

A LATE-ROMAN *DEFIXIO* (CURSE TABLET) FROM THE
ECCLES VILLA

R.S.O. TOMLIN

This piece of tattered and corroded sheet lead (Figs. 1 and 2) was found, rolled up, in rubble filling on the floor of Room 121 of the Eccles Roman villa (N.G.R. TQ 722605), during the ninth season's excavation in 1970.¹ That it was inscribed was by no means obvious, but some years later, when it had been unrolled, it was passed by the director of the excavation, Dr A.P. Detsicas, to Mr R.P. Wright, and by him to the present writer.

It is a rectangle, 89 by 71 mm., which has lost both its bottom corners and a few other small pieces, mostly at top and bottom. It has been inscribed on both sides with a needle-like instrument, presumably a stylus. The first two lines and the second half of the third line of the main text (Side (b)) are virtually undamaged and easily legible under a smooth purplish patination, but the rest of it is mostly obscured and sometimes obliterated by surface cracking and yellowish corrosion. The cracking is due to the tablet having been folded on itself seven or eight times after inscribing, and then being unfolded after discovery. The drawing (Fig. 2), which was traced from an enlarged photograph with constant reference to the original, reproduces what can still be read under favourable lighting conditions.

The main text consists of eight lines of writing inscribed *boustrophedon*, up and down like a plough-team; alternate lines are inverted, a feature not found in any other curse tablet from Britain, but in keeping with the inversions that some of them also display (letters written mirror-image, letters written in reverse sequence, whether within words, line, or from beginning to end). The intention, like that of folding the tablet on itself when completed, was surely to keep the text a secret between the god and his petitioner. The top

¹ *Arch. Cant.*, lxxxvi (1971), 29, with Fig. 1.

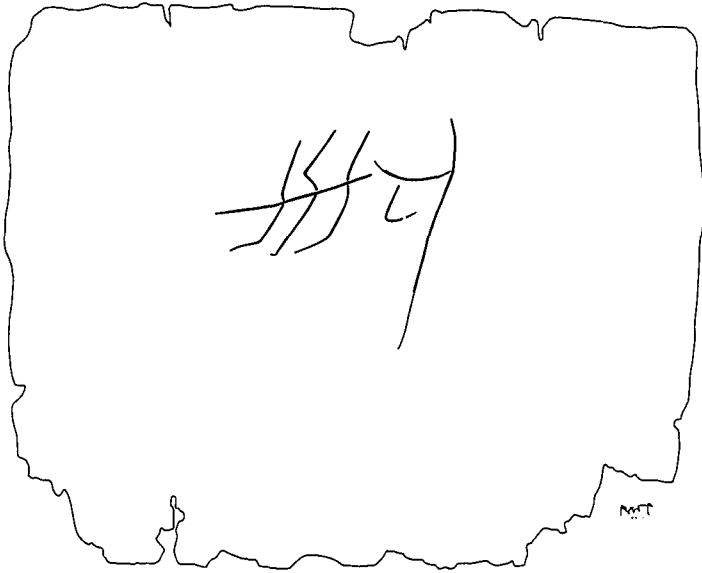


Fig. 1. The Eccles Defixio, Side (a) (Scale: 1=1).

edge is almost intact; the beginning and end of lines 7–8 have been lost in the pieces which have broken away, but there seem to be traces of the bottom edge which, with the crowding of what survives of line 8, suggest that the text was originally no more than eight lines.

The script is 'New Roman Cursive', the remote ancestor of modern handwriting, which superseded classical cursive towards the end of the third century A.D.² The *A* is not the usual form (which resembles a modern *u*), but one found in two of the Bath curse tablets³ and elsewhere. There are two forms of *D*, the usual lower-case *d* (as in *diebus*), and a capital letter (*donatio*). There are two forms of *E*, the typically late-Roman *E* made with two hooked strokes (*perit*), and another resembling a modern Greek *e* (*diebus*). There are two forms of *S*, the late-Roman one resembling a modern *V* (*diebus*), and one of earlier form (*sanetate*). There is no interpunctuation or word-division, and only a few ligatures (as in *perit*). The text contains at least one 'Vulgar' spelling (*sanetate* for *sanitate*), that is, it was written as it was pronounced; it may contain others (*diebus*, *que*, *nesi*).

The syntax is confused, but the state of the text makes it impossible to assess the confusion. The text seems to have been put together

² See A.K. Bowman and J.D. Thomas, *Vindolanda: the Latin writing tablets* (1983), 53ff.

³ *Britannia*, xiv (1983), 339, no. 4, and 341, no. 7.

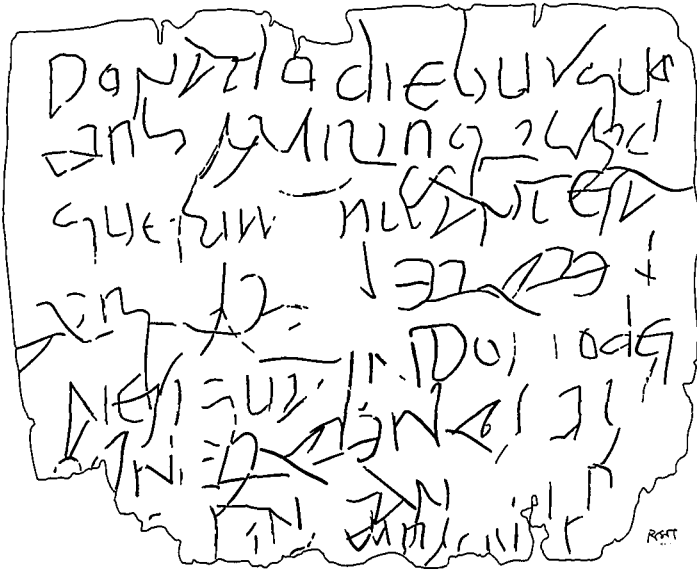


Fig. 2. The Eccles Defixio, Side (b) (Scale: 1=1).

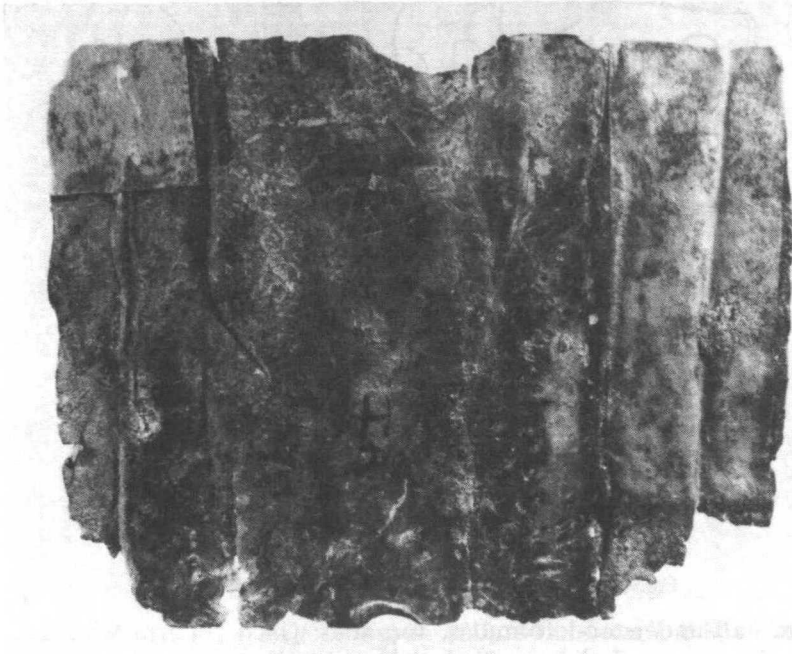
from half-understood formulas, formulas which confirm what one would expect on finding a rolled-up inscribed lead sheet, that this is a *defixio* or curse tablet, a written text cursing someone; in Britain he is usually a thief. Much of this tablet remains obscure, but it seems to be aimed against the health and safety of someone, presumably Butu, until . . . Analogy with other British curse tablets would suggest that the curse was only lifted when stolen property was returned, perhaps 'in the house of God' (*in domo dei*). This phrase may have Christian significance, but unfortunately it is far from certain.

Some of these points are discussed further in the commentary which follows the transcript and reconstructed text.

Transcript

Side (a): $\overline{\text{sssti}}$

Side (b): donatiodiebusquo
peritbuturesque
que.u.[.] \dagger necantesa
 \dagger etate \dagger e \dagger çalute
 \dagger esiquaindo.odei
.. \dagger anetate \dagger indo
[c. 4]şa \dagger n..an[c. 3]p[1-2]
[5 - 6] sum [. . .?]



(Photo. R.L. Wilkins, F.S.A.)

The Eccles *Defixio*; Side (a) (Scale 1=1).

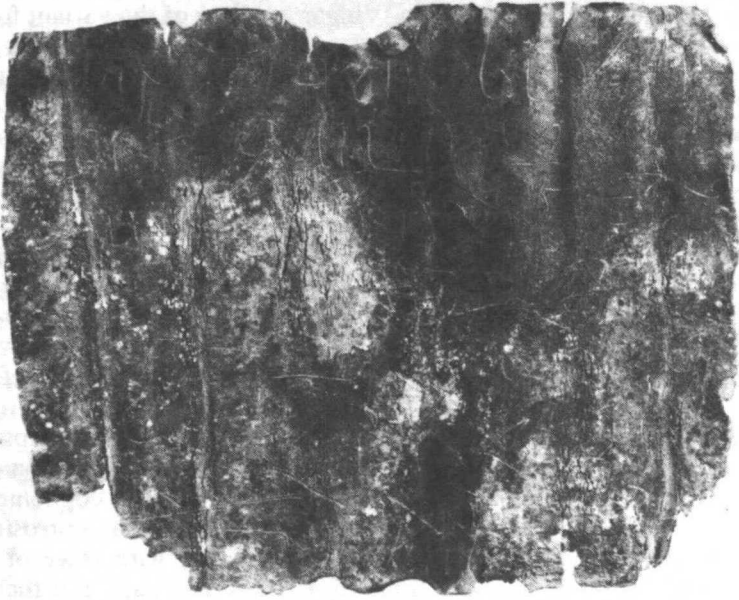
Reconstructed Text

Side (a): *abbreviation, perhaps s(. . .) s(upra)s(crip)ti*

Side (b): donatio diebus quo
perit Butu resque
qu(a)e . . . nec ante sa-
netate nec salute
nesi qua(m) in do[m]o dei
. . . sanetate in do-
[mo dei?] . . .

. . .

'A gift to the gods (?) by which Butu has perished, and the property which . . . neither health nor safety before unless in the house of God . . . health in the house of God (*repeated?*) . . .'



(Photo. R.L. Wilkins, F.S.A.)

The Eccles Defixio; Side (b) (Scale 1=1).

Commentary

Side (a)

Five letters only, all but the *T* elongated, like the address on a Roman letter. The first three seem to be *S* like that in *sanetate* (*b* 3). The horizontal line drawn across them afterwards suggests an abbreviation, like the double *S* with line in curse tablets from Uley⁴ and Ratcliffe-on-Soar,⁵ *deo ssto* for *deo s(upra)s(crip)to*. The third *S* remains unexplained.

Side (b)

1. *donatio*: a common formula in curse tablets from Britain is the 'gift' to the god of the stolen property to be recovered, or of the thief himself, using *dono*, *donat*, or *donatur*. This is the first instance of *donatio*.

⁴ *Ibid.*, x (1979), 344, no. 3.

⁵ *JRS*, liii (1963), 122 ff.

diebus: properly the dative plural of *dies* (day), but since curse tablets are usually addressed to a god, *diebus* is probably an error for *dibus* ('to the gods'); it may be a 'Vulgar' spelling of the variant form *diibus*.

quo: its antecedent is presumably *donatio* (f.), and it is thus a solecism for *qua*.

2. *perit*: contracted form of the perfect indicative of *pereo* (perish) the intention being apparently to state as an accomplished fact what it is hoped the curse tablet will achieve. One would have expected the present subjunctive *pereat*.

Butu resque: this seems to be the likeliest word-division, in view of the curse tablets which refer to stolen property as *res*, as in one from Uley,⁶ *donat ita ut exsigat istas res quae s(upra)s(crip)ta(e) sunt Butures* is not attested as a personal name. The repetition of *qu* might be an error, but it seems better to take the first as a conjunction and the second as a 'Vulgar' spelling of *qu(a)e*.

Butu: attested once as a samian potter's name⁷ but perhaps an abbreviation of *But(t)ur(r)us*, which is well attested as a cognomen. *Butto* is found in Pannonia and *Buttus* in Noricum as a cognomen.

3. The *e* of *que* and succeeding letters are damaged by corrosion. The first resembles ligatured *LV* (cf. *salute*), but with trace of an extra vertical. After possible trace of *M* there is a gap, and then a suprascript horizontal, which probably belongs to *T*: this suggests [*u*] (see next note) or perhaps a verb-ending.

3-4. *nec ante sa|netate nec salute*: the division of *sanetate* between lines means that the text was written, and intended to be read, in the line-sequence followed in these notes. *sanetate* is a 'Vulgar' spelling of *sanitate*. The ablative case is unexplained: one should either understand *fruatur* ('let him not enjoy health . . .') or see it as an error for the accusative. A formula seems to be intended like that in a tablet from Uley,⁹ *erogat deum Mercurium ut nec ante sanitatem habeant nissi . . .*

5. *nesi qua(m)*: the dotted letters are damaged, and there is an unexplained diagonal below *N* (not however suggesting *D*), but this reading seems reasonable. A blundered *nes(c)i(o)qua* ('any sort of safety') is less likely than the word-division proposed, a 'Vulgar' spelling of *nisi* (cf. the Uley tablet cited in the previous note) followed by *qua(m)* with *ante* as its antecedent.

⁶ *Britannia*, x (1979), 343, no. 3.

⁷ *CIL*, xiii 10010, 373, BVTV F.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 374.

⁹ *Britannia*, x (1979), 342, no. 2.

in do[m]o dei: there is trace of what may be *M. domus* is used with the god's name (*domus Veneris*, etc.) in the sense of 'temple', and curse tablets from Britain often require the return of stolen property to the temple, but *domus dei* is a common phrase in Christian authors in the sense of *ecclesia*, whether meaning *the* Church (or Christian community) or *a* church.¹⁰ The polytheism of *diebus* (*dibus*) does not preclude, though it makes less likely, a Christian interpretation of *in domo dei*: one of the Bath tablets¹¹ invokes the goddess Sulis, but also alludes to *Ch(r)istianus*. The Anglo-Saxon place-name *Eccles*, with its hint of a sub-Roman Christian community, makes it tempting to give *in domo dei* a Christian significance when it occurs in a fourth-century text from the area, but this can only remain a hypothesis.

6-7. Damaged by corrosion. There seems to be a repeat of the formula in 3-5, so *in do[mo dei]* is a reasonable restoration, but the space is cramped.

7-8. Corrosion and other damage have left only isolated letters recognizable, and no restoration seems possible.

¹⁰ See *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae*, s.v. *domus*, 1970, 17 ff.

¹¹ *Britannia*, xiii (1982), 404, no. 7.