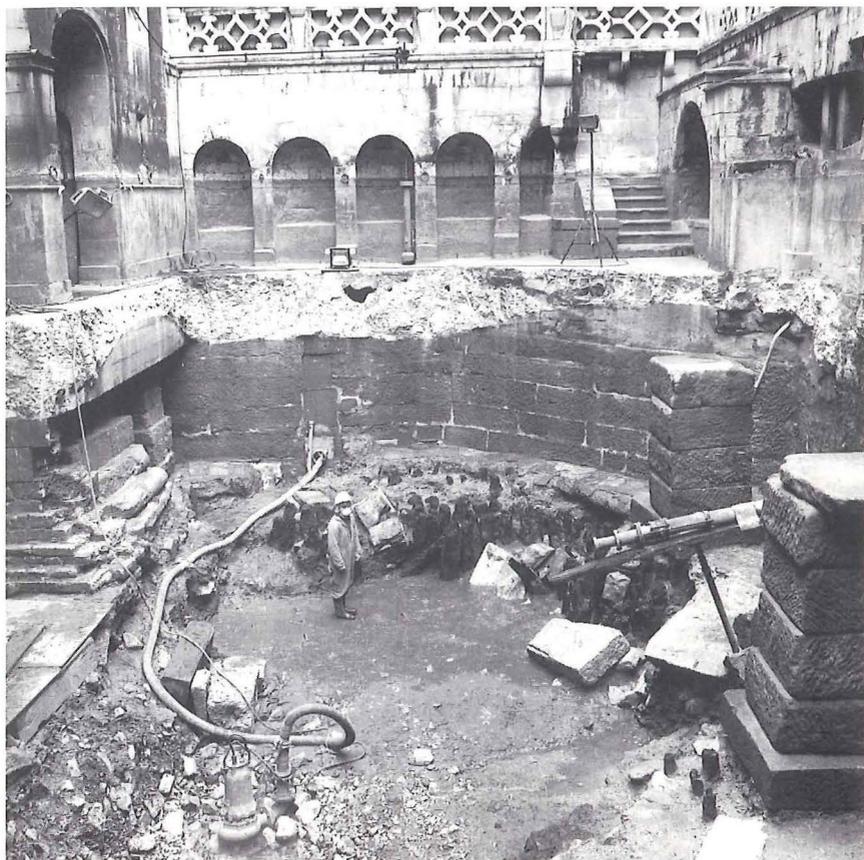


Fig. 1 Excavation of the sacred spring, 1979. Below the niches on the east side of the King's Bath are the Victorian concrete floor, in section, and underneath it the massive wall of the Roman reservoir protected in front by oak piles. (Courtesy Institute of Archaeology, Oxford)

over a hundred 'curse tablets'.³ These are perhaps the richest such 'archive' yet recovered, and it is tantalising to think there may be several hundred more still buried in the spring.

These tablets could not be read at once. Most of them were rolled up before they were thrown in, and after centuries of being tumbled in the hot spring they look like metal cigarettes gnawed at both ends (fig. 2). First they had to be unrolled and cleaned by Sarah Pollard at the

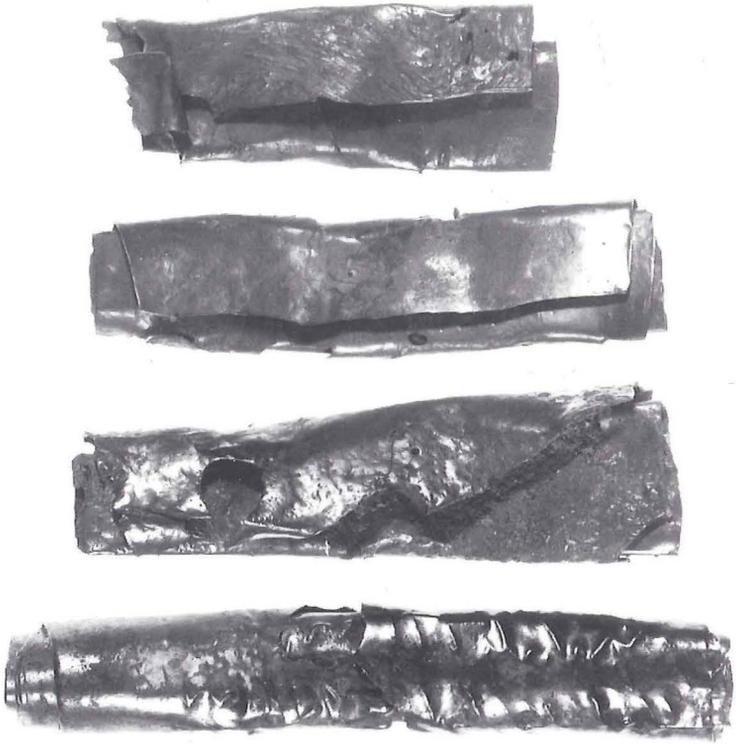


Fig. 2 Four Roman 'curse tablets' made of thin tin/lead alloy sheet, as found, before they were unrolled. Beaded edges left by casting under pressure can just be seen on the first three; and on the fourth, the impression left by the 'cursive' writing on the other side. (Courtesy Institute of Archaeology, Oxford)

Institute of Archaeology, Oxford, and then photographed by Bob Wilkins. Next they were analysed by Mark Pollard, who found that most of them were not just lead, but lead alloyed with tin. Like solder this would have had a lower melting-point, and sometimes it had been cast under pressure into smooth, paper-thin sheets, which made an ideal writing-surface. Such tablets were evidently a by-product of the local pewter industry, but others had simply been hammered out from thin lumps of alloy and roughly trimmed.

The dark, heavy metal had been chosen deliberately. When the Roman prince Germanicus died in Syria in suspicious circumstances, his bedroom was searched. 'Human remains were found in the floor and walls', writes the historian Tacitus, 'spells and curses and the name *Germanicus* scratched on leaden tablets, with half-burnt ashes smeared with corruption, and other baleful objects believed to subject living creatures to the infernal powers.' Unlike gold and silver, which were used to make protective amulets and medical charms, lead was livid, like the bruises on Germanicus' body, or the ashes of his funeral pyre. Even its chemical compounds were poisonous. These associations are usually unstated, but the authors of tablets from Gaul and Germany explicitly pray that their enemy 'sink like lead'; a tablet from a Danubian military base prays that Eudemus should become 'as heavy as this piece of lead'; and some Greek tablets found near Athens include curses that the victim's tongue should turn to lead, that he should become as cold and worthless as lead. Thoughts like these must have passed through the minds of visitors to the sacred spring, as they heaved their tablets through the archway and watched them disappear with a satisfying splash.

Sixteen, seventeen, or eighteen centuries later, after these tablets had been retrieved and had passed through all the various expert hands, they came to me as a Roman historian for decipherment and publication.⁴ It was strange to think that such mysterious, blackened objects must have been perfectly legible when they were inscribed. The stylus point cut through the grey surface patina of lead oxide, and left a bright trace of pure metal; it would have been like writing on a waxed tablet, using a stylus to scratch through the black wax to the pale wood underneath.

Some writers disliked their text being so legible, and enciphered it by writing it backwards in various ways or even by using mirror-image letters. But most of them simply wrote as they would have written a letter, then rolled up the tablet and threw it into the water, where only the goddess could read it.

One of the most informative texts (fig. 3) – as it happens the only one not to be a 'curse tablet' – was not even folded. The writer gives his name, Uricalus, and those of his wife, son and daughter, brother and sister-in-law, 'the names of those who have sworn at the spring of the goddess Sulis on the 12th of April', and concludes: 'Whosoever has perjured himself there, you are to make him pay for it to the goddess Sulis in his own blood'. And who is 'you'? Probably the goddess, to

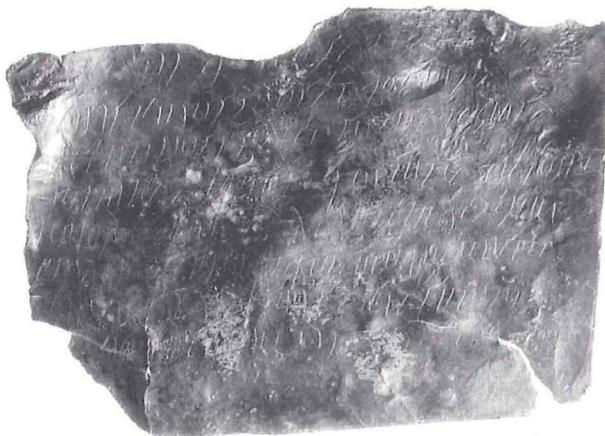


Fig. 3 Roman 'curse tablet', 75 x 55 mm., recording the oath sworn by Uricalus and his family at the sacred spring. 'Cursive' writing, perhaps of late third-century date. (Courtesy Institute of Archaeology, Oxford)

whom most writers address themselves explicitly, but perhaps the spring itself, which is named only here. This would be interesting, since we know of other hot springs in the Roman Empire which punished oath-breaking. One of the Gallic spas was sacred to Apollo Grannus, 'in whose boiling waters acts of perjury are punished'. In Sardinia, if you were charged with theft, you could protest your innocence by bathing your eyes in the water of a hot spring; if you were lying, you were struck blind. In Asia Minor there was a 'seething spring' in which gas bubbled up through cold water, which made oath-breakers ill when they drank it. A still more famous 'seething' pool was in Sicily, where oaths were tested by being written down and ritually recited; perjurers were scalded to death. According to one account, the oath was written on a tablet which was thrown in, and floated if it were true. The curious tales of these ordeal springs, as they are called, illustrate the spirit in which petitioners must have approached 'the spring of the goddess' at Bath, a nervous respect for the uncanny waters which could heal – and harm.

Uricalus' tablet had a 'brassy' patination and may have been protected by nearby coins. Despite some patches of corrosion it was unusually

fresh and, not surprisingly, it was one of the first I read. The others were more broken and corroded, and on all of them, even this one, the nice bright scratches after all those centuries had become as grey as the background. (Try reading a sheet of carbon paper.) French chalk can make the scratches visible for photography, but it also emphasises casual damage and gets in the way. I found it was best to shine a light across a tablet, to catch the minute 'ditch' and 'upcast' left by the stylus as it ploughed across the surface. Often it was possible to see the exact sequence in which the long-dead scribe had made his letters, where one stroke cut across another; but the trouble was that only part of the letter showed at a time, depending on the direction of the light. So as I turned a tablet this way and that, I always had to remember what I had just seen. By trial and error I found it was easiest to draw the text letter by letter, using a photograph as my guide, and to decipher it gradually. One word ran into the next, but with luck, they would begin to separate and become clear.

I speak of 'decipherment', but what I was reading was of course the standard handwriting of the Roman period which has been intensively studied for a hundred years, ever since the first papyri were recovered from the dry sandy soil of Egypt. I owe a great deal to papyrologists like David Thomas, who with Alan Bowman is publishing the ink-written texts from the Roman fort of Vindolanda near Hadrian's Wall. This handwriting is loosely called 'cursive'; nothing to do with 'curses', but meaning the 'running' hand of an experienced scribe, the letters lowercase and often joined together. It offers a rough guide to the dating of the tablets, the only guide in fact, since they are unstratified, and the only internal date is the one I have already mentioned, the 12th of April. 'Cursive' is broadly divided between Old Roman, so called, which at Bath is a 'clerical' hand found in documents from the mid-second to the end of the third centuries, and New Roman Cursive, which replaced it in the early fourth century. (The relationship between the two scripts is still a matter for dispute and, embarrassingly, one of the Bath texts is actually written in both.) When I looked at the two small grey photographs Nicholson published of the 'Vinisius' tablet, I soon realised that it was inscribed in New Roman Cursive, which in Nicholson's day had been virtually unknown. For this reason, no doubt, Nicholson had read the tablet the wrong way up, inventing in the process a script of his own. Although the tablet itself is now lost, his working photographs fortunately survived in the Bodleian Library, and I was able to recover much of the text. As might have been expected, it was another 'curse

tablet': 'Whether boy or girl, whether man or woman, the person who has stolen this is not to be permitted ...'

Even literate Romans, let alone Bodley's Librarian, might find 'cursive' difficult, judging by a Roman comedy which opens with the usual comic slave trying to read a girl's letter the young master has handed him: 'You don't need me, you need a clairvoyant'. The master says how beautiful the hand is, and the slave retorts: 'Whoever heard of a chicken with hands? A chicken wrote this letter.' It came as a relief to me that some of the texts from Bath were inscribed in capitals. Sometimes they were by semi-literates, like the character in a Roman novel who says he may not be educated, but he can at least read 'stone letters' [on inscriptions]. But others were beautifully inscribed in a miniature version of the flowing capitals used for brush-painted public notices and the headings of official documents. The most important was the letter of Docilianus (figs. 4 and 5) 'to the most holy goddess Sulis', since it acquainted me with formulas and ideas I would find in other texts. 'I curse him', Docilianus wrote, 'who has stolen my hooded cloak, whether man or woman, whether slave or free, that the goddess Sulis may afflict him with maximum death, and not allow him sleep or children now and in the future, until he has brought my hooded cloak to the temple of her divinity'. Docilianus duly names the object stolen, which is a *caracalla*, an outer garment like an anorak, and elaborates a curse which is to be effective until the stolen property is returned; since he cannot name the thief, he uses 'legal' language to define him by a series of mutually exclusive pairs of alternatives. There is to be no loophole of escape.

The same phrases, 'whether man or woman', 'whether slave or free', 'whether boy or girl', occur time and again in Romano-British 'curse tablets', and are also found in Roman prayers and legal texts. The most striking instance occurs in a particularly crabbed piece of New Roman Cursive from Bath, in which the sequence of letters is entirely reversed. It begins on the bottom line: 'Whether pagan or Christian', and continues up the page with 'whosoever, whether man or woman, whether boy or girl, whether slave or free, has stolen from me six silver coins from my purse, you, Lady Goddess, are to exact them from him'. Overleaf are written no fewer than eighteen personal names, all backwards, the longest such list from Bath. They make an interesting cross-section: ten 'Roman' names, all of them commonplace except two of Greek etymology; and eight 'Celtic' names, all of them rare or unique. Annianus, the author of this tablet, was familiar with the convention of

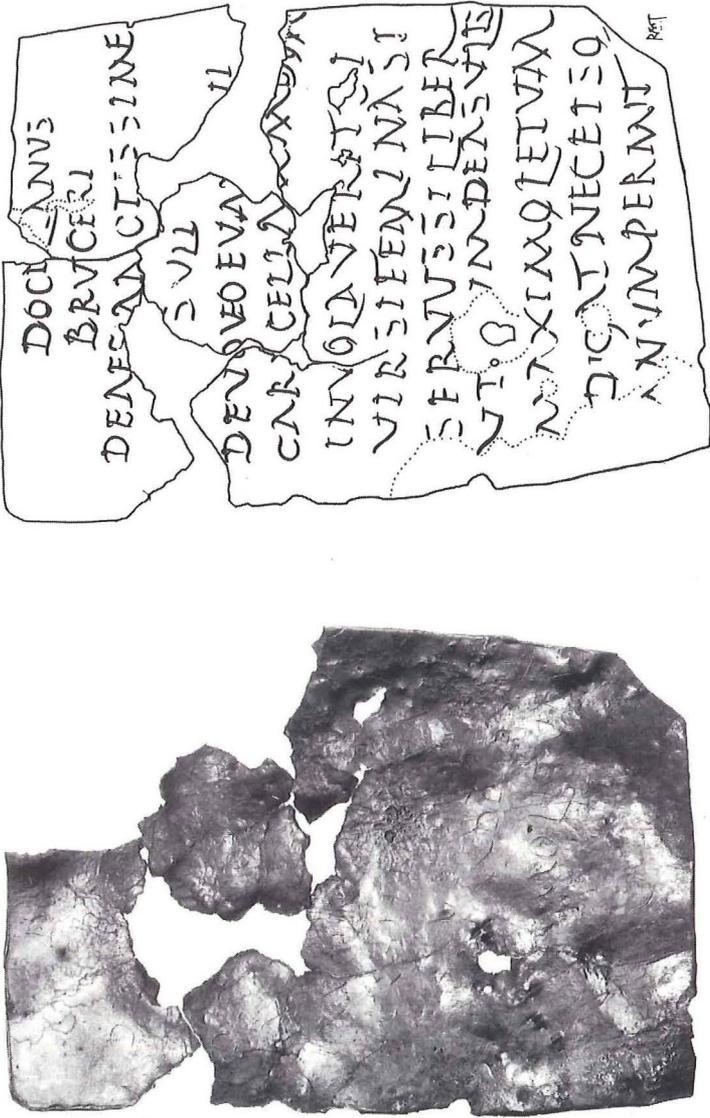


Fig. 4 and Fig. 5 Roman 'curse tablet', 70 x 100 mm., recording Docilianus' curse on the thief of his hooded cloak (*caracalla*, misspelt in line 6). 'Rustic capitals', probably of second-century date. The line drawing represents the incised text as black on white. It would originally have been silvery scratches on a dark grey surface. (Courtesy Institute of Archaeology, Oxford)

mutually exclusive pairs of alternatives, but he may also have read the *Epistle to the Galatians* (3.28): 'There is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus'. The unique phrase 'whether pagan or Christian' could only have been written at a time when these were mutually exclusive alternatives, in the fourth century (Julian the Apostate died in 363), and arguably it was written by a lapsed or at least broad-minded Christian. Pagans, who called Christians 'atheists', did not describe themselves as 'pagans'. Whatever Annianus' ultimate allegiance, he was paying tribute to the universal power of Sulis which transcended the contemporary division of religions.

My comment may be heavy-handed, even if the sacred spring was important enough also to receive tablets addressed to the gods Mercury and Mars, but it does imply that these texts are more 'religious' than 'magical'. This seems fair. They are not spells which will work infallibly, provided you get them right; they contain none of the magical nonsense-words and names of powers recommended by the ancient handbooks, such as occur in surviving charms and curses from other Roman provinces. I have called them, for convenience and out of habit, 'curse tablets', and certainly someone is getting cursed, but they are appeals to divine justice, for which a better term might be 'juridical prayers'. Tablets found at two Roman temples near Bath, at Uley (southwest of Stroud) and at Pagans Hill (Chew Stoke), both request action against thieves 'with renewed prayers', a phrase found otherwise only in one of the Church fathers. The Latin could even be translated as a 'pleading', which catches the ambiguity between an earnest entreaty and (in law) a formal statement of claim.

Many of the tablets from Bath and other British sites are quasi-legal documents, petitions in an under-policed world, like those which survive among the papers of Abinnaeus, commandant of an Egyptian garrison in the 340s. A small landowner, for instance, complains to him that a neighbour has carried off eighty-two of his sheep: 'Wherefore I request and beg of your philanthropy to apprehend this man and compel him to restore to me what he has wickedly seized'. The scale may be different: Abinnaeus' power was not supernatural and his petitioners were persons of greater substance. Compare the eighty-two sheep with this: 'Docca to the goddess Sulis Minerva. I give to your divinity the money which I have lost, that is five *denarii*; and he who has stolen it, whether slave or free, whether man or woman, is to be compelled [...]'. But the language is much the same: 'To the goddess Sulis Minerva. I ask

your most sacred Majesty that you take vengeance on those who have done me wrong, that you permit them neither sleep [nor ...].'

The petitioners of Sulis were appealing not to a Roman magistrate or local dignitary but to a supernatural patron. Yet they follow the procedure recommended by the great jurist Ulpian in an action for theft. The object stolen must be identified. If it is an utensil, he writes, the weight need not be given, but the type of utensil should be specified, and the metal. Thus Exsuperius gives Sulis 'an iron pan ... [the thief], whether man or woman, is to give satisfaction with his own blood.' An anonymous writer, who has carefully reversed the sequence of letters line by line, exclaims: 'Whoever lifted my bronze vessel is utterly accursed. I give him to the temple of Sulis, whether woman or man, whether slave or free, whether boy or girl, and let him who has done this spill his own blood into the vessel itself.' The verb 'lifted', Latin *levavit*, is a colloquialism, a trace of the language spoken by the writer, who continues overleaf: 'I give, whether woman or man, whether slave or free, whether boy or girl, the thief who stole the said property, that the god may find him.' And at Uley someone complains to Mercury that 'two pewter plates' have been stolen, offering the god 'half' of them in return for the thieves' blood.

Liquidation of a moral debt in blood is a favourite theme. If cash is stolen, Ulpian says, the number of coins should be given. I have already mentioned the thefts of five *denarii* and six silver coins 'from my purse', but here is another: 'I have given to the goddess Sulis the six silver coins which I have lost. It is for the goddess to exact them from the names written below: Senicianus and Saturninus and Anniola.' (The idea of 'exaction' occurs quite often, as if the deity were a debt-collector.) And here is the 'complaint' of Arminia: 'Consume Verecundinus son of Terentius, who has stolen two silver coins from me. You are not to permit him to sit or lie, to run[?] or walk, to have sleep or health, since you are to consume him as soon as possible.'

The six coins explicitly came 'from my purse', and the other sums could have been carried on the person. Another petitioner 'names' the thief 'who stole my bracelet'; Basilia 'gives' the temple of Mars her silver ring [she informs the sacred spring], 'that if anyone, whether slave or free, is privy to the theft or knows anything about it, he may be accursed in his blood and eyes and every limb, or even have all his intestines eaten away, if he has stolen the ring or been privy to the theft.' These losses, however, though bitterly resented, were nothing like the two purses of coin lost by builders of Hadrian's Wall, put down for a moment and

accidentally buried: 28 *denarii* at Birdoswald fort and the equivalent of 135 *denarii* at Barcombe quarry. (These legionaries were paid 300 *denarii* a year before deductions.) It looks as if the pilgrims at Bath came from a lower economic and social stratum, as indeed a study of their names suggests. The tablets preserve more than 150 names, 21 of them petitioners, the others in lists of suspected thieves or possibly enemies. Not one of them is explicitly a Roman citizen, as a legionary had to be, someone of at least local importance. More than half the names are 'Celtic', the others are almost all colourless 'Roman' names no more distinctive than modern Christian names. Perhaps it is not surprising that the victims of petty theft should be insignificant themselves; but what is interesting is the possibility that they were nonetheless literate.

The question of literacy is too far-reaching to be discussed here. A question that exercises Ulpian, in the passage I have been quoting, is whether the *colour* of a stolen garment should be specified. No one does so at Bath, but one petitioner was so eager to tell the goddess about the cloak stolen with his tunic that he used the words for three different kinds of cloak, Italian, Greek and Gallic. He gave it to her, 'that the thief may bring it down in his snout before nine days, whether free or slave, whether free woman or slave woman, whether boy or girl'. *Rostrum*, the word for 'snout', is a coarse reference to the thief's mouth, but it can also mean a bird's beak, as in a significant story told of St Columbanus. He was gardening, and went indoors for lunch, leaving his gloves outside; when he came back, one of them was missing. Being a saint, he knew what had happened, and cursed the raven which had stolen it: it would not be allowed to rear its chicks until it returned the glove [the same curse invoked by Docilianus], and the bird promptly complied. Ancient references to gloves are hard to find, and one now comes from Bath: 'Docimedis has lost two gloves. He asks that the person who has stolen them should lose his mind and his eyes in the temple where she [i.e. Sulis] appoints.'

So often the object stolen is a piece of clothing. There is another hooded cloak ('he is not to buy back this gift unless with his own blood'), someone else's cap or hood, and the *mafortium* lost by a woman called Lovernisca ('Vixen'); this was a short cape worn over head and shoulders, later worn by Roman monks and nuns. There are four conventional cloaks, one of them coupled with a more revealing garment: 'Solinus to the goddess Sulis Minerva. I give to your divinity and majesty my bathing tunic and cloak. Do not allow sleep or health to him who has done me wrong, whether man or woman, whether slave

or free, unless he reveals himself and brings these goods to your temple.' Another bathing tunic was lost by someone called Cantissena: not a bathing costume, which the Romans did not bother with, but a long warm shirt worn after visiting the baths. And that surely indicates where these chattels went missing, the small sums of money, the jewellery, the clothes, the rug and blankets mentioned in other tablets: near the temple of Sulis, in the various baths which drew their hot water from the sacred spring.

When Solinus emerged from his bath and found a thief had left him nothing to wear, he cast about for the proper words with which to clothe his indignation. His tablet, like the others, is not a free composition. They are obviously fair copies, without erasures and with very few corrections, full of copying mistakes, such as letters omitted, repeated in error, or visually confused. The same formulas and ideas are found time and again, but not to the extent that one text duplicates another; and indeed there are many small variations in formula, and formulas which can be traced from the early second century to the fourth, and at other cult-centres than Bath. The Latin in which they are written, though 'formulaic', also contains many traces of the spoken language. The Bath tablets therefore suggest a tradition wider and longer-lived than a single handbook or professional scribe. I was able to tabulate the lettering of 89 tablets, and I found to my surprise that only two were from the same hand; and they in fact were two halves of the same document. This posed a problem. If there had been professional tablet-writers, for whom there is some evidence elsewhere, why has no one written two tablets? I could only suppose that, contrary to what we might think 'must' have happened, petitioners sought advice what to say, perhaps from the staff of the temple of Sulis, but were expected to write it for themselves. This hypothesis is borne out by tablets which are too incompetent to be professional work, and in particular by five which *look* as if they have been inscribed, but which on close examination bear repetitive patterns which are not letters at all. These 'pseudo-inscriptions' are surely the work of illiterates who were conforming to the local convention.

Bath-house thieves rate a chapter to themselves in the great compendium of Roman Law, the *Digest*. From it we learn that soldiers found guilty were discharged with ignominy, but civilians might be sentenced to forced labour in the mines. The Greeks were still more harsh; whereas burglary was treated as a civil offence, bath-house thieves were executed. This is the spirit in which the Bath tablets were written. Excessive it may seem, but it can be matched in late-Roman

penal legislation. Here is Constantine the Great, Julian the Apostate's uncle and a contemporary of Basilia (the woman who lost her ring), reassuring his subjects: 'The rapacious hands of officials shall cease immediately, they shall cease, I say; for if after due warning they do not cease, they shall be cut off by the sword.' Like the petitioner who wanted the thief's blood to spill into his bronze vessel, the first Christian emperor is fitting the punishment to the crime. What a pity we do not know whether any bath-house thieves were caught at Bath, and laboured in the Mendip mines to lift the lead on which their successors would be cursed.

Would the curses have worked? Psychiatrists may suspect that the 'over-determination' in the language of Basilia and Constantine betrays a certain lack of confidence, but we know from their handwriting that people went on appealing to Sulis for at least two centuries, from the second to the fourth. This does suggest there was a basis for belief. After all, the water is inexplicably hot, and it does cure illnesses. In an uncertain world it is credible that the process can be reversed, that the classical features of Sulis Minerva can become a gorgon's mask. There were still 'cursing wells' in nineteenth-century Wales, the most notorious being St Aelian's Well in Denbighshire. A local magician was gaoled in 1831 for taking a fee to lift a curse; according to him, the victim's initials were scratched on a piece of slate, or written on parchment folded in lead, and then placed in the well. It was locally believed that if someone were 'put into the well', he would waste away and die; and there are circumstantial accounts of its victims, who included a Nonconformist minister.

Psychosomatic illness, we comment, whatever that means. A book was kept at St Aelian's Well, and victims knew they had been cursed; at Bath the 'curse tablets' were confidential, but in that climate of belief a thief might wonder if he had been successfully cursed. There is a subtle way in which the tablets could have 'worked', by the sense of guilt induced by illness and misfortune. This can be seen in the fascinating contemporary 'confession' cults of western Asia Minor. Here altars have been found dedicated to little-known local gods, which acknowledge crimes and their divine punishment; usually the victims have offended the gods, but there are also instances of 'anti-social' behaviour. Iucundus, for example, lost his reason, and was locally thought to have been poisoned by his mother-in-law Tatias. To rebut the rumours Tatias formally denied them at the altar, but she died instead, and her son Socrates dropped a pruning sickle on his foot and also died. Their guilt

was acknowledged by the children of Iucundus, who had thus seen in succession their father's madness, and the otherwise inexplicable deaths of their grandmother and uncle. This recalls the oath of Uricalus. Another instance strikes still closer to Bath. A community in Asia Minor invoked their god against anyone who stole from the bath house. Later a cloak was stolen, but divine punishment made the thief bring the cloak to the temple. An 'angel' ordered that the story be inscribed on an altar (fig. 6), which duly carries a little picture of the cloak.

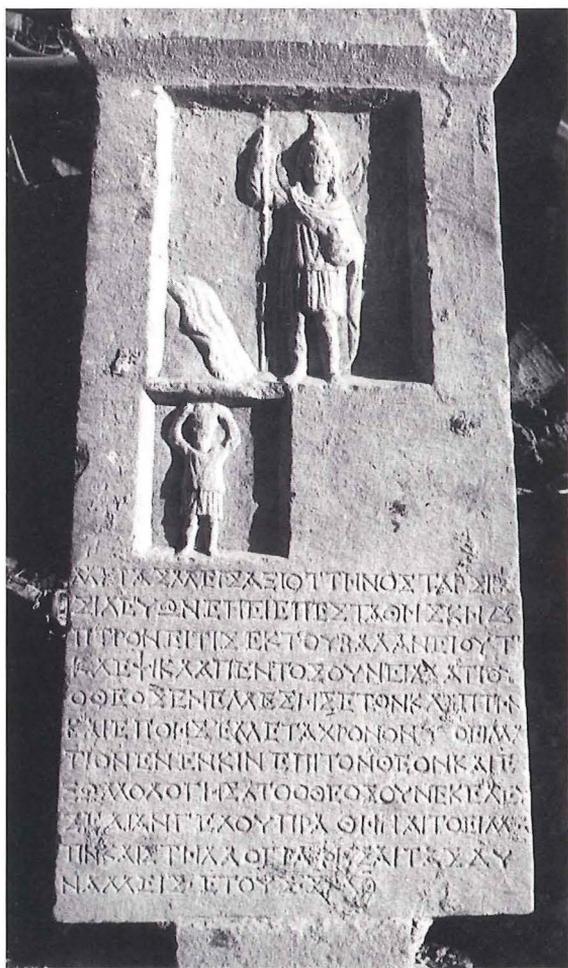


Fig. 6 Altar from Asia Minor honouring a local god (the standing figure with peaked hat and sceptre) for the recovery of a cloak (to his left) stolen in the local bath house. Below the cloak, a small figure with its arms raised in prayer. The text is cut in Greek capitals. (Courtesy Professor Peter Herrmann and *Tituli Asiae Minoris*)

Perhaps the priest of Sulis sometimes found a cloak on the steps of the temple, abandoned by a thief who had fallen sick, and was averting divine vengeance. The belief was transposed into a Christian setting. In sixth-century Byzantium a man fell ill, and on the point of death prayed to St Euthymius. He was rewarded by dreaming of the saint, who asked him where it hurt. The man indicated his stomach, and Euthymius pointed his fingers like a scalpel, opened the place, and extracted an inscribed tin tablet which he laid on the table. Then he closed the incision, healed it, and explained what had happened: the man's enemies had consulted a magician, who had been able to invoke demons because he had neglected his salvation by not going to church or receiving communion. In other words, be careful: your illness will find you out. If you feel ill after reading this, search your own conscience, not mine.

Notes

- 1 *An Anthology of Old English Poetry*, translated by Charles W. Kennedy, (New York, 1960), pp. 8–9
- 2 Barry Cunliffe, *Roman Bath Discovered* (rev. ed. London, 1984); Barry Cunliffe and Peter Davenport, *The Temple of Sulis Minerva at Bath*, Vol. 1 (Oxford, 1985); Vol. 2 ed. Barry Cunliffe. (Oxford, 1988)
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 In my *Tabellae Sulis: Roman inscribed tablets of tin and lead from the sacred spring at Bath* (Oxford, 1988), which is the publication on its own of my contribution to *The Temple of Sulis Minerva at Bath*, Vol. 2 (see note 2), pp. 59–277. I have used it extensively for this paper, and detailed references will be found there.