

CURSE TABLETS FROM MYTILENE

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*In memory of
Olivier Masson*

SINCE 1983 the Canadian Archaeological Institute at Athens has been investigating, under the direction of Hector and Caroline Williams, the acropolis of the town of Mytilene.¹ Among the discoveries was a sanctuary that flourished from the archaic period through the Hellenistic, with terracotta *keranoi* and *hydrophoroi*, all typical of a cult of Demeter, some three hundred lamps used only once, and hundreds of bones of piglets.² At the foot of the altar, among much pottery of the fourth and the third centuries B.C., lay three inscribed lead curse tablets (I and III: Williams and Williams 1990: 185; II: *id.* 1988: 139, Pl. 10), the only examples yet from Lesbos. We publish them here with the encouragement of the Professors Williams, whom we warmly thank for the privilege.

Curse tablets (*defixiones*, κατὰδεσμοί) are usually small inscribed sheets of lead meant to bring supernatural forces against unwilling victims.³ They are found chiefly either in graves, where they direct against persons named in their texts the ghosts or the miasma of the dead, or in wells or chthonic sanctuaries, where they enlist underworld forces. Sanctuaries of Demeter at Selinous (Dubois 1989: 33–40, fifth century B.C.; cf. Jameson *et al.* 1993: 125–131), Rhodes (Zervoudaki 1973: 622, fourth century B.C.?), Knidos (*DTAud* 1–13, second century B.C.?), Corinth (Bookides and Stroud 1987: 30–31, second century A.D.?), and a sanctuary, probably of Demeter, at Morgantina (*SEG* XXVI 927–933, second century B.C.) have in all yielded some forty curse tablets. That at Mytilene, with its three, is to be added to this list.⁴

A. INSCRIPTIONS

The texts consist of lists of names followed by generalizing phrases. Each of the three is inscribed in a special way: I retrograde (for example, ΨΗΔ), II with

¹We are grateful to Aglaïa Archontidou, Ephor of Antiquities of Lesbos, and to her staff for facilitating our own work there and to the late Olivier Masson and to Wolfgang Blümel and Malcolm B. Wallace for their suggestions towards improving this article.

²See the periodic reports of C. and H. Williams in *EMC/CV* 1984–93.

³For general introductions see Preisendanz 1969; Faraone 1991. The basic corpora are *DTWu* (Attica) and *DTAud* (Attica and elsewhere). For examples appearing subsequently, see Jordan 1985.

⁴Using a hand-held magnifying glass, Jordan originally read ΔΑΜΑΤΡΟC at III 5, soon after the tablet was excavated, and took this as independent written confirmation that it was Demeter who was worshipped at the sanctuary (Williams and Williams 1991: 176, repeated at *SEG* XLI 670 from *BCH* 115 [1991] 922). We have now been able to study the tablets using a binocular microscope and read the personal name ΔΑΜΑΡΧΟC here; there is no reason, however, to doubt that the deity of the sanctuary was Demeter.

spelling reversed (for example, CHIA), and III with individual syllables written normally but with their order reversed within words or word-groups (for example, χομαρδα for Δά-μαρ-χος, τωνταυμε for με-τ' αὐ-των). At work here is the principle of sympathetic or analogical magic, in which the twisting of the names of the intended victims is meant to twist the victims themselves and their affairs, as in an Attic example written retrograde, *DTWü* 67.8–9 ὥσπερ ταῦτα ψυχρὰ καὶ ἐπαρίτερα, οὕτως τὰ Κράτητος τὰ ῥήματα ψυχρὰ [καὶ ἐπαρί]τερα γέν[οι]το.

Excavation context suggests the late-fourth or the early-third century B.C. as a date for all three inscriptions.

Following the usual convention, we have printed all texts assuming psilosis and recessive accentuation.

I

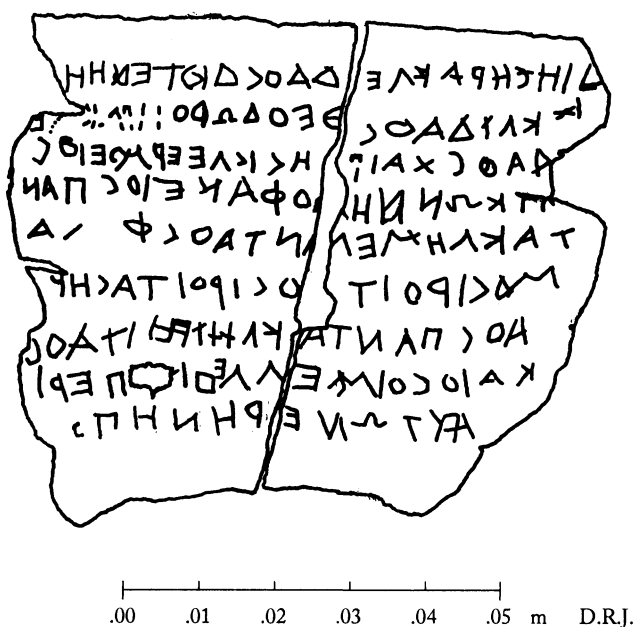


Fig. 1

The tablet (Fig. 1) was found folded thrice, towards the reader, first along a horizontal axis in the area of line 2, again along a horizontal axis in the area of line 6, and finally along a roughly vertical axis ca 0.035 m. from the right-hand edge, the last fold resulting in a crack and some damage, which has not, however, seriously affected the text.

On curse tablets retrograde writing, as here, is rare in any period; we know of only four other examples, three of them Attic and probably of the fourth

Mytilene Museum Inv. 24254	H. 0.067, W. 0.080 m.	late fourth or early third century B.C.
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1 Δίης Ἡρακλε[ῖ]δαος, Διογένη Ἡ[ρ-] ←
2 ακλίδας, Θεόδωρο Ἡρακλ[ε-] ←
3 ἰδας, Χαιρ[.]ησθε Ερμείας, ←
4 Νίκων Νημοφάνειος, Παν- ←
5 τάκλη Μελάντας, Φ[¹⁻²]δα- ←
6 μος Ἰροίτα[α]ος, Ἰροίτας Ἡρ[ακ-] ←
7 [λίδ]ας, Παντάκλη Ἰροίτας, ←
8 καὶ ὅσοι μελλ' εἴο[ι]σι περὶ ←
9 αὐτῶν ἔσθην ἢ πό[λιν]. ←

Dies son of Herakleidas, Diogenes son of Herakleidas, Theodoros son of Herakleidas, Chairesikles son of Hermos, Nikon son of Menophanes, Pantakles son of Melantas, Ph[.]damos son of Hiroitas, Hiroitas son of Herakleidas, Pantakles son of Hiroitas, and whoever are going to speak or act on their behalf.

II

The inscription consists of three lines spelled backwards, with the letters facing to the right. Such reversed spelling is common on curse tablets, particularly of the

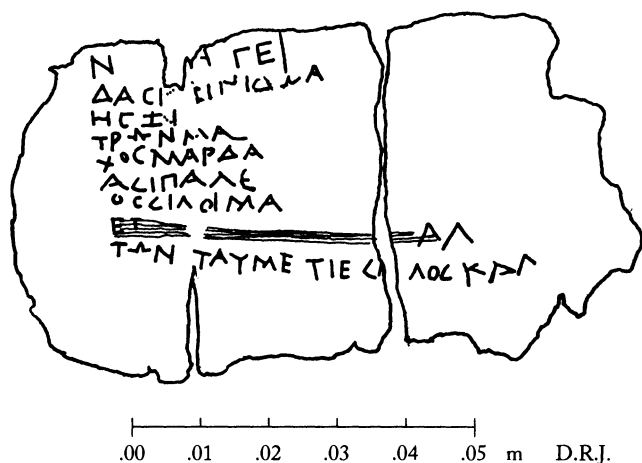


Fig. 3

the writer, once he devised his model, simply copied letter for letter, paying no attention to the sense, for in ΑCΠΑΑC (6) he seems to have copied AC as ΛΕ, the horizontal of the A of the model being no doubt somewhat displaced to the right. We must assume some error, in any case, for the name *Λεπαΐας or *Λεπασία is impossible in Greek.

Line 8 has been cancelled with fine horizontal strokes. Our partial restoration, in which we suppose that the writer was correcting an unsuccessful attempt at a generalizing phrase, is simply *exempli gratia*.

Mytilene Museum
Inv. 24253

H. 0.051, W. 0.092 m.

late fourth or early third
century B.C.

Transcription

- 1 ν[-^{c.3}-]α[.]γε
- 2 δακ[λ]εινιδωα
- 3 ηςζι
- 4 τρωνμα
- 5 χοcμαρδα
- 6 ασιπαας
- 7 οcσιλοιμα
- 8 [[CΙ^{c.13}-----]]ΑΛ
- 9 τωνταυμετιεσηλοcκαλ

Text

- 1 Γε[.]α[.]ν[-^{c.2}]
- 2 'Αδωνικ[λ]εΐδαc
- 3 Ζήηc
- 4 Μάτρων
- 5 Δάμαρχοc
- 6 'Αcπασία
- 7 Μαλοΐcιοc
- 8 [[κ]ᾗλλ[λοc? ^{c.9}-----CΙ]]
- 9 κᾗλλοc ἢ ἐcτι μετ' αὐτων

Ge[.]a[.]n[...] (?), Adonikleidas, Dies, Matron, Damarchos, Aspasia, Maloisios, [[and ... else (?) ...]] and whoever else is with them.

B. COMMENTARY

The use of patronymic adjectives, the shift /onti/ > /oisi/ (μελλ'έ'οις, I 8), the infinitive in -ην (ἔρην, I 9), and the use of περί (I 8) with the value of ὑπέρ "on behalf of" (Thumb and Scherer 1959: 108; Hamm 1951: 111) all show that the dialect is Lesbian. The future form μελλέοις (I 8) is new but comparable to other Lesbian forms such as ἐμμενέοις (*IG* XII.2 6.29, fourth century B.C.?) and καλέοις (*IG* XII.2 528.5). Other, minor, features are the reduction αι/οι > α/ο before vowels (Ἡρακλείδαος I 1, 1-2, 2-3, 6-7; Μελάνταος I 5; Ἰροίταος I 6-7; πό[ην] I 9), the pronunciation /i:/ of ει (Ἡρακλίδας I 1-2, 6-7?, but -κλείδ- elsewhere), ὅκοι for the expected ὅττοι (I 8), μετά for the expected πεδά (II 3, III 9), metathesis in the impossible Νημοφάνειος (< Μηνοφάνειος, I 4; cf. *DTWü* 64 Μημόφιλος < Μην-). Ζίης (III 3), an "allegro form" of Δίης, is not an example of the spelling ζ for δι as in the lyric poets but of a misspelling widespread chronologically and geographically (cf. for example, ζία for διά and similar forms in the papyri [Gignac 1976: 76]). Χαίρ[.]ησκλε, however it is to be accented, for Χαίρησίκλης (I 3: for the final -ε see below) is not easy to explain; it may be restored Χαίρ[ι]ήσκλε (influenced by χαίρεις?) or Χαίρ[ρ]ήσκλε (cf. Ἀρριστοτέλης [*IG* II² 5895], etc.).

From informal spellings such as these the unofficial character of the texts is clear. They are, therefore, of great interest to the linguist, for so far most of our information about Lesbian dialect has come from literary and public texts. Here we can get a glimpse of two less well-known features, the loss of final *c* and the conditional use of *η*. Only the first of our tablets documents the former: Διογένη (1), Θεόδωρο (2), Χαίρ[.]ησκλε (3), and Παντάκλη (4-5, 7). R. Hodot (1990: 84) has collected several instances, most of the third and second centuries B.C., that suggest that this phenomenon was known in Lesbian. Our tablet confirms an earlier occasional loss of final *c*. One might interpret the loss as a graphic rather than a phonetic phenomenon, found sporadically in Attic epigraphy, for example (Threatte 1980: 539-540; Masson 1997), but a linguistic explanation is preferable here: in fact, the shortening in hiatus (Χαίρ[.]ησκλη "Ερμειος > Χαίρ[.]ησκλε "Ερμειος) seen in the awkward -ε of Χαίρ[.]ησκλε (3) can have occurred only *after* the loss of the final *c* of Χαίρ[.]ησκλη.⁵ The remark of Gregory of Corinth (603 = Schol. Dion. Thr. 818.30) may in fact allude to this loss in Lesbian: (οἱ Αἰολεῖς) πολλάκις εἰς α ποιοῦσι τὰς εὐθυίας· ὁ Ἀρχύτα γὰρ λέγουσιν ἀντὶ τοῦ ὁ Ἀρχύτης, ὁ Ὑβραγόρα ἀντὶ τοῦ ὁ Ὑβραγόρας.

Most interesting, syntactically, is the conditional use of *η* at the end of both II and III: καὶ ἄλλος ἢ τις μετ' αὐτῶν (II 3) and κάλλος ἢ ἐστι μετ' αὐτῶν (III 9). Both the sense of these sentences and indeed the recurrent element καὶ εἴ τις ἄλλος in late-classical and Hellenistic Attic curse tablets (for example, *DTWü* 100A.3, 107A.6, etc.) make it clear that *η* here is conditional. One's first impression is that one has a monophthongized form of the Aiolic αἰ, "if," but this

⁵ Such shortenings, in which the vowels affected belong to different words, are well documented: με ἔνδικον (< μῆ ἔ.), ἐπειδὴ Ἰκέσιος (< -δῆ Ἰ.), etc. (Schwyzer 1939: 400).

would be the only case of confusion of η and α in the three texts. A conditional η is attested on Cyprus (Masson 1983: 241), but a Cypriot feature would be unexpected. Nor may one allege a conditional η in Epeiros (for example, *SGDI* 1561A, *SEG* XIX 427, fourth to third century B.C.) or at Astypalaia (*IG* XII.3 170), for each putative instance is in fact the interrogative particle $\tilde{\eta}$ (Méndez Dosuna 1985: 254). A close parallel for our case occurs on a curse tablet from the Athenian Kerameikos (*SEG* XXI 1093, fourth century B.C.), in which the disjunctive particle $\tilde{\eta}$ has taken, by a kind of contamination, the place of $\epsilon\iota$ (cf. Lat. *si . . . sive / sive . . . sive*): καὶ ἔ τις ἄλλος μετ' ἐκένων (sic) ξύνδικός ἐστι ἔ μάρτυς. It is worth wondering whether our Mytilenaeen text was influenced by an Attic formula such as that of the text from the Kerameikos, for example, καὶ ἄλλος ἢ τις μετ' αὐτῶν (cύνδικός ἐστιν ἢ μάρτυς).⁶

As we see, I shows more phonetic informality than II or III: $\epsilon\iota > \iota$, ὄκοι > ὄκοι, Μνηοφάνειος > Νημ-, Χαῖρ[.]ησκ-, loss of final c , shortening in external hiatus. This may be because, unlike these others, with their distorted spellings, I did not require a model, and the writer could inscribe its words as he heard them in his mind.

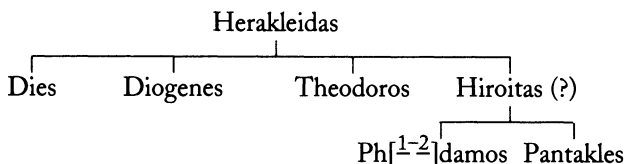
In the appendix below we give an index of the names. Most are already known on Lesbos, and some are frequent, such as Μελάντας (Eresos: Robert 1966: 81, n. 9), Ἰροίτας, another typical Lesbian name, and Δίης, also typical in the Aiolid (Masson 1994: 179–184). Characteristically Lesbian is Μαλοΐσιος (III 7), a theophoric of Ἀπόλλων Μαλόεις, whose cult at the τόπος Μαλόεις north of Mytilene is well known (Shields 1917: 6–9).⁷ The variant form Μαλούσιος has also been related to the place-name Μαλούς in the Troad (Bechtel 1917: 527, Ruge 1928: 947); the wide diffusion, however, of the name at Mytilene and in Asiatic Aioliis and Ionia is better explained if we consider it theophoric. The close relations that Lesbos always maintained with the Asiatic continent are reflected in Ἑρμειος

⁶ Whatever the explanation, η here on the Lesbian tablets now makes L. L. Threatte's tentative suggestion (1996: 671) about the Kerameikos tablet unlikely, that its ϵ may be a misspelling of the diphthong $\epsilon\iota$.

⁷ J. and L. Robert, *BÉp* 1964: 227, no. 489. The name is documented at Mytilene (*SB* 2558, sixth century B.C.; *IG* XII.2 96.7, Hellenistic period; Charitonides 1968: 89, second to first century B.C.), Gargara (*SIG*³ 330 = Frisch 1975: 1, ca 306 B.C.), Myrina (Dain 1933: 52, Hellenistic period), Teos (Münsterberg 1973: 107, Hellenistic period). The Μαλούσιος known at Thermos in Aitolia (*IG* IX.1² 60 II 14, Hellenistic period) and in Egypt (*P. Cairo Zenon* IV 59790.15) are most probably Aiolian mercenaries. The expected form, in any case, Μαλοΐσιος (from *Μαλοέντιος), is documented only at Naukratis (Gardner 1888: 706 = *SB* 2558 = Bernard 1970: 437, sixth century B.C.), while on Lesbos the form is Μαλοΐσιος, and in the neighboring regions, Μαλούσιος; these last forms R. Hodot (1990: 64, 103) explains as derived from Μαλο(ε)ΐσιος and *Μαλούντιος (contracted from *Μαλοέντιος). The lexicon of personal names of P. M. Fraser and E. Matthews (1987), surely the most useful tool for the understanding of the onomastics and prosopography of Lesbos, is unfortunately in error in dealing with this name. The two examples cited from Lesbos, patronymic adjectives in the form Μαλοΐσιος, are assumed to have a base Μάλουκος, which is a ghost-name (theophorics in -ιος, when used as patronymic adjectives, do not change forms: Bechtel 1909: 23). In addition, the Mytilenaeen Μαλοΐσιος, attested at Naukratis, is mistakenly printed Μαλοΐσιος and ascribed to "Chios (?)"; see, however, the discussion at Gardner 1888: pp. 65–66.

(I 3), the patronymic adjective of the name Ἑρμος (*IG* XII Suppl. 112, Eresos, third century B.C.), the Hermos being the famous Lydian river that debouches between Smyrna and Phokaia; the use of river names as personal names is frequent in the region: cf. the personal names Κάϊκος and Κκάμανδρος, after rivers in the Aiolid and the Troad, respectively (Lesbian examples: Moretti 1957: 209; Robert 1968: 211–212; Charitonidis 1968: 96). The most striking name in these lists is the *hapax* Ἀδωνικλείδας (III 2), which presupposes a theophoric *Ἀδωνικλῆς; Adonis is known from literature to have received cult on Lesbos (Sappho wrote a poem about him: fr. 140 L.-P.), but our Ἀδωνικλείδας is the first epigraphic attestation of the cult on the island. Χαιρησίκλης (written Χαίρ[.]ησκλη) is also a *hapax*. It is formed like the commoner Χαίροκλῆς but on the stem χαίρησι- of the future (Bechtel 1917: 464, citing Χαίρησίλεως, Paus. 9.20.1). We have not been able to restore confidently the missing letters in Φ[¹⁻²]δαμος (I 5 f.): we may have either an elsewhere unattested Φείδαμος (for *Φειδίδαμος: cf. Εὐελπίδης < Εὐελπιδίδης, Δαμήδης < Δαμομήδης, etc.: Schwyzer 1939: 263) or a form, for example *Φαέδαμος or *Φαόδαμος, related to the name Φαύδαμος, which is attested on Cyprus (Masson 1996: 89). Γε[.]α[.]ν[^{ε 2}] (III 1) is also difficult,⁸ but one may think of an unattested *Γέραινος as a possibility (cf. Δήμαινος, Ξέναινος, Ἴππαινος, etc.: Bechtel 1917: 27–28).

The three tablets yield in all twenty-six names, twenty-five of men and one of a woman, Ἀσπασία (not necessarily a “Hetärenname”: Wilhelm 1898: 424–425). The absence of fathers’ names in II and III makes it impossible to say much about the persons themselves listed there. This information is given in I. Its first three intended victims, Δίης, Διογένης, and Θεόδωρος, have the same patronymic adjective (Ἡρακλείδας) and are listed consecutively; we may then think that they were brothers. We may also think that Ἰροίτας Ἡρ[ακλ]ίδας, Φ[¹⁻²]δαμος Ἰροίταος, and Παντάκλη <c> Ἰροίταος (5–7) were a father and his two sons, and that the father of Ἰροίτας Ἡρ[ακλ]ίδας (6–7) was the father of the first three intended victims:



As we have already seen, however, Ἰροίτας is common on Lesbos; Ἡρακλείδας itself is quite banal; the right-hand side of the schema above is, therefore, only a suggestion. For the same reason, the collocation of the two names in other Lesbian texts (for example, *IG* XII.2 259 of Roman imperial date from Mytilene,

⁸ According to the system of distortion elsewhere in III, the first syllable would be Γε-; the last, because it begins with ν, cannot have had more than three letters (e.g., -ν[ός], -ν[ίς], *vel sim.*); the second, then, is -[.]α[.]-; therefore Γε[.]α[.]ν[^{ε 2}].

with its Ἡρακλείδαο Ἡρακλείδα ὁ καὶ Ἰροίταο) is not enough to imply descent from the men named on our tablets.

The name Δίης heads the lists in I and II, and at III 3 we read the phonetic variant Ζίης.⁹ It is hard to dismiss this as mere coincidence. No doubt they are the same man, a principal foe among the persons here cursed. As we have seen, the differences in diction between the tablets are not enough to rule out that all three texts were inscribed by the same writer. Nor, given the different techniques of distorting the spellings, do we consider that the slight differences in letter forms exclude the possibility.

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APPENDIX: INDEX OF NAMES¹⁰

Those previously unattested on Lesbos are marked +.

+Ἀδωνικλείδαο III 2 (*hapax*)

+Ἀσπασία III 6

+Γελ[.α[.]ν[^εζ] (?) III 1 (*hapax?*)

Δάμαρχοο III 5

Δαμόχαριο II 1

Δίης I 1 (son of Ἡρακλείδαο), II 1, III 3 (Ζίης): same person?

Διογένηο I 1 (son of Ἡρακλείδαο)

⁹This variant of course is no argument against the identification of Δίης and Ζίης; cf. the spelling Δίης and Δίης by a bearer of the name himself, in a graffito from Abydos: Perdrizet and Lefebvre 1919: 589. As H. C. Youtie has pointed out (1976), up till fairly recent times there was little concern for consistency in the spelling of proper names.

¹⁰We take this opportunity to add another Mytilenaeon to the prosopography. From his excavations on the Isthmus of Corinth P. A. Clement (1971: 109 = *SEG* XXIX 342) published a graffito of Roman Imperial date on one of its walls (Fig. 4; *vidit, delineavit* D.R.J.) as καλαῖς Μυτιλην<αί>αις, i.e., "to the fair ladies of Mytilene." Better: Κάλαῖς Μυτιληναῖ(ο)ς, with the ethnic in its syncopated form. The name is new for Lesbos but known at Rhegion, Iambl. *VP* 267; cf. also the commoner Καλαίδηο: e.g., *DTW* 23.6.



Fig. 4

Διονύσιος II 2

Ἑρμος I 3 (father of Χαιρηκίκλης)

Ἡρακλείδης I 1 (father of Δίης), 1–2 (father of Διογένης), 2–3 (father of Θεόδωρος), 6–7 (father of Ἰροίτας): same person?

Θεόδωρος I 2 (son of Ἡρακλείδης)

Ἰροίτας I 6 (son of Ἡρακλείδης), 6 (father of Φ[¹⁻²]δαμος), 7 (father of Παντάκλης): same person?

Μαλοΐσιος III 7

+Μάτρων III 4

Μελάντας I 5 (father of Παντάκλης)

+Μέλων II 1

+Μηνοφάνης (Νημ-) I 4 (father of Νίκων)

+Νίκων I 4 (son of Μηνοφάνης)

+Παντάκλης I 4–5 (son of Μελάντας), 7 (son of Ἰροίτας)

+Πυθέδαμος II 2

+Φ[¹⁻²]δαμος I 5–6 (son of Ἰροίτας) (*hapax*)

+Χαιρηκίκλης (?Χαιρ[.]ηκλε) I 3 (son of Ἑρμος) (*hapax*)

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