

**The Amathous Curse Tablets (British Museum inv. 1891, 4-11) and PGM VII  
(British Library Pap. 121):  
Evidence for Ritual Exchange Between Egypt and Cyprus<sup>\*1</sup>**

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**Abstract**

Discovered in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and subsequently acquired by the British Museum, the cache of over 200 lead and selenite tablets from Cyprus is one of the largest archives of curses from antiquity. Three features of the cache suggest connections with magical texts known from Egypt, including PGM VII: references to a «muzzling deposit», the use of *charaktêres*, and an invocation to Chthonic deities. This paper analyzes these elements to explore the mechanisms by which magical knowledge may have been transmitted in the Mediterranean.

**Keywords**

Magical Papyri, Curse Tablets, Ritual

**Introduction**

In 1891, a significant number of lead and stone artifacts entered the collections of the Greek and Roman Department of the British Museum, facilitated by A.S. Murray, Keeper of Greek and

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<sup>1</sup> I first owe thanks to Elisabeth O’Connell, Curator of Byzantine World, Egypt and Sudan at the British Museum who organized the panel, encouraged my participation, and provided useful comments on my work. I am indebted to the British Library and the British Museum for allowing me to study P.Lond. 121 and the selenite tablets from Cyprus, respectively. At the British Museum, Thomas Kiely, Curator of the Cyprus Collection, was instrumental in providing access to the Amathous tablets and archival material related to them. This paper also benefitted from the comments from fellow participants at the Curses in Context IV conference, organized by Christopher Faraone and Sofia Torallas Tovar. Chris Faraone provided me with earlier versions of his research, for which I am grateful. Jessica Lamont provided suggestions for my reading of selenite tablet BM 1891, 4-18. 44. I owe thanks, too, to the anonymous reviewer of this work, who provided useful comments and bibliography. I also wish to acknowledge the Thomas F. Cooper ’78 Endowed Classics Faculty Support Fund and the Jody L. Maxmin Classics Department Faculty Support Fund at Oberlin College, which aided my research in London ’71. The following abbreviations are used throughout this paper: DTAud = Audollent 1904; Gager = Gager 1992; SGD = Jordan 1985; NGD = Jordan 2000; Mitford = Mitford 1971. A longer study of this material will be published as Wilburn 2021.

Roman Antiquities. Three years earlier, in 1888, the museum had accessioned a group of papyri purchased by Wallis Budge from Messrs. Bywater, Tanqueray and Co. that included a long papyrus roll designated as Papyrus 121.<sup>2</sup> Each collection was soon published; Louise McDonald presented a critical edition of seventeen of the lead tablets in 1891, while Carl Wessely and F. G. Kenyon each produced an edition of the papyrus in 1893.<sup>3</sup> Although not discovered in the same archaeological context, the analysis of these two separate accessions can demonstrate the value of bringing together early purchases from the British Library and the British Museum to illuminate the shared cultural context of the Roman Mediterranean.

The British Museum accession from Cyprus included more than 230 objects, with 200 lead sheets and numerous inscribed pieces of selenite, a translucent form of gypsum. In the same year as the British Museum acquisition, fragments of selenite tablets were acquired by the Bibliothèque nationale de France; Jordan has suggested that most fragments in the London have a corresponding piece in Paris.<sup>4</sup> Three features of the Amathous tablets suggest correspondences with spell instructions preserved in formularies associated with Graeco-Roman Egypt, including P.Lond. Pap. 121 (PGM VII), currently in the British Library. Many of the lead and selenite tablets possess internal references to a «muzzling deposit», a spell type associated with PGM VII. *Charaktêres* have been inscribed in multiple places on the selenite tablets and can be distinguished along the lower preserved edge of some of the lead tablets. One tablet shows direct correspondence with a ritual text known from another papyrus formulary, PGM IV, likely from the Theban region of Egypt. This paper explores the features of these artifacts that illuminate the movement of ritual knowledge through the Mediterranean, investigating the evidence for transmission and positing a network through which magical knowledge may have spread.

### The Lead and Selenite Tablets from Amathous

The archaeological context of the find can be reconstructed from archival letters and early publications.<sup>5</sup> Some of the selenite tablets show evidence that they were mounted on the walls of the shaft, as one preserves suspension holes and others show the remains of gypsum. The lead tablets were rolled up and a number were punched through with nails. Cecil Smith, who was the Assistant Keeper at the time of the acquisition, recounts that «the leaden tablets were mostly folded in three

<sup>2</sup> Dosoo 2016, 265. This purchase included P.Lond. 121 (PGM VII = TM 60204); P.Lond. 122 (PGM VIII = TM 59324); P.Lond. 123 (PGM IX = TM 64577); P.Lond. 124 (PGM X = TM 64532); P.Lond. 125 (PGM XI a = TM 64578). Dosoo convincingly has made the case that PGM VII, PGM VIII and PGM XIa all belong to an archive from Hermonthis.

<sup>3</sup> P.Lond. 121: Wessely 1893; Kenyon 1893. Critical editions of the tablets have been published numerous times: MacDonald 1891; DTAud nos. 23-37; Wünsch 1900, nos. 10-12; Robert 1936, 106-107; Mitford 1971 nos. 127-142; Jordan 1994; López Jimeno 2001, nos. 273-289.

<sup>4</sup> Jordan 1994, 136.

<sup>5</sup> Wilburn 2012, 178-184; Wilburn 2020, 115-116.

and nailed to the wall».<sup>6</sup> Smith sketches an image of a deep shaft bristling with lead and selenite tablets; practitioners must have descended the shaft to put the tablets in place.<sup>7</sup> Internal evidence from the inscriptions underscores the contextual relationship between the two types of artifacts. Both employ spellings as well as magical names that seem to be locally significant.

The majority of the lead tablets likely were created with reference to a single formulary text, into which the names of the commissioner and victim or victims were inserted. Multiple hands are evident. The written spell opens with a metrical passage, invoking «*daimones* under the earth» and refers to the tablet as a muzzling deposit. Divine names are scattered throughout, incorporating both well-attested *voces magicae* – magical words – as well as others that may be of local origin.

Fragments of around 30 selenite tablets are currently in the British Museum and the Bibliothèque nationale de France. These artifacts have seen only limited publication. Four small fragments were published by Wunsch.<sup>8</sup> One tablet, 1891, 4-11. 50, begins with a lengthy invocation to chthonic deities. The text instructs the divinities to «necessitate, accomplish this muzzling spell ...»<sup>9</sup> D. Jordan and P. Aupert published a translation and photograph of an additional selenite tablet from the Bibliothèque nationale against Philodemos, son of Hedeneto.<sup>10</sup> The inscription includes a variety of *charaktêres* as well as numerous divine names and magical invocations.

My analysis has suggested that there is greater variation among the inscribed selenite tablets.<sup>11</sup> Like the lead examples, the tablets include invocations to *daimones* and to chthonic deities, among them, Chthonic Hermes, who is invoked on tablet 1891, 4-11. 56. The selenite tablets incorporate extensive use of *charaktêres*, strings of which are repeated across multiple tablets. *Voces magicae* and divine names are also replicated over the tablets. Like the lead tablets, multiple hands can be distinguished. I have identified passages that are repeated on several tablets, indicating that the selenite tablets used at least one formulary spell.

Smith's brief description of the archaeological context suggests that the selenite sheets were discovered below the lead tablets, perhaps indicating that the selenite artifacts predated the lead ones. Features of the inscriptions and shared characteristics of the tablets, however, suggest that they were the products of the same collective of practitioners, who drew upon a wide range of ritual practices to create these artifacts. The instructional spell recorded at British Library Pap. 121 (PGM VII) 396-404, which refers to itself as a «muzzler» and incorporates numerous *charaktêres*, provides a useful point of reference for the study of the tablets. Although the spell preserved in PGM VII cannot be

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<sup>6</sup> Smith 1892, 542, n. 1.

<sup>7</sup> On ritual deposition, see Schiffer 1987, 47-98; Walker 1995.

<sup>8</sup> Wunsch 1900, 245-246 = DTAud 18-21.

<sup>9</sup> SEG 44.1279 (NGD 115). Trans. Jordan 1994, 136.

<sup>10</sup> Aupert / Jordan 1994.

<sup>11</sup> It is unclear why the practitioners used different materials for the tablets. Further work on the inscriptions may indicate that the materials had different functions, or that the material changed over time. The practice of display echoes votive offerings or ritual artifacts, as at the temple of Demeter at Knidus. Newton 1863, 724. See Wilburn 2020, 127-128.

construed as a model for the Amathous artifacts, the papyrus formulary highlights the interconnected nature of magical practice in the Mediterranean, which likely included the circulation of short recipe components.

### **The Chthonic Invocation on British Museum Tablet 1891, 4-18. 50 and PGM IV**

Tablet 1891, 4-18. 50 includes a lengthy invocation to Chthonic deities, naming the divinities in a series. D. Jordan first identified close correspondences between this tablet and a spell preserved in the so-called Great Magical Papyrus of Paris, P.Bib.Nat. Supp. gr. No. 574 (PGM IV) 1390-1495, entitled «A love spell of attraction with the help of heroes or gladiators or those who have died a violent death».<sup>12</sup> In the spell recorded in the PGM, the practitioner is enjoined to speak an invocation over small pieces of bread. Should this ritual fail, a secondary rite is provided, in which the practitioner is told to call upon a series of underworld deities, each designated by the epithet «chthonic». A number of scholars have suggested that this lengthy chthonic invocation, which is distinct from the main rite, should be viewed as a discrete ritual fragment that was appended to the love spell. Jordan proposed that the metrical invocation may derive ultimately from Greek lamentations spoken over the dead.<sup>13</sup>

Comparison between the Amathous tablet and the Egyptian instructional text reveals the absence of certain names in the PGM spell, including Demeter and Persephone, perhaps representing the choice of the Egyptian practitioner to downplay the presence of Greek divinities. C. Faraone has proposed that the chthonic inscription is evidence of the circulation of short recipes – invocations or spells – around the Mediterranean. Such spells might have been collected in compilations like PGM XXXVI, or incorporated into longer, narrative style spells that are found in some of the longer handbooks, such as PGM IV.<sup>14</sup>

The Chthonic invocation was employed at Amathous as the primary mechanism for muzzling an opponent; this same component had served a different purpose in the Egyptian formulary, where it was used to compel the affection of a victim. Tablet 1891, 4-11. 50 is the only artifact that employs this formula, but it illustrates how ritual components and invocations, sometimes divorced from their original religious or magical contexts, may have moved around the Mediterranean, where local practitioners repurposed them to fit local ritual procedures.

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<sup>12</sup> Jordan 1994, 141-143.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, 139.

<sup>14</sup> Faraone forthcoming-b.

## Muzzling

The texts on the lead tablets refer to themselves by the terms *φιμωτικὸν κατάθεμα* and *παραθήκη φιμωτική*, a «muzzler-deposit» and a «muzzling deposit» (DTAud 22, lines 22 and 39).<sup>15</sup> Selenite tablet 1891, 4-18. 50 calls itself a «muzzler» and the word can be reconstructed on one of the other selenite tablets in the cache, 1891, 4-18. 40 (Figure 1). To my knowledge, only three other curse tablets use variations on the verb *φιμώω*, to muzzle, or refer to themselves as «muzzlers». One is a tablet from Cyprus, SEG 59. 1619, in which «muzzler» has been reconstructed.<sup>16</sup> Two others are from Syria-Palestine: one, from Syria, requests that the mouth be muzzled, while the other, from Beth Shean, requests that the targets be muzzled.<sup>17</sup>

P.Lond. Pap. 121 (PGM VII) includes a spell at lines 396-404 entitled «A muzzler, and a charm for subjecting and possessing», which provides instructions for the creation of a tablet from a lead cold water pipe. The inscription to be written on the lead tablet contains a series of *charaktêres* and magical phrases without any discernible Greek words. Like the chthonic inscription preserved in PGM IV, described above, the muzzling spell may have been incorporated into the longer spell manual from another geographic location. PGM VII includes four discrete sections differentiated by paragraph markings and other scribal features, elements that attest to the compilation of the text from component parts.<sup>18</sup> C. Faraone recently has argued that two features of the section that includes the muzzler indicate that the spells in PGM VII may have originated in a coastal location: the injunction that practitioner use seashells, most notably in the love charm at PGM VII 300 a-310 and the charm to induce insomnia at 374-376, and the occasional requirement that the practitioner deposit the power objects in the sea. PGM VII, in contrast, is attributed to Hermonthis, which lies many miles from the Mediterranean. Faraone has suggested the coast of North Africa as a possible point of origin for these rites.<sup>19</sup> Like the text preserved on selenite tablet 1891, 4-11. 50, the individual responsible for compiling PGM VII likely incorporated ritual procedures developed and used in a different geographical location, providing further evidence for the transmission of individual spell components or smaller collections of spell instructions.

The use of the term *φιμωτικόν* in the title of the spell may indicate that muzzlers were considered a specific kind of ritual act. The verb *φιμώω* and its variants appear in other formulaic texts from Egypt.<sup>20</sup> In PGM XXXVI 161-77, a spell manual associated with the Fayum that likewise demonstrates the compilation of discrete spells, the practitioner is enjoined to speak the imperative

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<sup>15</sup> Jordan 1994, 143 n. 34. *φιμώω*, to muzzle, or silence, and its variants, is used more commonly beginning in the first and second centuries A.D., providing another clue to dating the cache.

<sup>16</sup> SEG 59. 1619. Giannobile 2009.

<sup>17</sup> Apheca (Fiq) Syria: DT 15 = translated as Gager 4; Beth Shean: SEG 35.155, translated as Gager 77.

<sup>18</sup> Martín Hernández 2015, 160-161.

<sup>19</sup> Faraone forthcoming-a.

<sup>20</sup> See commentary on P.Oslo I, 1 (= PGM XXXVI), line 164. Eitrem 1925, 77-78; Maltomini 2004.

phrase «muzzle the mouth». A reference to a muzzler also can be found in a fragmentary manual, PGM XLVI, of unknown provenance.<sup>21</sup> The *Cyranides* suggest that the tongue of the chameleon can be used as part of a  $\phi\mu\omicron\kappa\acute{\alpha}\tau\omicron\chi\omicron\nu$ , or spell to silence or muzzle; the tongues of the hyenas, seals and weasels could be used in similar fashion.<sup>22</sup>

Two gemstones, one from Afghanistan, and the other from Rome, were inscribed with nearly identical recipes intended to muzzle an opponent. One of the inscriptions reads «This is the spoken incantation: ABAICHŌPMUID. Muzzle NN, whom NN bore, so that he might not object to me in anything that I object to him».<sup>23</sup> The gemstone begins with an instructional text, and includes placeholders for the victim of the spell. Although Jordan has argued that the inclusion of the phrase «this is the spoken logos» is a copying mistake, it is more likely that each of these gemstones was intended to be used as a model text, one that could be tailored or expanded for the performance of a ritual for a client; alternatively, the owner of the gem could use the artifact to silence an opponent. At least three *ostraka* are known that were used as small, portable artifacts to record instructional texts; these include instructions for warding off a scorpion sting, for the production of an amulet, and one used for medical purposes.<sup>24</sup> A gemstone used to transmit a ritual recipe is known from Gorgippia, a Greek city on the Black Sea, in which prescriptions for ailments of the head are preserved.<sup>25</sup> These artifacts suggest that short recipes and spell components existed and may have been exchanged outside of the larger ritual handbooks. Specialized muzzling rites link the Cypriot tablets to activated curse tablets and manuals known from the Levant, Egypt, and North Africa, as well as Rome and Afghanistan.

### *Charaktêres*

Signs known as *charaktêres* are prominent on many of the selenite tablets and appear on a number of the lead ones. On selenite tablet BM 1891, 4-18.40 (Pl. 1), a margin is present at the top of the

<sup>21</sup> Brashear suggests that a spell to muzzle the mouth was recorded on one of the sheets of the *codex miscellaneus* BGU IV 1024-1027, which includes proceedings, receipts, and records for the *annona militaris*. The instructional text is brief (lines 23-25) and is directed at the mouth of a woman. Brashear 1980, 20. The most recent edition of the text has proposed another reading that would view this passage as a love spell. Poethke / Prignitz / Vaelske 2012, 115, 117.

<sup>22</sup> *Cyranides* II 43; Maltomini 2004, 149. Hyena: *Cyranides* II 40; seal: *Cyranides* II 41; weasel: *Cyranides* II 7. Maltomini 2004, 150 and n. 19.

<sup>23</sup> Jordan 2002.

<sup>24</sup> Martín Hernández and Torallas Tovar note three examples: SuppMag II 89 (TM 69046); SuppMag II 68 (TM 64128); O.Crum 487 (TM 83376). Martín Hernández / Torallas Tovar 2014, 797. See also the example from Karanis cited in Wilburn 2012, 123-125.

<sup>25</sup> The amulet includes on its reverse side a listing of parts of the head with corresponding magical words or symbols. Faraone has argued that the gemstone was intended to be a handbook used by a practitioner to recall the appropriate symbol to relieve pain in a complainant. Faraone 2010, 108-109. A magical gem against a wandering womb, formerly in the Abbey of St. Geneviève (Campbell Bonner Database of Magical Gems, CBd-2925), includes the place-marker  $\delta\epsilon\iota\nu\alpha$  within an incantation. The gem may have served as an instructional text for a practitioner, or the owner may have substituted her name in reciting the incantation. Compare Bonner 1950, 50.

preserved fragment before a line of *charaktêres*; the magical symbols are larger than the Greek text that follows. An additional, shorter line of *charaktêres* is present in line four. The same series of signs appears on 1891, 4-18.45. A different line of *charaktêres* appears on the tablet from the Bibliothèque nationale, published by Aupert and Jordan. A similar pattern is found on tablet 1891, 4-18.51 (Pl. 2) and a smaller number of this series appears on tablet 1891, 4-18.59.8. On three tablets, 1891, 4-18.44 (Pl. 3), 1891, 4-18.46, and 1891, 4-18.59.48, a series of three large signs is visible. In each of these cases, the *charaktêres* have been integrated into the line of Greek text. Damage at the bottom of most of the lead tablets has obscured the writing, but in some cases the inscription is legible. On lead tablet 1891, 4-11.1, a few *charaktêres* are visible in the last line. *Charaktêres* are also visible on lead tablet 1891, 4-11.11. The repetition of certain signs, often in the same order, across the corpus of tablets suggests that the use of these *charaktêres* was locally meaningful.

Although the diversity of the *charaktêres* known from other locations has suggested to some scholars that the signs largely were improvised, the strict and precise repetition of certain signs on the Amathous tablets indicate that these were significant to the practitioner who created the artifacts.<sup>26</sup> In the wider Mediterranean, there are few instances in which the same *charaktêres* appear on multiple artifacts.<sup>27</sup> Where repetition occurs, it is likely that either the same practitioner is responsible, or, if multiple hands are evident, that a group of practitioners was utilizing a common manual or, at the very least, a shared collection of power signs.<sup>28</sup> The *charaktêres* found on the Amathous tablet include some features that are attested elsewhere, particularly in the use of modified Greek letters with bulbs on the ends of their vertices, as power signs. Specific parallels can be identified between the Amathous tablets and the muzzling spell found in P.Lond. Pap. 121 (PGM VII) 396-404. Two non-alphabetic symbols are shared between the tablets and the papyrus: a sign similar to an hourglass and a series of three vertical lines with bulbs on either end. Both the formulary text and the selenite artifacts also include Greek letters that have been turned sideways or inverted.

While the similarities between signs found on the Amathous tablets and PGM VII may be explained through chance, the employment of *charaktêres* on a curse tablet may represent a more significant choice. Gordon has suggested that *charaktêres* were used on magical artifacts as a means of protection to ward off demonic forces; their inclusion in malign magic appears to be more limited.<sup>29</sup> Curses that employ *charaktêres* are known from Hadrumetum, Carthage, Rome, and the Levant, where they are often linked to chariot racing.<sup>30</sup> In a tablet from Apameia, Syria, the *charaktêres* are

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<sup>26</sup> Improvised *charaktêres*: Frankfurter 2019, 650; Gordon 2011, 20. Intentional use: Dzwiza 2015, 49. K. Dzwiza is currently building a much-needed comprehensive inventory of the magical signs, which will permit systematic analysis of the distribution of the symbols.

<sup>27</sup> Dzwiza 2015, 33 and fn. 18.

<sup>28</sup> Németh 2011, 102.

<sup>29</sup> Gordon 2011, 23-24.

<sup>30</sup> Ibidem, 25; Gordon 2002; Németh 2013, 49-50.

invoked as holy powers to bind the targets of the spell, who are charioteers.<sup>31</sup> In this case, a ritual practice – the use of magical signs as a component of aggressive rituals – may have been transmitted between ritual specialists. Although further research is necessary, the distribution of *charaktères* employed in binding appears to map onto the incidences of muzzling spells, perhaps suggesting that these ritual traditions travelled in tandem.

### **Conclusion: Ritual Exchange and Knowledge Networks**

Practitioners at Amathous employed a formulary that included multiple model texts, which they consulted to inscribe the lead and selenite artifacts that are now in the British Museum and the Bibliothèque nationale de France. The comparisons between the Amathous tablets and P.Lond. Pap. 121 that have been presented within this paper do not argue for direct transmission of magical knowledge, but rather for multiple, diffuse patterns of exchange. Ritual technologies could spread as short, discrete components or elements, and this may have been the form in which Amathous specialists encountered and subsequently adopted magical techniques. Direct textual transmission can be noted in the inscription found on tablet 1891, 4-18.50 and PGM IV. The Amathous practitioners appear to have adopted a specific spell type – a muzzler – to bind the targets of the ritual act. Technical processes, too, may have been incorporated into the rites at Amathous, as practitioners integrated *charaktères* in line with the ritual invocations. The ritual technologies employed at Amathous are known from diverse areas of the Mediterranean, ranging from Egypt and the coast of North Africa to Rome, the Levant, and even Afghanistan.

Social networks and actor network theory can offer one framework for analyzing the transmission of knowledge and cultural practices. While innovation and the adoption of new technology is rooted within the local environment, social ties between individuals might extend a knowledge network outward, oftentimes over long distances and between different spheres of cultural life.<sup>32</sup> Transportation, movement and trade are critical in the spread of technical expertise. The ancient world was connected by maritime routes, and Amathous, situated along the southern coast of Cyprus, derived much of its historical importance from its port; the site is situated at a nexus of multiple routes that might have exchanged both goods and ritual technology. These processes may have taken numerous forms, including indirect means not connected with ritual specialists, such as trade and exchange of published text editions or ritual artifacts. Alternatively, ritual specialists may have

<sup>31</sup> Tremel 2004, 108, no. 17; Gager 1992, 57, no. 6.

<sup>32</sup> Dobres 2014, 202-203; Collar 2013, 9. On ritual exchange, see Harrison 1993.

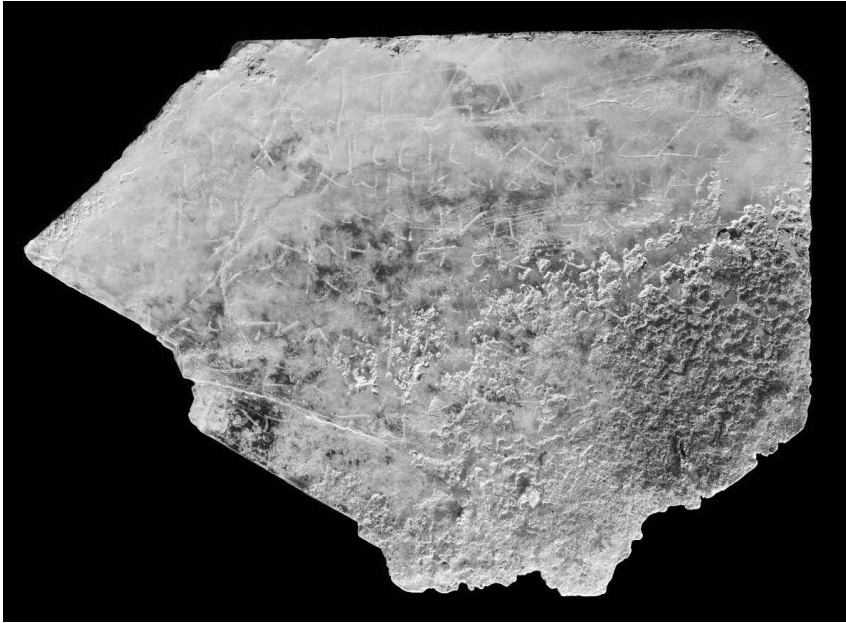


facilitated knowledge transfer through private correspondence or as they moved from place to place, either as itinerant «holy men» or as priests or functionaries associated with local temples or shrines.

The cache of tablets from Amathous, remarkable for the number of curses, attests to the active manufacture of ritual artifacts at the site. Studied in conjunction with other ritual products from diverse locations in the Mediterranean, most notably British Library Pap. 121, the artifacts reveal evidence for knowledge transmission and exchange. The Amathous tablets in the British Museum and the magical papyri in the British Library were acquired in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and lack the level of secure provenance that would be provided by contemporary excavation. However, archival records of purchases, kept meticulously by these institutions, have permitted scholars to reconstruct the findspots and origins of these important objects, deepening our understanding of both local and Mediterranean-wide practice.



Pl. 1. British Museum Selenite Tablet 1891, 4-18.40, from Amathous (Agios Tychonas), Cyprus. Third Century CE. © Trustees of the British Museum.



Pl. 2. British Museum Selenite Tablet 1891, 4-18.51, from Amathous (Agios Tychonas), Cyprus. Third Century CE. © Trustees of the British Museum.



Pl. 3. British Museum Selenite Tablet 1891, 4-18.44, from Amathous (Agios Tychonas), Cyprus. Third Century CE. © Trustees of the British Museum.

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