

The Two Senses of *Plinthion* as a Technical Term in the Greek Magical Handbooks

C.A. Faraone

Abstract: *The Greek noun πλινθίον appears four times in magical recipes in instructions about how to inscribe a series of magical words and there is a consensus that it refers to the “rectangle” produced when words are stacked in a column, and that the use of plinthion was similar to the use of two other technical terms to describe the outer dimensions of complicated word-designs, especially the kardia (“heart”) and the pterugma (“wing”), which both describe triangular formations of words or letters. In this article I argue that πλινθίον describes two different kinds of design: (i) “as a little brick” indicating that a word should be repeated row upon row “like a single brick”; or (ii) “as a hollow rectangle” describing how a string of magical words should be written along the edges of a rectangular curse-tablet “like a hollow frame” into which a curse is placed.*

Keywords: magical recipes, *plinthion*, design, magical words

The Greek noun πλινθίον literally means “little brick” but in non-magical texts it is frequently equated with πλαίσιον, an “oblong frame or case used in molding bricks” or a “hollow rectangle” used in military formations.¹ In magical recipes it appears only four times² and there is a long-standing scholarly con-

¹ LSJ s.vv. πλινθίον II and πλαίσιον.

² PGM IV 1305, PGM V 349 and 361, and PGM VII 656. The non-diminutive form *plinthos* (“brick”) appears many times in the handbooks to refer to clay bricks used (often in pairs) to create small altars for burning incense or small plinths for other kinds of ritual equipment; see LMPG s.v. *plinthos*, which also lists (s.v. *plinthion*) two fragmentary occurrences at PGM IV 3255 and 3262 where [*plinthi*]on is used to refer to a clay brick. In the forthcoming

sensus that in this context it refers each time to the “rectangle” or “square” that is produced by stacking words in a column.³ There is, moreover, a modern habit of using *plinthion* as a quasi-technical term to describe any similar stack of magical words.⁴ The rationale, in short, is that the entire column is so named because it resembles a single brick presumably one standing upright on its short side.

In the past this habit made sense, because we considered the use of *plinthion* to be similar to the scribal use of two other technical terms to describe the outer dimensions of complicated word-designs, especially the *kardia* (“heart”) and the *pterugma* (“wing”), which both describe triangular formations of words or letters, the former in the shape of a downward-pointing isosceles triangle and the latter in the shape of a downward-pointing right triangle. We have, therefore, assumed by analogy that when scribes used the word *plinthion*, they are also referring to the outer shape of a rectangular column of magical names. This is, in fact, incorrect and I will argue below that in the four places where the word appears in the formularies, it describes two very different and specific kinds of design: (i) “as a little brick” indicating that a single word should be repeated row upon row “like a *single* brick” in a wall of other similarly shaped words; or (ii) “as a hollow rectangle” describing how a longer string of magical words should be written along the edges of a square or

second volume of *GEMF* however, both readings have been changed to [*ostrak*]on.

³ LSJ s.v. *plinthion*. *GMPT* is inconsistent, translating it as “rectangle” at PGM V 349 and 361, as “square” at PGM IV 1305, and as “bricks” at PGM VII 656.

⁴ See, e.g., Kotansky’s comments on *GMA* 9, Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 61 n. 56 (“square”), Frankfurter, “Magic of Writing” 199–200, Gordon, “Shaping the Text” 85 (“lists of individual *onomata* arranged vertically, like a shopping list, and called a ‘rectangle’ [*plinthion*], lit. ‘little brick’), Mastrocinque, “Les formations géométriques” 7, Frankfurter, “Writing in Mediterranean Antiquity” 638–40, Faraone “Two Greek Recipes” 164–72, or Daniel and Hollmann, *Magica Levantina*, 33–35. In these general discussions, scholars sometimes include what seems to be a parallelogram version of this *plinthion* at PGM XIII 888–913 which is in fact called a “wing” (*pterygma*) in the recipe, not a *plinthion*, perhaps (as Kotansky suggests loc. cit) because it is composed of a pair of isosceles triangles attached side-by-side to one another, one pointing up and the other pointing down.

rectangular curse-tablet “like a hollow frame” into which a request - usually a curse - is placed.

1: *Plinthion* as a Magical Name in a Stack of Similar Magical Names

Scholars most often use the word *plinthion* to describe the final shape of a stack of magical words, especially the seven vowels, a stack which is generated by two different processes. The first method is to write each vowel seven times on seven consecutive lines, as we find at the end of a fourth-century CE recipe for an erotic curse, where the scribe illustrated (Figure 1) how the vowels were to be stacked against what is most probably an effigy of the female victim (*PGM* XXXVI 204–210):

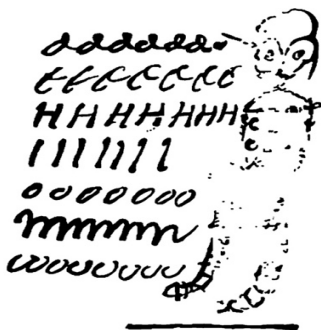


Figure 1: Seven Vowels on a Curse from a Magical Handbook⁵

A much later 5th–6th century CE papyrus amulet begins with the vowels in a similar pattern, although the scribe mistakenly put the *iotas* and the *omicrons* on a single line (*PGM* XLII):⁶

AAAAAAA
 EEEEEEE
 ÊÊÊÊÊÊÊ
 Ι Ι Ι Ι Ι Ι Ι Ο Ο Ο Ο Ο Ο Ο
 UUUUUUU

⁵ The drawing in Figure 1 is by Raquel Martín Hernández and it is used here with permission.

⁶ Below the stack of vowels are a series of symbols and below them some angel names.

ὀὀὀὀὀὀὀ

Another example is engraved on the back of hematite gem in Par-

ΑΕΗΙΟΥΩ
ΕΝΙΟΥΩΑ
ΗΙΟΥΩΑΕ
ΙΟΥΩΑΕΗ
ΟΥΩΑΕΗΙ
ΥΩΑΕΗΙΟ
ΩΑΕΗΙΟΥ

is that shows on its obverse Harpocrates being revered by various triplets of animals (*LIM* 30).

Figure 2: Seven Vowels on a Gold Foil Amulet from Vars, France⁷

The second and more popular way to generate a stack of vowels is to write all seven of them in the top line and then to repeat the same vowels six more times, each time shifting the first letter of the line to the end, as we can see in a gold foil amulet found in Vars, France (*GMA* 9), where this column of vowels was the sole content of the amulet (Figure 2).

In the magical handbooks, however, the scribes only use the word *plinthion* once to refer to a stack of vowels, in this case in the midst of a long invocation of Ursa Major spoken while burning an elaborate incense and presumably doing so under a night sky (*PGM* IV 1301–1307):

THŌZOPITHĒ Bear, greatest goddess, who rules the heavens, holding royal sway over the axis of the stars, highest, beautifully gleaming goddess, incorruptible element, composition of everything, all gleaming, harmony (1305) of all things, ΑΕĒΙΟΥŌ (in the shape of) a little brick, (you) who have taken a stand upon the axis, whom the lord god stationed to turn with your powerful hand the holy pole. (Add the) THŌZOPITHĒ formula.

By using the word *πλινθίον* after the vowels, instead of ὥς *πλινθίον*, the scribe seems to be equating ΑΕĒΙΟΥŌ to a brick, although most

⁷ The drawing is after Kopp, *Paleographia critica* 2.3.303 and reprinted as *GMA* 9.

editors and translators take it as a simile as we see it above: “ΑΕËΙΟΥÔ (in the shape of) a little brick.” But the problem remains that these two words (αειιουω πλινθιον) appear in the middle of a spoken invocation suggesting that this text was originally designed to be written down but was later reused as a text to be recited. It is unclear, however, which of the two forms of the vowel-stack was to be used in the original recipe.

The only other name or sequence that regularly appears in this format is the magical name EULAMÔ, which we find primarily on curse tablets. And like the string of seven vowels, it usually appears with a letter shifted in each iteration, for example, these magical names at the top of a lead curse of fourth-century CE date from Egypt (*SM* 57):⁸

EULAMÔ
ULAMÔE
LAMÔEU
AMÔEUL
MÔEULA
ÔEULAM

The word EULAMÔ appears only three times in the extant magical handbooks, on each occasion in recipes for curses,⁹ but never in this kind of stack. Until recently, this kind of column with shifted letters was limited to the vowels or EULAMÔ, but a recently published lead curse from Caesarea Maritima against legal opponents produces the same pattern with a much longer magical word of seventeen letters, BRAKRAKBABRAKBRA, which is repeated seventeen times with a shift of a single letter in each new line.¹⁰

It would seem, therefore, that scribes could use the phrase *hōs plinthion* narrowly to describe cases where the seven vowels or a sin-

⁸ A 3rd CE tablet of similar design was found in Carthage (*DT* 243) that has a corrupted version that begins with BULAMÔ and a fourth-century one from Oxyrhynchus has the same stack of names, which are commanded to bind various body parts of competitors in a footrace; see *SM* 53 and Gager, *Curse Tablets* no. 8. For other fourth-century examples, see also a curse tablet from Rome *DT* 172 (EULAMÔN), three more from Carthage (*DT* 243, 252, and 253).

⁹ *PGM* III 57 (spoken invocation), VII 410 (inscribed on a lead tablet) and IX 9 (inscribed on the back of a tablet).

¹⁰ Daniel and Hollmann *Magica Levantina* 31-37 no. 3

gle magical word were stacked up into columns, usually with a shift of a single letter at each level. But another fourth-century handbook shows us that this was not always true. It preserves a recipe for an insomnia-procedure, which instructs us to write on the wings of a bat two sequences of ten or eleven magical words *PGM VII* 652–660:¹¹

Write on its right wing: BÔPHÔR PHORBAPHORPHARBA PHÔRBÔR-PHORBA : PHORBA PHORBA PHORBA : BAPHAIÊ : PHÔ[RBA]PHÔR: BARBA [putting] one word under another one, [like] a small brick (ἐν ὑπὸ τὸ ἐν [τ]ι[θεῖς ὥς] πλινθίον) -- [add the usual, whatever] you want-- and on the left wing write this in the same pattern: “PHORPHÔR : PHORBA : BORPHOR : PHORBA: BORPHOR : PHORBAPHORPHOR : PHORB-ABÔR : BORBORBA : PHÔRPHÔRPHORBA”

The segments of these magical words – e.g. PHORBA, BORPHOR and PHORPHOR – are similar to each other in their length and sound and the instructions make it clear that we are to put one word under the other, a pattern which we can achieve more easily, if we hypothetically divide up them up into sets with four syllables:

RIGHT WING:

BÔPHÔR PHORBA
PHOR PHARBA
PHÔRBÔR PHORBA
PHORBA PHORBA
PHORBA BAPHAIÊ
PHÔ[RBA]PHÔR BARBA

LEFT WING:

PHORPHÔR PHORBA
BORPHOR PHORBA
BORPHOR PHORBA
PHORPHOR PHORBA
BÔR BORBORBA
PHÔRPHÔRPHORBA

In the Greek text, we see some signs of punctuation, especially for the left wing, but there are few correspondences between those divisions and the columns suggested above, with the exception of the final word on the left wing. But no matter how the scribe wished these names to be divided and stacked, it is clear that the simile [ὥς] πλινθίον refers to the manner in which each individual word is placed one upon another “like a brick” and not to the outer shape of the square or rectangle that is produced after all the words have been copied out.

This arrangement of very similar magical words may been

¹¹ This is the text and translation Raquel Martín Hernández in the forthcoming second volume of *GEMF*.

prompted by the desire to create a series of such word-columns, as we can see in the design for a subjugation curse that requires us to inscribe four such columns (*PGM* X 36–50):

			IÔCHCH
AEËIOUÔ	CHYCH	MICHAËL	NYSEU
EËIOUÔA	CHYCHBACHYCH	RAPHAËL	NYCHIEU
ËIOUÔAE	BACHACHYCH	GABRIËL	AÔCHË
IOUÔAEË	BACHAXICHYCH	SOURIËL	MECHEU
OUÔAEËI	BAZABACHYCH	ZAZIËL	IAÔ
UÔAEËIO	BADËTOPHÔTH	BADAKIËL	SABAÔTH
ÔAEËIOU	BAINCHÔÔÔCH	SYLIËL	ADÔNAI

The first column alone is outlined by the scribe and it comprises the by-now-familiar stack of the seven shifted vowels. The three other columns are also stacked with powerful names and second and third columns seem to imitate the first column by stacking words of nearly equal length and with similar, if not identical endings, for example, the ends of the names of the angels in the third column.¹²

We find a similar case of parallel columns on two curse tablets from the amphitheater in Carthage (*DT* 252–253), which seem to have been copied from the same handbook recipe. The columns are best preserved on the second example:

CHUCHBACH	EULAMÔ	IÔERBËTH
BAKACHUCH	ULAMÔE	IÔPAKERBËTH
BAKAXICHUCH	LAMÔEU	[I]ÔBOLCHOSËTH
BAZABACHUCH	AMÔEUL	IÔAPOMPS
	MÔEULA	
MANEBACHUCH	ÔEULAM	IÔPAKARTHARA
		IÔPATHNAX
BADETOPHÔTH	IABEZEBEBIÔ	IÔTONTOLIPS
BAINCHÔÔCH	IÔ IAÔ	OUBRIOULËM
	BEUZUTHIE	EULAMÔ

¹² The much shorter CHYCH in the first line of the second column stands out as an anomaly; perhaps it lost its prefix at some point in its transmission.

Here, too, we can see that each column is comprised of similar sounding words of similar length: in the center we see EULAMÔ again with its letters shifted in the usual way; on the right a version of the IÔERBÊTH formula, with each name starting with IÔ-;¹³ and on the left six of the seven words ending with CHUCH or CHÔÔCH. And if we look at only the first six words in each column, the lists become even more regular. It is of interest, too, that on this tablet (*DT* 253) the scribe seems to have left blanks in each of the columns, as if he sensed that something had dropped out of these sequences.

The first column is, moreover, very similar to the second column in *PGM* X 36–50 that was discussed just above:

<i>PGM</i> X 36–50	<i>DT</i> 253
CHYCH	CHUCHBACH
CHYCHBACHYCH	BAKACHUCH
BACHACHYCH	BAKAXICHUCH
BACHAXICHYCH	BAZABACHUCH
BAZABACHYCH	MANEBACHUCH
BADEÏTOPHÔTH	BADEÏTOPHÔTH
BAINCHÔÔÔCH	BAINCHÔÔCH

The most important clue to understanding why scribes used the simile *hōs plinthion* to describe this pattern of presentation lies in the fuller expression used in the recipe discussed earlier, where the simile likens each word to brick stacked one upon another and not to the final outline of the column of words (*PGM* VII 652–660): “[putting] one word under another one, [like] a small brick (ἐν ὑπὸ τὸ ἐν [τ]ι[θεῖς ὥς] πλινθίον).”¹⁴ The idea seems to be, as Mastrocinque saw many years ago, that these columns work on a basis different from that of the triangular “heart” and “wing” formations.¹⁵ In those triangular formations, he suggested, the name is dismantled one letter at a time as the sequence continues, until the word disap-

¹³ This formula is frequently written in this format, for example, in the following formularies: *PGM* III 71–79 (near the illustration) and *PGM* LVIII. It also appears in activated texts such as *DTA* 252, 253, SEG 40.921, O.Monts. Roca inv. 1472, and P.Baden V 134.

¹⁴ The translation in *GMPT loc. cit.* captures this idea nicely by changing the singular “brick” into the plural to catch the English idiom better: “put one word under another, like bricks.”

¹⁵ Mastrocinque “Les formations géométriques” 106.

pears, but the seven vowels in a column continually remain at full count and when their letters are shifted they multiply their power by manifesting different aspects of it.¹⁶ This ideal pattern is only strictly followed, of course, in the cases of AEËIOUÒ, EULAMÒ and the unique BRAKRAKBAKBRABRA, but in the other cases discussed above scribes seem to have extended this format by analogy to series of similar sounding names, like those of the principal angels or those in the IÒERBÈTH-*logos*.

2: The *Plinthion* as a Rectangle that Encloses a Powerful Speech Act:

Figure 3¹⁷

There are only two other appearances of the phrase *hós plinthion* in the Greek magical handbooks and they do not fit the pattern described above. They are both embedded in a long and complicated recipe in a fourth-century papyrus codex (*GEMF* 58/*PGM* V 304-339), which begins with instructions for an elaborate circular curse on a papyrus sheet and an illustration of it (Figure 3) and then adds

¹⁶ These triangular forms originally appeared on amulets and were “vanishing acts” designed to weaken diseases or demons and make them disappear from the patients, but they were eventually added to curses but without any idea of their original purpose; for discussion, see Faraone, *Vanishing Acts*, 1-16.

¹⁷ The drawing in Figure 1 is by Raquel Martín Hernández and it is used here with permission.

a different version of the design to be inscribed on a lead curse tablet. The first version runs as follows (*GEMF* 58/ PGM V 304-319):¹⁸

Take a hieratic papyrus -- or a lead sheet¹⁹ -- and an iron ring, put the ring upon the papyrus and trace the outline of the ring, inside and out, with a reed pen. Then ... inscribe the (magical) name into it²⁰ and the symbols outside of it,²¹ adding what you do not wish to happen on the inside²² as well as: "let his wits be bound, so that he may not do the NN deed." Then place the ring (back) on its own outline, which you made (earlier), and gathering up the parts (i.e. the ends of the papyrus) which are outside of the outline, tie up the ring with fibers(?), so that it is covered up. Prick holes along the symbols with the reed pen.

We are also told to recite one of two prose incantations, as we are binding up the package – the first if the victim is male and the second if she is female (320–332) – and then to bury it four fingers deep in the grave of someone untimely dead, whose ghost receives his own instructions to bind the victim (333–336).²³

The circular design illustrated in the handbook (Figure 3) cor-

¹⁸ This translation is based on the text and translation of Korshi Dosoo in the forthcoming second volume of *GEMF*.

¹⁹ The alternative medium of a lead tablet seems to have been added here after the second version of the recipe was appended to the first, because lead is not mentioned again until the instructions are given for the second version. That lead is not, in fact, a viable alternative for this first recipe is suggested by the use of a reed pen and ink to inscribe it, rather than the bronze stylus is usually mentioned in *GEMF* recipes for lead and other metal *lamellae*.

²⁰ The magical name is to be inscribed within the outline of the ring drawn on the papyrus, not on the ring itself, as in Figure 3.

²¹ The intended layout is shown in the drawing which appears in Figure 3.

²² The scribe mistakenly repeats ἔξωθεν ("outside"), but, as all editors have recognized, this should be emended to ἔσωθεν ("inside"), as shown in the image that accompanies the recipe (see Figure 3).

²³ "I bind NN regarding the NN thing; let him not speak, let him not be contrary, let him not face me, let him not speak against me, but let him be subject to me for as long as this ring is buried. I bind his mind and his heart, his resolution, his works, so that he will be sluggish before all people," and if it is a woman, "So that she, NN, may not marry him, NN" – (add the) usual – and then taking it away to the grave of one untimely dead, dig four fingers deep, put (it) in and say, "Corpse-daimon, whoever you happen to be, I hand over to you NN, so that he may not do the NN deed."

responds fairly well to the description quoted above, although the curse placed in the center is different: the recipe has the wish “for may his wits be bound, so that he may not do the NN deed”; whereas the curse in the drawing reads: “let whatever I wish not take place, let her, NN, not get married forever!” In both cases, however, the sympathetic action of the inscription seems to be the same: by encircling the text of the curse and the name of the victim within a long, powerful magical name the scribe first binds the victim textually and then does it again physically by wrapping the papyrus around the ring, tying it up, and then pricking the package with the reed pen.

The recipe goes on, however, to give a shorter and entirely new version of the name to be written within the traced outline of the ring (ll. 339–346):

This is what is written into the circle: ‘AROAMATHRA ERESCHIGALCH EDANTA IABOUNĒ AKĒ IAŌ DARUNKO MANIĒL, may the NN deed not be done, as long as this ring is buried.’ Bind it with bonds made from rope and in this way deposit it. The ring may also be put in a disused cistern or with an untimely-dead person.

This is, in fact, the beginning of the second version of the recipe, although the mention of the lead medium is delayed to the end. After this variant the scribe adds yet another set of names that are to be written below the tracing of the ring and in a different manner (*GEMF* 58/*PGM* V 347–355):

After the symbols write this too under the ring *hōs plintheion*: AR-CHOOŁ · LAILAM · SEMESILAMPH · AMMOPHORIŌN · IŌĀĒ · PTHOUTH · EŌ PHRĒ, the greatest daimon, IAŌ SABAŌTH ARBATHIAŌ LAILAM OS-ORNOPHRI EMPHRĒ PHRĒ PTHA CHRŌIŌ IAŌ BABOURĒ THIMANEPHRĒ RE NOUSI SABAŌTH BARBATHIAŌ THACHRA OUCHEETH ESORONŌPHRI, and the full fifty-nine (letters) (added: above), which you also write inside. –, which you (i.e. earlier) also wrote inside (of the ring).²⁴

²⁴ This refers to the IAEŌ-logos, which the scribe wrote at the very top of the folio in smaller letters and which we were told earlier to (ll. 309–310) “write in the circumference of the ring.” Here the text as it stands (ὄν καὶ ἔω ποιεῖς) tells us to write the *logos* (again) inside of the outline of the ring. This repeated command about the circle is either misplaced or (more likely) the verb ποιεῖς is a mistake for ἐποίησας and the scribe means (paraphrase): “inscribe the IAEŌ-logos, which you (i.e. earlier) also put inside (i.e., the outline of the ring).”

Immediately after this list, however, the scribe adds some important details about this variant of the procedure (*GEMF* 58/*PGM* V 356-357):

This same arrangement is written on a sheet of lead, and then, after placing the ring²⁵ inside (i.e., of the lead sheet), fold (it up) and plaster it. Below the lower *plinthion* and the *IAEÖ-logos*, also (add) this: BAKAXICHUCH MENEBAICHUCH ABRASAX AÖ, restrain the NN deed.”

Here at the end of the recipe, as sometimes happens, we are supplied with additional instructions that the scribe or his exemplar forgot to include earlier: namely that we are to use lead, rather than papyrus, cover it with plaster, and inscribe at the bottom of the lead sheet four additional names and the command “restrain the NN deed”.

This long recipe finally comes to an end with one more variant, one that (as we shall see) is crucial for understanding what the phrase *hōs plintheion* means in this recipe:

In the authentic version are found the names (ὥς δὲ ἐν τῷ αὐθεντικῷ εὐρέθη τὰ ὀνόματα):²⁶ “ARPHOOL LAILAM SEMESILAM IAEÖ-*logos* BAKAXICHUCH ABRASAX AÖ ARCHÓMILAK MENESILAM IAEÖ ΟΥΟ BAKAXICHUCH ABRASAX ΟΙΙ, bind the NN deed.”

We have seen, then, how these late-antique recipes can sometimes grow longer with the addition of each variant. In this case there are at least three of them:

- (i) an iron ring and a circular curse inscribed on a papyrus and then wrapped together as a package, tied with fibers(?), and then placed in a grave;
- (ii) an iron ring and a different circular curse inscribed on a lead tablet with some additional names written below the ring *hōs plintheion*; this is then tied together with rope, covered with plaster and placed in a cistern or a grave,
- (iii) a shorter version of the *hōs plintheion* text, one that the scribe

See the similar expression used above in the same recipe (ll. 314-15): θείς τὸν κρίκον ἐπὶ τὴν αὐτοῦ περιφέρειαν, ἣν ἐποίησας (“placing the circle upon the same outline which you have [i.e. already] made”).

²⁵ Reading ἐνθές for ἐνθεις

²⁶ This refers to some additional text that the scribe has consulted.

claims is *authentikos*, an adjective that can be translated as “original”, “principal”, “authoritative” or “autograph”.

But what exactly does the scribe mean when he directs us to write the additional names *hōs plintheion*? Modern editors have understandably translated the phrase “as a brick” or “as a rectangle” thinking that it refers to the process of stacking of the magical words in a column, as we saw earlier, although in this case we do not see the same pattern of similarly sized names that begin or end in a similar fashion.

As it turns out, four second- or third-century CE curse tablets from Roman Carthage show us that the simile *hōs plinthion* refers to an entirely different kind of design: we are to write the magical names so that they run along the edges of a curse tablet “like a hollow rectangle”, inside of which the curse itself is placed. Such a reading uses the alternate meaning of *plinthion* that was mentioned at the start of this article and that refers to the wooden frame used to make bricks. These lead curse-tablets were discovered together near the “Fountain of the Thousand Amphoras” in Carthage in a vase that had been submerged in a canal²⁷ and the best preserved are a pair of square tablets that are inscribed with nearly identical texts that begin with a series of magical names in the Greek alphabet and then end with a curse in Latin:²⁸

ARTHU LAILAM SEMESÊ[L]AM AEËIOUÔ BACHUCH BAKAXICHUCH MEN-
EBAICHUCH ABRASAX BAZABACHUCH MENE BAICHUCH ABRASAX, Lord
gods, hold, hold back the Falernian (baths), so that no-one can
approach that place; bind and bind up the Falernian baths from
this day, so that no-one approach that place.

Both tablets aim at restraining the Falernian baths, the presumed name of a nearby bathing establishment – perhaps with the goal of constricting the water flow and thereby ruining the business of the owners.

²⁷ Audollent, “Les inscriptions de la Fontaine” 119-20, Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 182 and Rives 197-98.

²⁸ Audollent, “Les inscriptions de la Fontaine” 129-31 nos. 3 and 4. Latin text of no. 3: *domini dei tenete, detinete Falernas nequis illoc accedere possit. Obligate, perobligate Falernaru balineu ab hac die nequis homo illoc accedat*; and Latin text of no. 4: *domini dei tenete, detinete Falernas nequis illoc eat lavarii. nodiate Falernas ab hac die. Obligate perobligate balineu Falernas nequis illoc ire possit ab hac die.*

Α Ρ Θ Υ Λ Α Ι Λ Α Μ Σ Ε Ξ
 Β Α Ι Χ Υ Χ Α Β Ρ Α Σ Α Χ Ε Β Α Ζ Ε Ι Α Μ Α Ε . . .
 Θ Ε Ι Τ Ε Ζ Ε Τ Ε Θ Ε Τ Ι Ν Ε Τ Ε Φ Α Λ Ε Ρ . . .
 Μ Ι Ν Ι Ν Ο Ι Λ Λ Ο Σ Ε Α Τ Λ Α Ν Α . . .
 Μ Ε Ν Ε Ο Ι Ε Ο Β Λ Ι Γ Α Τ Ε Ρ Ε Ρ Α Ι Χ Χ Α Χ Χ
 Α Κ Α Σ Ι Χ Υ Χ Μ Ε Ν Ε Γ Α Λ Ε Ρ Ν Ε Σ Ι Ν Ε
 Β Ρ Α Σ Α Σ . Θ Ο Μ Ι Ν Ι Ν Ο Ι Λ Λ Ο Σ Ε Α Τ Λ Α Ν Α . . .
 Α Κ Α Σ Ι Χ Υ Χ Μ Ε Ν Ε Γ Α Λ Ε Ρ Ν Ε Σ Ι Ν Ε
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Figures 4–5:
 Two Lead Curse Tablets from the “Fountain of the Thousand
 Amphoras”²⁹

The design of these tablets is, however, of most interest. As we can see in case of the square version (Figure 4), the scribe began by inscribing the magical names in the Greek alphabet, beginning in the top left corner of the tablet and then running twice around the edges. But then he ends his text in Latin by collectively addressing

²⁹ The drawings are after Audollent, “Les inscriptions de la Fontaine” (1933) nos. 1 (p. 122) and 3 (p. 129).

these Greek names as “lord gods” (*domini dei*) and then filling up the remaining space in the center with the Latin curse itself, which no longer rotates along the periphery, but is printed line by line. One can tell, moreover, that the frame of magical names was inscribed first, because the Latin text does not quite fill up the space left blank in the center.

Two other tablets were found in this same vase, but they curse charioteers, rather than the bath. The least damaged one is rectangular in shape (Figure 5) and has the same magical names wrapped around its edges, but it ends with a binding curse in Greek rather than in Latin: “ARTHU LAILAM SEMESELAM · AEËIOUÔ · BACHUCH · BAKAXICHUCH · MENEBAICHUCH ABRASAX · BAZABACHUCH · Lord gods, restrain (κατάσχετε)”³⁰ The punctuation between some of the magical words on this version shows, moreover, that it was copied from a handbook recipe.

The Greek magical names that run around the edges of these tablets from Carthage are, in fact, quite similar to the “authentic” version of the *hōs plintheion* text found in the *GEMF* 58 recipe:

ARTHU LAILAM SEMESELAM AEËIOUÔ BACHUCH BAKAZICHUCH
MENEBAICHUCH ABRASAX, BAZABACHUCH MENE BAICHUCH
Lord gods, hold, hold back (*tinete, detinete*)

Audollent “Les inscriptions de la Fontaine” nos. 3–4 (2nd–3rd CE)

ARTHU LAILAM SEMESELAM · AEËIOUÔ · BACHUCH · BAKAXICHUCH ·
MENEBAICHUCH ABRASAX · BAZABACHUCH · Lord gods, restrain (κατά-
σχετε)

Audollent “Les inscriptions de la Fontaine” no. 2 (2nd–3rd CE)

ARPHOOL LAILAM SEMESILAM IAEÔ-*logos* BAKAXICHUCH ABRASAX AÔ
ARCHÔMILAK MENESILAM IAEÔ OUÔ BAKAXICHUCH ABRASAX ÔII, re-
strain (κατάσχεσ)

GEMF 58 363–368, the “authentic” version (4th CE)³¹

³⁰ Audollent, “Les inscriptions de la Fontaine” 121–28 nos. 1 and 2. No. 1 is square and preserves just enough of the edge and center to establish this pattern. No. 2 (quoted in the main text) one is more than twice as large and rectangular in shape (13 x 17 cm). The spiraling text aims to bind the horses of the blue team and the drivers, of whom only the single name Strabonianus survives. The magical names and the curse are, moreover, repeated twice in the successive rotations.

³¹ I note briefly that the “inauthentic” first version of the *hōs plintheion* text

The format of the curses from the Fountain of the Thousand Amphoras confirms, therefore, this different understanding of the phrase *hōs plintheion*, which in *GEMF* 58 recipe must mean to write the magical names along the periphery of a lead tablet “as a hollow rectangle”, in that case one placed beneath the circular design. Such an arrangement makes sense in the wider context of the recipe, because like the circular design it is composed of a series of magical names, which surround the curse itself and the victim’s name.

3: Conclusion:

Although scholars have long understood the term *hōs plintheion* to refer to the outer shape of upright stacks or columns of magical words, we have seen that this word is used only four times in the papyrus formularies, and, when it is used, it refers to two different phenomena. The first is when a single magical name, usually *AEËIOUÔ* or *EUMALÔ*, is stacked up like one brick upon another, each time with a shift of the first letter to the end. In the *PGM* VII recipe, however, the phrase *hōs plintheion* referred to a series of different magical words built around the stem *PHORBA*, which were similar enough in their length and endings to encourage the same kind of treatment, an assimilation process that was nicely illustrated, as we saw, for example, when seven angel names were stacked in parallel with the seven-vowel sequence (*PGM* X 36–50) or when the names of the *τÔERBÊTH-logos* were lined up with six variations of *EULAMÔ* (*DT* 252–253).

The outlier in this group was the use of *hōs plintheion* and then *plintheion* in the same complicated curse recipe in *GEMF* 58, where they referred not to a single word or a stack of them, but rather to a hollow frame of words running along the edges of a rectangle. It would be interesting to know where this second technique was invented. The chronology is important: the four curses discovered near the “Fountain of the Thousand Amphoras” in Carthage were inscribed a century or more earlier than the papyrus recipe, and

begins and ends with a very similar set of magical words and curse: *ARKHOOL LAILAM SEMESILAMPH* (349-50) and *IAEÔ-logos BAKAXICHUCH MENEBAICHUCH ABRASAX AÔ*, restrain (κατάσχες) the NN deed” (361-63).

the punctuation of the magical names on one of them suggests that they were themselves prepared from a recipe book that was even earlier. The repeated use of lead, moreover, and the verb κατέχειν in the *GEMF* 58 recipe, in the Carthaginian curses, and in a similar tablet from fourth-century Rome (see Appendix), all suggest a common recipe that was first invented in Carthage and that by the fourth century CE it had eventually made it way to both Egypt and Rome. This suggestion is supported by recent studies that have shown that Roman Carthage seems to have the home of an innovative group of scribes, whose work also shows up in the papyrus handbooks of Egypt.³²

University of Chicago
cf12@uchicago.edu

³² See, e.g., Daniel, “Magical Square-Spiral” and Sánchez Natalías, “More Magical Square-Spirals” for the “square spiral” design, Németh, “*Charaktères* on Curse Tablets” for the uniqueness of Carthaginian *charaktères*, Faraone, “Labyrinth Design” and Faraone, “Curse-Tablet Recipes of *PGM VII*”, the last for evidence that a block of text from a papyrus handbook from Egypt (*PGM VII*) may have been written in North Africa and even in the area of Carthage.

Appendix: A Further Parallel from 4th-Century Rome:

A similar version of the magical names found in Carthage and in *PGM* V appears on a single fourth-century CE lead curse tablet from Rome that was composed entirely in Greek, rolled up and pierced with a nail. It was inscribed on the obverse with a brief curse that aims to block the sale of a slave woman and then on the reverse, with a different curse that aimed at preventing the same slave from being sent to a workhouse:³³

ARTHU · LAILAM · SEMISILAM · BACHUCH · BACHAXICHUCH MENEBAI-
CHUCH · ABRASAX, lord gods, restrain (κατάσχετε) the matron of
the workhouse, Clodia Valeria Sophrone, and do not let her drag
Poletoria (as a workhouse laborer) to suffer(?) the fate of lifeless-
ness(?)....

This version follows the pattern that we saw in all of the curses from the canal: the lead medium and a short text that aims at restraint and that invokes all of the magical names as “lord gods” asking in Greek rather than Latin that they bind the victim. The scribe who produced the fourth-century Roman version did not, however, inscribe the magical names along the periphery of the tablet, but rather he wrote them out line-by-line as is typical of most lead curse tablets. He did, however, separate most of them with punctuation, just as we saw in the all Greek curse from Carthage (Figure 5).

Abbreviations of Magical Corpora:

- DT* = A. Audollent, *Defixionum Tabellae*. Paris, 1904.
- GMA* = R. Kotansky, *Greek Magical Amulets*. Vol. 1. Papyrologica Coloniensia 22.1. Opladen, 1994.
- GEMF* = C.A. Faraone and S. Torallas Tovar, eds. *Greek and Egyptian Magical Formularies: Text and Translation*. Vol. 1. Berkeley, 2022.
- GMPT* = H.D. Betz, ed. *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation, Including the Demotic Spells*. Chicago 1986.
- LIM* = A. Mastrocinque, ed. *Les intailles magiques du département des Monnaies, Médailles et Antiques*. Paris, 2014.
- PGM* = K. Preisendanz [and A. Henrichs], *Papyri Graecae Magicae: Die Griechischen Zauberpapyri*. 2 vols. 2nd ed. Stuttgart, 1973–1974.
- SM* = R. Daniel and F. Maltomini, *Supplementum Magicum*. 2 vols. Papyrologica Coloniensia 16.1 and 2. Opladen, 1990 and 1991.

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