Leicester's Roman curse tablets

What is a curse tablet?

In Roman Britain, writing a curse was a popular way of seeking divine punishment for a wrongdoer, usually a thief, and redress for the stolen property. The message was usually inscribed on a thin metal tablet, typically lead, which was then thrown into a sacred pool, interred with the dead or hidden in a building.

In Leicester, archaeologists have found two curse tablets, one called the Servandus Tablet (shown left), the other the Sabinianus Tablet, named after their authors. Servandus calls on the god Maglus to destroy a thief who has stolen his favourite cloak, whilst Sabinianus has had money stolen and asks the gods to strike the culprit down.

These, like other curse tablets from Britain, followed common formulas:

- An appeal to a god or spirit.
- A description of the complaint and/or crime.
- The name of the victim and the wrongdoer/s (if known).
- A request to punish the wrongdoer.
- A description of the punishment.

Have a look at the translations of the Leicester tablets

Servandus Tablet	Sabinianus Tablet
"I give to the god Maglus him who did wrong from the slave-quarters; I give him who did theft from the slave-quarters; who stole the cloak of Servandus: Silvester, Rigomandus, Senilis, Venustinus, Vorvena, Calaminus, Felicianus, Rufaedo, Vendicina, Ingenuinus, Iuventius, Alocus, Cennosus, Germanus, Senedo, Cunovendus, Regalis, Nigella, ~~Senicianus~~. I give, that the god Maglus before the ninth day take away him who stole the cloak of Servandus."	"Those who have stolen the silver coins of Sabinianus, that is Similis, Cupitus, Lochita, a god will strike down in this septisonium, and I ask that they lose their life before seven days."

Some curse tablets ask for creative punishments, often by causing bodily functions to stop working (e.g. may the thief not eat, drink, sleep, sit or lie down etc. until they have returned what they have stolen), others simply ask for the culprit to suffer poor health. Whilst a few, like the two Leicester tablets, threaten death.

The Leicester tablets give a unique insight into the lives of people in the Roman town. Both were skilfully written in Latin sometime between AD 150 and AD 250, either by the authors or scribes on their behalf.

The Servandus Tablet refers to a god called Maglus. This is the first know reference to this god, a name which possibly comes from the Celtic word *maglos*, meaning prince.

Twenty people are named on the Servandus Tablet. Given that the cloak was stolen from a slave-quarters, the list is probably a unique roll-call of household slaves and is the single largest group of Roman names ever recorded from Leicester. The names are a mixture of Latin, Celtic and Greek. Three of the people are women.

- **Can you work out who the women are?**

The last name, Senicianus, is crossed out (shown right). Is this because he was guilty or did he prove his innocence?

- **What do you think?**

Senicianus' name scratched out on the Servandus tablet

The Sabinianus Tablet mentions a *Septizonium*. This is thought to be a monumental fountain called a nymphaeum. It was probably part of a public fountain and the curse was written to be thrown in the water. *Septizonium* were dedicated to the seven planetary deities that give their names to the days of the week.

- **Do you think you can name these deities (the clues are in the English and French names for the days of the week)?**

Leicester's *septizonium* is very important because it is only the sixth known reference to such a building in the entire Roman Empire, and the only example from northern Europe. The others are all linked to the North African emperor Septimius Severus (AD 193-211). Could he be responsible for the building in Leicester? We can't say for sure, but we do know the emperor stayed in Britain in AD 208-211. It is possible, then, that he may have visited Leicester.

Curse like a Roman! How to create your own curse

Has someone annoyed you recently? Or stolen something? Perhaps they've eaten the last biscuit or broken a favourite possession. Why not get revenge the Roman way and curse them!

You will need to…

- Describe the crime which has been committed.

- Give a list of suspects or name the culprit (PLEASE don't use actual people, we don't want to punish someone for real).

- Ask a god or goddess to punish the wrongdoer.

- Decide on the appropriate action for the god or goddess to take.

Tips

- The Romans did not use punctuation for their curses and words often ran together without spaces. **JOIN SOME OF THE WORDS TOGETHER** to confuse anyone trying to read your curse.

- Letters, words and even entire lines of text were often written backwards for added magical effect and to prevent other people reading the curse. **WRITE SOME OF THE WORDS BACKWARDS**.

Once you have decided what you want to write, copy your curse out on the blank tablet in Old Roman Cursive using the guide below. If you want to make a real curse tablet, use blank 'scratch art sheets' available from your local art store or online.

Who stole Sabinianus' coins?

Sabinianus, angry at the theft of his money, called on the gods to punish the thief. "I know it was Similis, Cupitus or Lochita" he told them, "take their life! Return my money!" But the gods do as they please. Instead they gave Sabinianus a riddle. Question them, they told him, only one will tell you the truth. So Sabinianus confronted the three. "Who stole my money?" he demanded.

Similis instantly said "I stole the coins".

Cupitus flatly denied it, saying "I didn't steal the coins".

Lochita looked at the other two and said "Similis didn't steal the coins".

Can you work out who is telling the truth? And who stole Sabinianus' coins?

Write your own story…

The curse tablets tell us a lot about some of the people who lived in Roman Leicester, but they also leave out a lot of details. Did Senicianus really steal the cloak? Who did steal the coins? Writing a short story about what you think might have happened.

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