Late Antique Lamps with Defixiones

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Rome: the fountain of Anna Perenna

Between 1999 and 2000 the sacred spring of Anna Perenna at Rome, in Piazza Euclide, was brought to light. Inscriptions and other finds show that the Romans had worshipped Anna Perenna here from at least the first century B.C. onwards. At the end of the fourth century or the beginning of the fifth the fountain was filled with amphora sherds in order to block it up. The Theodosian law that suppressed pagan cults may lie behind this action, especially since the coins found in the fountain do not go beyond the reign of Theodosius I.[1] In late antiquity the old cult of Anna Perenna, a focus of worship by Roman girls, was almost forgotten and was increasingly supplanted by magical practices of a completely different form. In keeping with the widespread habit of throwing defixiones into springs, cisterns, baths, *fistulae*, and other watery communication with the after-life world,[2] defixiones on lead lamellae were tossed into the fresh water of that fountain, or to be more precise, into its holding tank.

A peculiar feature of these defixiones is that they were inserted into lamps. Marina Piranomonte, who directed the excavations, found here 72 lamps of the first half of the fourth century. Almost all were unused (or used only once), for they have no trace of burning on the nozzles. Only a few lamps have signs of heavy use, and these bear Christian symbols. Seven unused lamps contained lead (in one case copper)

[1] F. Catalli, in M. Piranomonte (ed.), *Il santuario della musica e il bosco sacro di Anna Perenna* (Milan 2002) 37.

[2] See for example D. Jordan, "Defixiones from a Well near the Southwest Corner of the Athenian Agora," *Hesperia* 54 (1985) 205–210, and "Ψήγματα κριτικής," *Eulimene* 1 (2000) 127–131, esp. 130–131.

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defixiones (*Figures* 1–3) and two coins and traces of parchment.[3] Further traces of defixio rites are recognisable in the puppets with lead or iron nails inserted into their heads, which were put into lead canisters inscribed with curse texts.

No comparative study of these defixory lamps has hitherto been undertaken; in this paper I gather a few scraps of evidence which may be related to the rituals performed at the fountain of Anna Perenna, though it is impossible to know precisely how the rituals concerning the defixiones and lamps were performed.

A defixory lamp of the fourth century B.C.

The first document is an astonishing inscription on a lamp of the fourth century B.C. from Athens.[4] It was found at the foot of the north slope of the Areopagus, under the floor of a house. A graffito etched in its black paint mentions six persons: Philodemos, Antikleides, Praxias, Arkesilas, Alkias, Antimedes. What is abnormal is that the inscription runs backwards, and the editor reasonably wrote: "the backward writing, however, smacks of magic, and the lamp may have been deliberately buried under the floor as the bearer of a curse."[5] The aim of the authors of the backward writing is clarified by several curse texts, such as an Attic defixio which says: "just as these things are cold and reversed, so too may the words of Krates be cold and reversed";[6] on another from Dekeleia: "just as these things (i.e. the letters) are backwards so too may all words and deeds be backwards for her."[7] This form of attacking personal enemies is paralleled by the ancient Greek figurines whose

[3] Piranomonte, in *Il santuario* 21–25, and "La fontana sacra di Anna Perenna a Piazza Euclide tra religione e magia," *Μήνη* 5 (2005) 87–104. The defixiones will be published by J. Blänsdorf.

[4] H. A. Thompson, "Activities in the Athenian Agora: 1957," *Hesperia* 27 (1958) 145–160, esp. 159 pl. 46; M. Lang, *Athenian Agora* XXI *Graffiti and Dipinti* (Princeton 1976) no. C32, pl.6.

[5] Thompson, *Hesperia* 27 (1958) 159.

[6] Wuensch, *IG* III.3 App. 67.

[7] D. R. Jordan, "A Survey of Greek Defixiones," *GRBS* 26 (1985) 151–197, no. 40.

torsos and limbs are twisted around for the same purpose.[8]

Not far from the above-mentioned house another defixio was brought to light under the floor of a small building; in this case the defixio was inscribed on a lead tablet and placed in a miniature cooking pot of the end of the fourth century B.C. The personal names in the inscription are spelled in retrograde syllabically rather than alphabetically, e.g. ΕΛΝΩ for ΛΕΩΝ.[9]

This evidence for the use of lamps in cursing is quite isolated and about 700 years earlier than the lamps deposited in Anna Perenna's spring. However we find in other places evidence that practitioners of magic arts in late antiquity frequented ancient pagan shrines, and therefore the case of the Anna Perenna spring is not completely isolated.

Nemea

The site of Nemea, well known for its panhellenic games, was in the second and third centuries in a state of neglect, for the games and the cults were no longer practised here. The recent excavations, directed by Stephen G. Miller, have brought to light three cisterns, in which a large number of lamps have been discovered (*Figure* 4).[10] They can be dated to the third century and all are different from one another. Miller (58) states that "most of these lamps show little, if any, sign of use; only light burning is to be seen at the nozzles." The activities on the site in late antiquity that are attested by the lamps are quite surprising in an abandoned sacred area. Miller suggests that the lamps could be seen as an ancient collection or as the remains of a *lychnomanteion*, a prophetic sanctuary that employed lamps.[11] But the case of the spring of Anna Perenna

[8] See recently C. A. Faraone, "Twisting and Turning in the Prayer of the Samothracian Initiates," *MusHelv* 62 (2005) 30–50, esp. 37.

[9] David R. Jordan and Susan I. Rotroff, "A Curse in a Chytridion. A Contribution to the Study of Athenian Pyres," *Hesperia* 68 (1999) 147–154.

[10] S. G. Miller, *Nemea. A Guide to the Site and Museum* (Athens 2004) 57–59.

[11] Other important finds of lamps have been interpreted as remains of oracular practices. M. Petropoulos, Τα εργαστήρια των ρωμαιών λυκναριών της Πάτρας και το Λυχνομαντείο (Athens 1999), esp. 132–139, has published a series of 3rd–2nd cent. B.C. lamps from Patras, which in the editor's opinion were used for mantic purposes in a *lychnomanteion*; but there is no compelling evidence pointing to this hypothesis. On the other hand, the

suggests another possibility, namely, that the lamps were thrown into the cistern as a form of aggressive magic (*malae artes*, as the Romans said). Thus the practitioners were probably imagining that each lamp symbolized an enemy, who was sinking towards the watery afterlife with the lamp. Though it must be admitted that no inscription has been found on or in these lamps at Nemea, the explanation that they were defixiones remains a possibility. Moreover, I have observed that the lamps from the cisterns that are displayed in the museum at Nemea have an irregular hole on their upper face, perhaps for ritual purposes, but certainly not for the normal supply of oil.

Christian beliefs and defixiones

In late antiquity a dark underground chamber with a basin of water could be thought of as a region of the underworld, and the dedications of lamps in such a place could function as a means of contact with the powers of the underworld. Christianity eventually was able to persuade many people that the pagan gods were evil demons who came to crush humankind with diseases and to eat the souls of pagans, sinners, or heretics. The deserted pagan shrines would be thought of as an earthly underworld, where the souls of one's enemies were cursed by means of defixiones. Both orthodox and heterodox Christians were convinced that the demons sought out human souls, which they wanted to eat. Certainly that was not the major fear of the Christians in the face of demons, as they were more frightened by diseases, whose cause was thought to be the malignity of the demons; but the idea of their eating souls was a way of envisaging how the demons might take possession of the damned. The Archontic Gnostics held that the planetary Archons (Zeus, Hermes, etc.) fed on souls in order to stay alive.[12] Lactantius too maintains that the pagan gods, i.e. the demons, desired to eat as many human souls as possible (*Inst.* 2.16.21). The Gnostic treatise *Pistis Sophia* describes an enormous snake that encircled the earth, swallowed souls, and kept them in its

thousands of lamps from the "Fountain of the Lamps" at Corinth are mostly remains of Christian health rituals: David Jordan, "Inscribed Lamps from a Cult at Corinth," *HThR* 87 (1994) 223–229.

[12] Theodoret *Haer.* 1.11 (*PG* 83.362).

belly (3.126.2), and orthodox Christianity shared the same frightening idea.[13] Thus, bringing symbols or parts of a person (the name, the image) into a temple of the pagan gods might signify transferring him to the belly of the demon and the afterlife of the damned.

A Nymphaeum was a water basin or a fountain; images of Nymphs or Charites[14] often stood in the baths, and in fact the inscriptions of the Anna Perenna fountain mention the Nymphs.[15] Many defixiones, in both pagan and Christian environments, claim to hand over their victims to watery Nymphs[16] or goddesses of the sea.[17] In pagan beliefs abduction by Nymphs and particularly plunging into a fountain, like the Salmacis at Halicarnassus,[18] was thought of as an evil fate, as a metaphor for death, but sometimes also as a reception among divine beings.[19] In late antiquity, with the prevailing of Christian beliefs, the Nymphs of springs, basins, or the sea were transformed into female demons. Water, according to Jewish and Christian beliefs, was the realm of demons,[20] and many Christian exorcisms sought to drive away sea demons such as

[13] *Acta martyr. Lugdun.* 1.25, 2.6 (A. A. R. Bastiaensen et al., *Atti e passioni dei martiri* [Milan 1987] 73, 94). In the Middle Ages Hell and also limbo were represented as an open mouth of an enormous monster in which the damned were held: M. Mihàlyi, "Anastasi," *Enciclopedia dell'Arte Medievale* 1 (1991) 556; J. Baschet, "Inferno," 7 (1996) 354.

[14] See T. Ritti, *Iscrizioni e rilievi greci nel Museo Maffeiano di Verona* (Rome 1981) no. 7, where further bibliography can be found.

[15] R. Friggeri, "Le iscrizioni," in *Il santuario* 26–33 [*AE* 2003, 251–253].

[16] Jordan, *Eulimene* 1 (2000) 130–131.

[17] C. A. Faraone, "In the Horn of an Ox: a Curious Hexametrical Curse from Hellenistic Cyrene (SGD 150)," *Μήνη* 4 (2004) 51–62.

[18] Ovid *Met.* 4.285–388.

[19] Ch. Sourvinou-Inwood, *Hylas, the Nymphs, Dionysos and Others* (Stockholm 2005) 109–111.

[20] See H. Gunkel, *Schöpfung und Chaos* (Göttingen 1895); A. Mastrocinque, *From Jewish Magic to Gnosticism* (Tübingen 2005) 24–30; D. Brakke, *Demons and the Making of the Monk: Spiritual Combat in Early Christianity* (Cambridge [Mass.] 2006) 132, and 213–239 on the transformation of the pagan gods into demons according to Christian belief.

Gorgo, Abysou, Aura, Antaura (sea winds).[21] Other texts and amulets were thought to defend against female demons such as Gyllo, Alabasdria, Kera, etc.[22] Thus it is evident that in late antiquity handing over lamps to watery Nymphs could only signify handing over souls to evil female demons.

Athenian Agora

It is known that many defixiones have been found in pits or cisterns in the Athenian Agora,[23] but it has not been noted that in several cases lamps have also been found in the same pits and cisterns.[24] Many examples are of little interest for our investigation, because of the early date of the lamps or their

[21] A. A. Barb, "Antaura the Mermaid and the Devil's Grandmother," *JWarb* 29 (1966) 1–23; C. Stewart, *Demons and the Devil: Moral Imagination in Modern Greek Culture* (Princeton 1991), esp. ch. 6; J. Spier, "Medieval Byzantine Magical Amulets and their Tradition," *JWarb* 56 (1993) 51–59; J. van der Vliet, *L'image du mal en Egypte : démonologie et cosmogonie d'après les textes gnostiques coptes* (Leiden 1996); S. Iles Johnston, *Restless Dead. Encounters between the Living and the Dead in Ancient Greece* (Berkeley 1999) 161–199; A. Mastrocinque, *Sylloge gemmarum gnosticarum* I (Rome 2004) 356–361; in these works further bibliography can be found. Christians who had been newly baptized feared being seized by demons: R. Kotansky, *Greek Magical Amulets* I (Pap. Col. 22 [Opladen 1994]) 178–179, and "Greek Exorcistic Amulets," in M. Meyer and P. Mirecki (eds.), *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power* (Leiden 1995) 241–277.

[22] P. Perdrizet, *Negotium perambulans in tenebris* (Strasbourg 1922); R. P. H. Greenfeld, *Traditions of Belief in Late Byzantine Demonology* (Amsterdam 1988) 182–190, and "Saint Sisinnios, the Archangel Michael and the Female Demon Gylou: the Typology of the Greek Literary Stories," *Βυζαντινά* 15 (1989) 83–142; J. van der Vliet, "Demons in Early Coptic Monasticism: Image and Reality," in H. Hondelink (ed.), *Coptic Art and Culture* (Cairo 1987) 135–156, esp. 139; Brakke, *Demons* 182–212. Listing and classifying demons was a useful means of knowing the origin of misfortune and the premise of exorcistic and protective rituals against it: D. Frankfurter, *Evil Incarnate: Rumors of Demonic Conspiracy and Satanic Abuse in History* (Princeton 2006) ch. 2, esp. 19–26. Misfortune was avoided by avoiding certain places in the landscape or by specific ritual attention: W. Brashear, "Zauberformular: Exkurs," *ArchPF* 36 (1990) 49–74, esp. 61–73; Frankfurter 14.

[23] D. R. Jordan, "Defixiones from a Well Near the Southwest Corner of the Athenian Agora," *Hesperia* 54 (1985) 205–255.

[24] Lamp finds in the Agora: J. Perlzweig, *Athenian Agora* VII *Lamps of the Roman Period* (Princeton 1961) 224–228.

small number.[25] The lamps used for cursing in the fountain of Anna Perenna are as late as the fourth century and were quite numerous. But three cases are worth citing because of lamps and defixiones found in the same pits. In a first or second century cistern 9 lamps were recovered together with a defixio;[26] in a pit containing fill dating to the first to third centuries, 29 lamps and 2 defixiones;[27] and in another pit dated late second/early third century, 2 lamps and more than 44 defixiones.[28]

Lamps and aggressive magic in the magical papyri

Nothing is known of the nature of the curse rituals that employed lamps, but a few pieces of information come from the magical papyri. As Marina Piranomonte has noticed, many recipes in the papyri, particularly for mantic seances, prescribe using lamps which are not coloured red.[29] One may add that the papyri often prescribe new and unused lamps, which is true of the items of Anna Perenna and at Nemea.

In several cases the recipes are concerned with lamellae, textiles, and other things to be put into the lamps. For example, "this figure is to be inscribed on a piece of clothing belonging to one who has died violently, and is to be cast into a pure lamp";[30] the figure is that of a headless demon.

PGM VII is particularly rich in recipes for oracles by means of lamps or compulsive rituals performed with lamps. The oracular lamps are here of less interest than the lamps for compulsive rituals, which are more similar to the cursing lamps. A ritual which was meant to cause insomnia in a person is described:[31]

[25] For instance, Perlzweig, *Lamps* A 14:2, 7 lamps of cent. I–IV in one pit; C 14:2, 25 lamps from a cistern filled during the reign of Aurelian.

[26] Perlzweig, *Lamps* B 21:1 + Jordan, *Hesperia* 54 (1985) 209.

[27] Perlzweig, *Lamps* D 12:1 + G. W. Elderkin, "Two Curse Inscriptions," *Hesperia* 6 (1937) 382–395; Jordan, *Hesperia* 54 (1985) 209.

[28] Perlzweig, *Lamps* J 12:2 + Jordan, *Hesperia* 54 (1985) 206.

[29] *PGM* IV 2367, 3187–88, VII 542, VIII 87, XII 22, LXII 1.

[30] *PGM* II 170–174, transl. J. Dillon, in H. D. Betz (ed.), *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation*[2] [*GMPT*] (Chicago 1992).

[31] *PGM* VII 376–384, transl. R. F. Hock, *GMPT*.

> Another (charm to induce insomnia): Take a lamp and furnish it with a wick and say to it: "I conjure you, lamp, by your mother Hestia, MERALLEL (say twice), and by your father Hephaistos, MELIBOU MELIBAU MELIBAUBAU. [Let] her lie awake" and (add) the usual. [Write] these letters on the wick: "☌ chiiiiiii." And having provided the material [recite] the above spell. Now make an iron metal leaf, too.
> The spell: "Turn cold, iron, and become like snow, [for I] am MELIBOU MELIBAU MELIBAUBAU" ([and] add the usual).

Another recipe explains how, with the help of demons, to force a woman to come to the practitioner for sex:[32]

> Fetching charm for an unmanageable [woman]: Take a [lamp], not painted red, with seven wicks, and make a wick of [the hawser of] a wrecked ship. On the [1st] wick write with myrrh, "Iao"; on the second …
> Put olive oil in the lamp and place it in a window facing south. Also put wormwood seeds on the lamp (around the edge of the lamp), and recite this formula …
> If the first lamp flickers, know that she has been seized by the daimon …
> It can fetch people even from across the sea. For that, place the lamp in some water in the open air. Place a papyrus boat under the lamp, and [recite the] formula 6 times.

Lamps as means to damn enemies

An interesting feature of these recipes is that the wick is made of cold material that originated from the netherworld (thus a shipwreck[33]) or is accompanied by drawings of gods of the afterlife (thus the Akephalos-demon). The rolled-up lead tablets from the Anna Perenna spring were positioned in the lamps as wicks, and it is clear now that they were meant to freeze and stop a person. In late antiquity a lamp could symbolise a human soul.

The symbolism of lamps in the middle and late empire was

[32] *PGM* VII 593–619, transl. D. E. Aune, *GMPT*.

[33] Defixiones were also inscribed on particular sea shells that were sacred to Seth-Typhon: *PGM* IV 2218–25; cf. A. Audollent, *Defixionum tabellae* (Paris 1904) no. 234; F. de Salvia, "L'ΟΣΤΡΑΚΟΝ ΘΑΛΑΣΣΙΟΝ nei papiri magici greco-egiziani," in M. Capasso (ed.), *Papiri letterari greci e latini* (Galatina 1992) 291–307.

widespread and complex, because it was adopted by many religious currents and in a number of religious contexts. In funerary rituals, lamps were lit in order to give light, life, and protection to the deceased.[34] Among the Hebraizing sect of Hypsistarians, lamps and fires were ignited as a central cultic practice for the Theos Hypsistos.[35] In Mithraic ceremonies lamps were used to symbolise the light of Helios or Selene by being placed behind images of these gods.[36] Christianity made much of the symbolism of lamps, for Jesus used the image of a lamp that should not be put under a modius[37] as a symbol of the true faith which should shine to humankind, and called John the Baptist a blazing and shining lamp.[38] Terms like *neos phos* (new light) and *photismos* were employed of recently baptized Christians and of baptism itself.[39] Jesus said also that his followers should have light and life,[40] and in obedience to this Christian lamps were made and inscribed with the words *phos* and *zoê*.[41] St. Paul said, "you were once darkness and now you are light in the Lord."[42] Clement of Alexandria, commenting on this passage of Paul, argues that man was called *phota* by the ancient authors.[43] Here we meet the identification of man and light, which was also used by the pagans. Macrobius in fact states that the offering of candles during the Saturnalia was introduced by Hercules.[44] An oracle had prescribed that heads

[34] F. Cumont, *Lux perpetua* (Paris 1949) 48–51.

[35] See recently S. Mitchell, "The Cult of Theos Hypsistos between Pagans, Jews, and Christians," in P. Athanassiadi-Fowden and M. Frede (eds.), *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford 2001) 81–148, esp. 91–95.

[36] R. Merkelbach, *Mithras* (Hain 1984) 134–136.

[37] Mark 4:21–22; Luke 8:16–17, 11:33; Mt 5:14–16, 6:22–23.

[38] John 5:35.

[39] H. Conzelmann, "Phos," in *Grande Lessico del Nuovo Testamento* XV 361–492.

[40] John 8:12.

[41] H. Leclercq, "Phos–Zoé," in *DACL* 14.1 (1939) 756–758.

[42] Eph. 5:8.

[43] *Paed.* 1.6 (*PG* 8.284B).

[44] Macrob.1.7.30–32: *Apollini consecrata erectisque Diti sacello et Saturno ara, cuius festum Saturnalia nominarunt. cumque diu humanis capitibus Ditem et virorum vic-*

had to be offered to Hades (i.e. Dispater) and a man (*phota*) to Cronos (or Saturnus); Hercules, who knew the Greek, understood "head" not as true human heads but as images of faces, and *phota* as "lights," i.e. "candles," and not as "a man."

Therefore we may conclude that the offering of a lamp could substitute for the offering of a man. The wick was the symbol of a soul, being most luminous and warm. The cold of the wick produced the freezing of the enemy; throwing the lamp into a cold and underground water basin represented his death; placing a lamp in the realm of a pagan god deprived the enemy of salvation, of the possibility of joining the spiritual god.

The lamps let the magicians resort to obvious and simple symbols:

light versus darkness
warm versus cold
fire versus water

A lamp represented a person and the ritual was a symbolic homicide.

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timis Saturnum placare se crederent propter oraculum in quo erat: καὶ κεφαλὰς Ἄιδῃ καὶ τῷ πατρὶ πέμπετε φῶτα, *Herculem ferunt postea cum Geryonis pecore per Italiam revertentem suasisse illorum posteris, ut faustis sacrificiis infausta mutarent inferentes Diti non hominum capita sed oscilla ad humanam effigiem arte simulata, et aras Saturnias non mactando viro sed accensis luminibus excolentes, quia non solum virum sed et lumina* φῶτα *significat. inde mos per Saturnalia missitandis cereis coepit.* We do not know how old that tradition is, but it is hardly as recent as Macrobius (beginning of the fifth century).

Fig. 1: Lamps from the fountain of Anna Perenna
Soprintendenza Archeologica di Roma
(Museo Nazionale Romano - Museo Epigrafico)
Courtesy of M. Piranomonte

Fig. 2, ibid.: Inv. no. 445038, lamp with defixio inserted

Fig. 3, ibid.: Inv. no. 445018, lamp with three defixiones

Fig. 4: Archaeological Museum of Nemea: Inv. no. L 283, lamp
Courtesy of S. G. Miller