

Bonds and Headless Demons in Greco-roman Magic

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IN THIS PAPER I wish to discuss the meaning of a gem-stone in black jasper from the Numismatic Museum in Athens that Armand Delatte published in 1914. The stone is inscribed with a headless human figure, its hands bound behind its back and surrounded by seven symbols with the legend BAXYX below it (no. 615).¹ The symbolism of the hands bound behind the back will be the first topic dealt with and then the identity of the demon will be considered. Some texts from Late Antiquity or with their roots in Late Antiquity reveal both the significance of the binding and the identity of the demon.

The binding of the hands behind the back will represent an attempt at cancelling the harm that the demon may do. The belief that the maleficence of demons is rendered null and void by imposing a bond or δεσμός on them runs throughout the sub-magical text known as the *Testament of Solomon*. In it one demon after another presents itself to Solomon to tell the king how its power may be annulled. They come before Solomon already in

¹A. Delatte, "Études sur la magie Grecque V: 'Ακέφαλος Θεός," *BCH* 38 (1914) 189 fig. 1. Representations of headless demons are not uncommon in the world of Late Antiquity. They do not necessarily all represent the same demonic force. A headless demon is drawn in a Berlin magical papyrus (*PGM* II.166–170). For a photograph, see K. Preisendanz, *Papyri graecae magicae*², ed. A. Henrichs (Stuttgart 1972) I pl. 1.2. His identity has occasioned much discussion: Delatte argued that he represented Seth and Typhon (189–249); Preisendanz held that he was Osiris cast as a solar deity (*Akephalos, der kopflose Gott*, *Beih.z.alt.Orient* 8 [1926]); Campbell Bonner saw in him primarily a bogeyman, though a bogeyman who could be identified with Osiris (*Studies in Magical Amulets, chiefly Graeco-Egyptian* [Ann Arbor 1950] 166).

bonds, since their leader Beelzeboul has undertaken to bring them into Solomon's presence bound (ἐπηγγείλατο πάντα τὰ ἀκάθαρτα πνεύματα ἀγαγεῖν πρὸς με δέσμια, 3.7 McCown). Solomon, nonetheless, imposes a further δέσμιον on some of them by applying his seal (σφραγίς) to their person (4.12, 5.12, 10.8, 15.7).

The idea that demons are rendered impotent to do harm by fettering them is also encountered in the *Life of Symeon Stylites the Younger* (henceforth *v.Sym.Styl.J.*). It is not only demons who are bound and kept from doing harm, a man who behaves badly towards Symeon suffers the same fate. The notion is extended to the binding of a presbyter who out of envy spoke ill of Symeon. There are two episodes in the work in which demons are subdued by being bound. In one of them two demons attack a man who had climbed a pine-tree standing on the edge of a precipice, picking him up by his feet and throwing him over the precipice, at which point the man called on Symeon for help and saw the Stylite stretching out his hands, taking him into them and putting him on his feet again safe and unharmed; there was then a further vision of the earth opening and of Symeon putting bonds in the form of fetters (ἀλύσεων δεσμὰ τοῖς δυσὶ δαιμονίοις ἐπιθέντα) on the demons and of his throwing them into the abyss (91 van den Ven). The second episode also contains a vision of Symeon binding a demon. In this case, it is a boy ill with a fever, whose life is despaired of, who has a vision of Symeon carrying an iron staff and shackles and of an ugly, black, headless demon whom Symeon holds bound (καὶ δαίμων τις μέλας καὶ ἀειδής, ἀκέφαλος τυγχάνων, κεκράτηται δεσμευόμενος παρ' αὐτοῦ) and who then has a further vision, this time of Symeon pinioning the arms of the demon behind its back with the shackles (δήσας αὐτὸν ἐν τῇ ἀλύσει ὀπισθάγκωνα), and of his dragging the demon to his pillar, where he kindled a

pyre into which he threw the demon. As he saw the sight, the disease left the boy and he became whole again (231).

At one level the image of the demon rendered impotent by the bonds or shackles that are imposed on him needs no explanation: its meaning is intuitively obvious. It is not, however, a matter of chance that the image of binding was used to symbolize cancelling a demon's power to do harm and not one of the many other images that might equally well have been used. The harm that demons do is pictured in terms of binding. The demon bound is then very much the biter bit. *V.Sym.Styl.J.* is again one of the principal sources of images of demons binding their victims. There is the *silentarius* from Constantinople who could not have intercourse with the wife he had just taken, because of a bond a demon had cast upon him (ἐδεσμεύθη ὑπὸ δαίμονος).² This led to his sending a messenger to Symeon asking that he be released from the δεσμός and to Symeon's being filled with the holy spirit and breathing in the direction of the west, while praying that the man be released from the δεσμός of the Devil (ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι τοῦ Κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ λυθῆι ὁ δέσμος τοῦ διαβόλου, 151).³ Then there is the presbyter from the village of Kassa who, prompted by envy, spoke ill of Symeon and finally excommunicated him in an anathema; he immediately saw a host of demons pinioning his arms behind his back (πλήθος δαιμόνων δησάντων αὐτὸν ὀπισθάγκωνα) and found that he was unable to read from the Gospels and raise the holy offering; setting out to find some cure for his condition, he encountered persons who roundly declared that

²For a recipe neutralizing δεσμά preventing a man and woman from having intercourse, see Delatte, *Anecdota Atheniensia* I (Liège/Paris 1927: hereafter *Anecd.Ath.*) I 146.15–34.

³For ἐμφύσησις or insufflation as a technique for defeating demonic forces, blasting snakes, and curing sickness, cf. Cyr. S. *v.Euthym.* 23 (Schwartz, *TU* 49.2 [1939]); Anton. Hag. *v.Sym.Styl.* 24 (Lietzmann, *TU* 32.4 [1908]); Thdt. *H.rel.* 3.7 Canivet and Leroy-Molinghen (*SC* 234 [1977]). On its use in exorcisms, see Paul van den Ven, *La vie ancienne de S. Syméon Stylite le Jeune* (*SH* 32 [1962–70]) II 159.

sorcery was at the root of his sufferings (ἔλεγον διά τινος γοητείας τοῦτο πεπονθέναι αὐτόν) and who took the little money he possessed to cure him. It need hardly be said that they were unsuccessful and in fact made the man worse (239).

The harm demons do conceived as a δεσμός has its origins in a more or less discrete category of spell whose aim it was to inhibit an opponent physically, either by preventing him from speaking in court or keeping him from performing some other action. The opponent was imagined to be bound down.⁴ So in curse-tablets from Athens of the 4th century B.C. the verb καταδέω appears in the first person singular preceded by the name of the party to be bound down in the accusative.⁵ The name for such a spell is a κατάδεσις or a κατάδεσμος, but when the substantives are first encountered in Plato, there are indications, although not conclusive ones, that the terms have a wider application and are used in a fairly general sense for spells designed to harm (*Resp.* 364c2–5, *Leg.* 933a2–b5). In Theocritus we get a woman saying νῦν μὲν τοῖς φίλτροις καταδήσομαι (2.159) as she puts a love-spell on an errant lover to force him to return to her.⁶ In the magical papyri of the 4th century A.D., such a spell would have gone under the rubric φίλτροκατάδεσμος (*PGM* IV.296). It may well have been called that in Theocritus' time.⁷ What is clear is that there has been an extension

⁴On early binding-spells, see C. A. Faraone, "The Agonistic Context of Early Greek Binding Spells," in *Hiera Magika: Ancient Greek Magic and Religion*, edd. Christopher A. Faraone and Dirk Obbink (New York/Oxford 1991) 3–6.

⁵A. Audollent, *Defixionum tabellae* (Paris 1904) 52; Wünsch, *IG* III.3 40, 41, 45, 47, 48, 49, 50, 52, 74, 84a, 86.

⁶C. A. Faraone, *Ancient Greek Love Magic* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1999) 27–28, maintains that a φίλτρον is a spell used by a woman to win back the affections of a man, while a φίλτροκατάδεσμος or ἀγωγή is what the spells primarily used by men to arouse sexual passion in a woman are called. I have argued in a forthcoming article in *CQ* that this distinction cannot be sustained.

⁷J. G. Howie suggests to me that there is a play on φίλτροκατάδεσμος in the words τοῖς φίλτροις καταδήσομαι.

in meaning of the verb *καταδεῖν* and the term comes to be used for putting a spell of any sort on someone. Thus the *κατάδεσμα* or *καταδέσμια* which a phylactery from Sicily (2nd or 3rd cent. A.D.) and another from Beirut (4th cent. A.D.) promise to afford protection against look to be spells in general:⁸ [αὐ]τὸ φορῶν οὐ φοβήσῃ μάγον οὐδὲ κατάδεσμον οὐδὲ πνεῦμ[α πον]ηρὸν οὐδέ τι δῆποτε (32.10–12); διαφύλαξον Ἀλεξάνδραν ... ἀπὸ παντὸς δέμονος καὶ πάσης ἀνάγκη(ς) δενόμων καὶ ἀπὸ δεμόνων καὶ φαρμάκων καὶ καταδέσμων (52.6–13).⁹ In later Greek, the simplex *δεσμός* or *δέσμιον* is used in place of the compound *κατάδεσμος* as are *δεῖν* and *δεσμεύειν* in place of *καταδεῖν* and *καταδεσμεύειν* respectively.¹⁰ They are used in a quite general sense, but the idea that a *δεσμός* or a *δέσμιον* involves binding clearly never quite disappears.

The black, ugly, and headless demon whose arms Symeon is seen to bind behind its back is to judge from the context a fever-demon (*v. Sym. Styl. J.* 231). So very likely is the headless demon on the gem published by Delatte. That headless demons are very often fever-demons emerges from a passage in the *Testament of Solomon* that describes a fever-demon and how he is to be vanquished (9). He is the fever-demon called *Φόνος*, who is human in all of his limbs, but is headless (*ἄνθρωπος μὲν πάντα τὰ μέλη αὐτοῦ, ἀκέφαλος δέ, 9.1*); he sees through his breasts; his special province is to set limbs ablaze with fever and inflict ulcers on the feet (*εἰμι ὁ πυρῶν τὰ μέλη καὶ τοῖς ποσὶν ἐπιπέμπω καὶ ἔλκη ἐμποιῶ*); his power is nullified by a fiery thunderbolt

⁸Roy Kotansky, *Greek Magical Amulets I* (Pap.Colon. XXII.1 [1994]) nos. 32 and 52.

⁹*Cf. Orph.lith.* 588, φάρμακα δ' ὅσσα πέλονται ἀτάσθαλα καὶ κατάδεσμοι; *Orph.lith.kerygm.* 20.19 Halleux-Schamp, καὶ μiasμάτων πάντων καὶ καταδέσμων καθαρτήριον ὑπάρχει.

¹⁰*δεσμός*: *Iambl. Myst.* 3.27.3; *PGM* IV.2904, XII.162, 170; *Cyran.* 1.4.48, 59 *Kaimakis*; *v. Sym. Styl. J.* 49.12, 151.10; *δεῖν*: *PGM* IV.2904; *δεσμεύειν* = *καταδεσμεύειν*: *PGM* V.320–321.

(καὶ διὰ τῆς ἐμπύρου ἀστραπῆς καταργοῦμαι).¹¹ In a formulary of the 17th or 18th centuries, there is a recipe for an amulet against fever that recommends the engraving on the stone known as zonitis of a headless spirit with its hands bound behind its back and its feet also bound standing upright; signs, seven in number, are to be drawn around it and behind it the following (seven) names: Apser, Azekiel, Ouriel, Sichaël, Ephamael, and Zoizo (εἶτα λαβὼν λίθον ζωνίτην γλύψον ἐν αὐτῷ πνεῦμα ἀκέφαλον ὄπισθεν ἔχον τὰς χεῖρας καὶ τοὺς πόδας δεδεμένους καὶ ὄρθριον ἰστάμενον). The manuscript actually contains an example of the figure to be drawn. It is a winged headless demon with a tail; its feet are indeed bound, but its arms are folded across its chest.¹² The amulet from Athens does not have the seven names inscribed on it, but it does have seven signs, which in combination with its headlessness rather suggests that it is a fever-demon.

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¹¹ An exorcism attributed to Athanasius in a manuscript of the early 18th century, now in the National Library in Athens (no. 825), exorcizes precisely this demon: ὀρκίζω σε, δαιμόνιον πονηρὸν τὸ καλούμενον Φόνος, τὸ ἔχον μὲν πάντα τὰ μέλη τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, ἀκέφαλος δὲ ὄν, τὸ βλέπον διὰ τῶν μασθῶν τὸ ποιοῦν βούβους τοὺς ἀνθρώπους, τὸ καταργοῦμενον διὰ τῆς ἐμπύρου ἀστραπῆς (*Anecd.Ath.* I 234.23-27).

¹² *Anecd.Ath.* I 489.7–490.7. The same codex contains one other very similar recipe for the cure of demoniacs and epileptics that also involves engraving the figure of an evil spirit on some jasper with its hands and feet bound (εἶτα λαβὼν λίθον ἴασπιν δόκιμον γλύψον ἐν αὐτῷ πνεῦμα πονηρὸν δεδεμένον χεῖρας καὶ πόδας, ὄνομα δὲ αὐτῷ Σατάν, *Anecd.Ath.* I 487.4–5). The accompanying figure shows a devil with horns with its hands bound in front of it and its feet also bound.