Late Antique Lamps with Defixiones

Attilio Mastrocinque

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. 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, 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)


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.

\textit{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, Antimeades. 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


torsos and limbs are twisted around for the same purpose.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.

\textit{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 (\textit{Figure 4}).\textsuperscript{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 \textit{lychnomanteion}, a prophetic sanctuary that employed lamps.\textsuperscript{11} But the case of the spring of Anna Perenna


\textsuperscript{11} Other important finds of lamps have been interpreted as remains of oracular practices. M. Petropoulos, \textit{Τα εργαστήρια των ρωμαϊκών λυχναριών 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 \textit{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. 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

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12 Theodoret *Haer.* 1.11 (*PG* 83.362).
belly (3.126.2), and orthodox Christianity shared the same frightening idea. 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 after-life of the damned.

A Nymphaeum was a water basin or a fountain; images of Nymphs or Charites often stood in the baths, and in fact the inscriptions of the Anna Perenna fountain mention the Nymphs. Many defixiones, in both pagan and Christian environments, claim to hand over their victims to watery Nymphs or goddesses of the sea. In pagan beliefs abduction by Nymphs and particularly plunging into a fountain, like the Salmacis at Halicarnassus, was thought of as an evil fate, as a metaphor for death, but sometimes also as a reception among divine beings. 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, and many Christian exorcisms sought to drive away sea demons such as

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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. Mihályi, “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.


Gorgo, Abysou, Aura, Antaura (sea winds). Other texts and amulets were thought to defend against female demons such as Gyllo, Alabasdria, Kera, etc. 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, but it has not been noted that in several cases lamps have also been found in the same pits and cisterns. Many examples are of little interest for our investigation, because of the early date of the lamps or their

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small number. 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; in a pit containing fill dating to the first to third centuries, 29 lamps and 2 defixiones; and in another pit dated late second/early third century, 2 lamps and more than 44 defixiones.

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. 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”; 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:

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25 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.


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: “.nio chiiiii.” 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:\footnote{PGM VII 593–619, transl. D. E. Aune, GMPT.}

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\footnote{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’OSTRACON THEIAEION nei papiri magici greco-egiziani,” in M. Capasso (ed.), Papiri letterari greci e latini (Galatina 1992) 291–307.} 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
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.\textsuperscript{34} Among the Hebraizing sect of Hypsistarians, lamps and fires were ignited as a central cultic practice for the Theos Hypsistos.\textsuperscript{35} In Mithraic ceremonies lamps were used to symbolise the light of Helios or Selene by being placed behind images of these gods.\textsuperscript{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\textsuperscript{37} as a symbol of the true faith which should shine to humankind, and called John the Baptist a blazing and shining lamp.\textsuperscript{38} Terms like \textit{neos phos} (new light) and \textit{photismos} were employed of recently baptized Christians and of baptism itself.\textsuperscript{39} Jesus said also that his followers should have light and life,\textsuperscript{40} and in obedience to this Christian lamps were made and inscribed with the words \textit{phos} and \textit{zoê}.\textsuperscript{41} St. Paul said, “you were once darkness and now you are light in the Lord.”\textsuperscript{42} Clement of Alexandria, commenting on this passage of Paul, argues that man was called \textit{photai} by the ancient authors.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{44} An oracle had prescribed that heads

\textsuperscript{34} F. Cumont, \textit{Lux perpetua} (Paris 1949) 48–51.
\textsuperscript{38} John 5:35.
\textsuperscript{40} John 8:12.
\textsuperscript{42} Eph. 5:8.
\textsuperscript{43} \textit{Paed.} 1.6 (PG 8.284B).
\textsuperscript{44} Macrobi.1.7.30–32: \textit{Apollini consecrata erectisque Dii sacello et Saturno ara, cujus festum Saturnalia nominarent, cumque diei humanis captibus Ditem et vinorum vi-
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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Università degli Studi di Verona
attilio.mastrocinque@univr.it
Fig. 1: Lamps from the fountain of Anna Perenna
Soprintendenza Archeologica di Roma
(Museo Nazionale Romano - Museo Epigráfico)
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