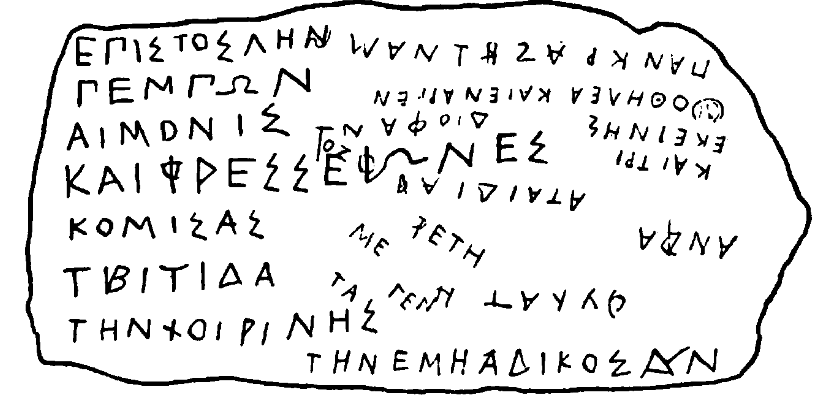
**Using ancient evidence, discuss the role of language in Greek and Roman magic. How important was language and to what ends was it used?**

By Helen Leggatt

Within the Classical period, Greco-Roman magicians had many tools at their disposal. Perhaps the most-used and most powerful among those tools was language. Greek and Roman magic included a number of activities to control the supernatural, natural, or chthonic deities and use their power to elicit a specific outcome. The spoken word, or the written word, were important elements in the achievement of such material outcomes. In a largely illiterate society, a magician’s mastery of writing and enunciation, as well as access to magical formularies, characters, and secret languages, enabled them to create an aura of mystery and expertise. This essay will discuss the importance of language – both written and oral – and illustrate how it was used to facilitate and increase the efficacy of magic.  
  
*Defixiones*, or curse tablets, are magical devices that are perhaps most associated with the power of language because their creation and deployment include the use of both the written and the spoken word. The tablets, usually made of lead, are inscribed with words, and sometimes images and symbols, and used in such a way as to complete the task for which they were created. *Defixiones* are associated with binding spells – spells that constrain, restrict, or pin-down a victim. The physical manifestation of the oral binding spell is the rolling up of the lead tablet, and pinning down the layers with a nail.[[1]](#footnote-1) The evolution of *defixiones* suggests an increased focus on the power of language. Earlier tablets contained just the name of the victim, and we might conclude that at that time the oral element – the incantation - dominated the ritual.[[2]](#footnote-2) Later tablets contain longer and more complex inscribed text, perhaps reflecting the original oral spell, almost as if the physical object represents a recording that will survive longer than speech alone.[[3]](#footnote-3)   
  
The manipulation of individual words and letters, and the formatting of inscriptions, played an important role in the creation and power of *defixiones*. Formatting, patterns, palindromes, and nonsensical words, among others, served to emphasise the required outcome of the binding spell and communicate with the deities the magician wished to command such as Hermes, Hekate, Persephone, or Hades. Words might be written back to front, or upside down, or in “’boustrophedon form’ i.e., with lines written alternatively from left to right and from right to left”, snaking across the page, to cause confusion in the victim, turn their thoughts upside down, or change their mind (Fig. 1).[[4]](#footnote-4) Such goals of “sympathetic confusion”, and where the name inscribed embodies a person, may also account for tablets on which the letters of a victim’s name are jumbled up.[[5]](#footnote-5) An example of twisted text is evident in an Attic tablet:

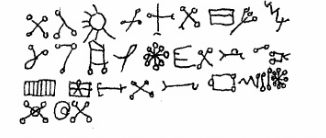
esehT   
all   
I bind   
seppihkrA seteniapE, etc.   
(‘These all I bind: Arkhippes, Epainetes, etc.’)[[6]](#footnote-6)

**  
Another explanation for the reversal of a victim’s name might be the potency of reversal. Another way in which reversal of norms is illustrated in Greco-Roman spells is the use of the matriarchal lineage when defining the exact identity of a victim, rather than the usual patriarchal lineage. Furthermore, the deities were understood to comprehend these muddled words and phrases while mere humans did not.  
*Fig. 1 – Defixio illustrating scrambled text (from ‘Gager – Curse Tablets and Binding Spells From the Ancient World’ p. 202)[[7]](#footnote-7)*  
  
Magical language also took the form of “ineffable” words that, while unintelligible to humans, were in a language the summoned god or daemon would understand.[[8]](#footnote-8) Called *voces magicae*, the best known are the *Ephesia grammata* of which the earliest known are *askion, kataskion, lix, tetrax, damnameneus, aision/aisia*.[[9]](#footnote-9) According to David Frankfurter, *Ephesia grammata* convey “power in its fixed and amuletic state”.[[10]](#footnote-10) *Ephesia grammata* formed a bond between the magician and the beings being summoned. Such was the power of the *Ephesia* *grammata* that they were also worn on the body or written on amulets as protection against spells.

Indeed, Gorgias of Leontini (ca. 485–380 bce), in his work ‘*Encomium of Helen*’ in which he defends her reputation following her treachery during the Trojan War, likens the effect of language to that of drugs:

The power of speech over the disposition of the soul is like the disposition of drugs (*pharmaka*) over the nature of the body. Just as different drugs drive out different humours from the body, and put an end either to disease or to life, so with speech: some words produce harm, others pleasure, others fear, while still others can embolden their listeners. Or again, by means of some harmful persuasion, words can bewitch (*pharmakeuein*) and thoroughly cast a spell (*ekgoeteuein*) over the soul.[[11]](#footnote-11)

It is through the dispensing of words and speech that magicians were able to illustrate their status as an intercessor between the powers being addressed and their client.  
  
The written language of magic did not always rely on words. Magical alphabets might consist of *charakteres*, symbols made up of lines with circles at their ends in various different configurations.

Fig. 2. Example of *charakteres*.[[12]](#footnote-12)

The use of *charakteres* was most likely to provide the item on which they were inscribed with additional visual power. They may also have impressed a magician’s client, in that they were indecipherable by the client, rendering them mysterious or only known among those with secret knowledge. In a similar way, symbolic sounds and vowel-only words and phrases were used in incantations. The magician might make animal noises or include “sighing, groaning, smacking of lips, taking a deep breath and letting it out with a hissing sound”.[[13]](#footnote-13) A witch referred to by the poet Tibullus is described as possessing “magical hissing”.[[14]](#footnote-14) The power and success of a spell was premised on the correct pronunciation and sounding of such words and sounds. Vowel-only words might also be represented visually in shapes, or representing objects, adding iconographic power to the curse. Another potential explanation for the use of vowel-only words, or other *voces magicae,* is the power afforded to them due to their foreignness or ancientness.   
  
A final consideration of language in Greek and Roman magic is the importance of repetition. Three, and numbers that can be divided by three, was considered a magical number within magical rituals and represented completeness or “all”.[[15]](#footnote-15) A phrase, word, or chant spoken three times, or an action performed three times, was considered to ensure a spell was correct and complete. This use of the number three can be observed in a passage from Virgil’s eight eclogue in which the character, Alphesiboeus, attempts to bind a lover using a magical ritual.   
  
 These triple threads of threefold colour first

I twine about thee, and three times withal

Around these altars do thine image bear:

Uneven numbers are the god's delight.

"Draw from the town, my songs, draw Daphnis home.

Now, Amaryllis, ply in triple knots

The threefold colours; ply them fast, and say

This is the chain of Venus that I ply.[[16]](#footnote-16)

The poet Tibullus, in this writings, refers to a witch who specifically commands that he carry out tasks three times to invoke a spell that will make his lover’s husband blind to their affair – “chant it three times; when finished, spit three times”.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Language – in terms of the written word and speech – is of great significance in Greek and Roman magic. The written word was used to strengthen oral spells which were ephemeral and give them a physical and enduring nature. Oral spells included precisely enunciated voces magicae, or magical words, lending a mysterious and “other” tone to the incantation. The manipulation of the written word served to further emphasise the action for which the spell was cast. By including both orally and written *voces magicae*, as well as the use of repetition, the spell caster could bolster the mysterious aspects of their craft. This set them apart from the uninitiated in a position of knowledge and reverence, while rendering lay persons dependent on their skills. For the tasks for which magic was needed, normal everyday language was not considered powerful enough, hence the adoption and evolution of magic-specific words, vocalisation, and vocabulary.

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