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SEQUENCES OF *CHARAKTERES* IN SOME *CIRCUS DEFIX- IONES* IN LATIN FROM HADRUMETUM¹

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Abstract: A peculiar feature of a series of curse tablets from Hadrumetum, published by Audolent in his *Defixionum tabellae* (1904) and in a further study dated 1906, is that they contain four recurring sequences of magical *charakteres*. One of the sequences occurs on a single tablet, another on three tablets, the third in five, and the fourth is found 34 times on ten tablets. In each case the context is a curse against chariot-teams, i.e. charioteers and horses. Since the names of some charioteers show up on nearly all the tablets in the group, we may assume that the series was written over a relatively brief number of years. This inference is supported by the fact that the appearance and physical size of the tablets differ considerably. From these data we can conclude that there was a circle of magicians, using the same handbook and specialising in chariot-racing, who invented the recurring sequences of *charakteres*, though – as far as we know – their innovation was not adopted in other regions.

Keywords: Audolent, *defixio*, sequence of *charakteres*, Hadrumetum, charioteers.

One of the major interests of the Zaragoza project ‘Espacios de penumbra’ is the identification of *officinae magicae*, that is, organised groups of practitioners writing in Latin. Several such groups are known for the Greek-speaking area of the Mediterranean outside Egypt, for example at Athens, Antioch, Amathous in Cyprus, Tell Sandahanna in Palestine, and Rhodes. A similar group existed at Carthage, working mainly in Greek, but also capable of linguistic code-switching. A study of sequences of *charakteres* at Hadrumetum (modern Sousse, Tu-

¹ I would like to express my gratitude to the head of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Michel Amandry and his chief assistant, Mathilde Avisseau-Broustet, for allowing me to study the tablets in their collection and for giving me all the information they had in their records. I would like to thank Kirsten Dzwiza, who checked the signs of sequence **a** in her own database, and told me that she had no recorded parallels. Finally I would like to thank the Archives Départementales du Puy-de-Dôme in Clermont-Ferrand for all due help and allowing me to publish the results. I am grateful to Richard Gordon for his help and numerous suggestions, the majority of which I accepted. This study forms part of OTKA [Hungarian Scientific Research Fund] programme no. K 81332 (Ancient magic, parallel researches: Curse tablets and magic gems), and the Zaragoza project titled *Espacios de penumbra: Cartografía de la actividad magico-religiosa en el Occidente del Imperio romano* (Ref. FFI 2008–01511 / FISO).

nia) allows us to identify an analogous group there, writing in Latin and specialising in circus *defixiones*.

Among the roughly forty curse-tablets found, mainly by French army officers in the late nineteenth century, at Hadrumetum, is a group of texts exhibiting a common feature, namely that they contain recurring sequences of *charakteres*. In this form they have not been found elsewhere; moreover, the individual *charakteres* are also different from magic signs found elsewhere. The purpose of this study is to examine these *charakteres* and to confirm the hypothesis that a more or less independent *officina magica* operated in Hadrumetum in the 1st-2nd c. AD.

Audollent's role

Auguste Audollent (1864-1943) noticed the increasing number of curse tablets at the end of the 19th century when he published inscriptions found at French excavations in North Africa. Starting in 1901, he dedicated a slew of studies over several decades to the topic. After the First World War he was regarded internationally as the most significant authority on curse tablets.

The main publication of curse tablets by Auguste Audollent, which appeared in 1904 under the title *Defixionum tabellae (DTAud)*, gives us the drawing of a sequence consisting of five magical signs (sequence **a**) in the first line of inscription no. 276, whereas in line 6, 13 and 19 he simply writes: „*Signa magica ut supra*”. Thus the signs occur altogether four times on the tablet. The same sequence of signs occurs on seven other tablets of the DT, altogether 28 times on the eight tablets. The five *charakteres* of the sign sequence fill up the whole width of the tablet.² Another sign sequence consisting of six *charakteres* appears on the verso side of tablet no. 278 (this is where Audollent gives a drawing of it), and it can also be seen once on tablets no. 282, 283 and 285 (sequence **b**). Audollent only writes in these cases: „*signa magica eadem quae in 278 b*”.

In any event, Audollent saw and studied only 11 out of the 14 tablets.

Charakteres appeared in Greco-Roman magic texts of Egyptian origin after the 1st century A.D. These signs that look like letters but cannot be interpreted as such are of disputed origin, and apart from a few bold but not necessarily well-founded attempts hardly any interpretations have been offered. They are frequently not even included in editions except as a short note that the text includes magic signs/Zauberzeichen at this point. The time has come to create a unified database of *charakteres* in papyri, lead tablets and magic gems, and

² Cagnat 1903, 260.

Kirsten Dzwiza has started this project already. I would like to contribute by outlining problems in interpreting the series of characters in Hadrumetum.

Unique sequences of signs:

Sign sequence **a**:

EZ NEM TARTALMAZ JELEKET, ÜRES!

Sign sequence **b**:

ϕ θ γ ζ ς κ ρ ϣ

Sign sequence **c**:

○ ψ ε ρ ∨ ⊕

Distribution of the tablets:

Occurrence of sign sequences **a** and **b**:

	a	b
<i>DTAud 276</i> :	4 +	
<i>DTAud 277</i> :	2	
<i>DTAud 278</i> :	3 +	1
<i>DTAud 279</i> :	4 +	
<i>DTAud 280</i> :	3	
<i>DTAud 281</i> :	3	
<i>DTAud 282</i> :	5	1
<i>DTAud 283</i> :	4	1
<i>DTAud 284</i> :	–	
<i>DTAud 285</i> :		1
<i>BCTH 1906A</i>	2	
<i>BCTH 1906B</i>	4	1
altogether:	34	5

Discovery of the groups:

Group 1

The tablets bearing sequences **a** and **b** were found by the commander of the French rifle garrison in Sousse, General Paul Henri Goetschy (1848–1921) during his amateur excavations in a cemetery next to the road leading to Kairouan,

some 500 metres from the French military camp and 300 metres from the Punic necropolis. According to the report of Goetschy, they were discovered in two cinerary tombs in 1894.³ 12 of the 14 lead tablets were rolled up. The two tablets that were not rolled up had had nails driven through them, which were still *in situ* when found.⁴ There was no furniture in the tombs with the help of which the tablets could have been dated, but the surrounding tombs date from the 1st-2nd c. AD.

Group 2

The three tablets bearing sequence **c** were found in 1902 in a cinerary tomb in a small necropolis, north-east of the ancient town, dating from 1st-2nd c. AD. A fourth tablet was found in the tomb, with a Latin text written in Greek letters (*DTAud* 267), but was significantly different from them. The three tablets with *charakteres* were written in the same hand, and are further linked to one another by the *vox magica Sarbasmisarab*, the sign sequence, and the objectives of the curse.

1906 group

Little is known about their provenance. A rifle sergeant named Icard found one of them in the Roman cemetery of Sousse, in a cinerary tomb. This cemetery was located above the Roman catacombs and Abbé Leynaud had an air duct slit to these with the help of the riflemen. Sergeant Icard found the second tablet in the spoil, and therefore could not tell exactly where it was discovered.⁵

Present locations of the tablets

These tablets are – or were, according to Audollent’s information – in the museum of Sousse. He also says the tablet with sequence **d** is kept in Tunis. Audollent says that General Goetschy gave the *defixiones* of sequence **a** found by him to the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris.⁶ Audollent does not say where the two *defixiones* published in 1906 were kept; the only information he gives is that he was asked by the Ministère de l’Instruction Publique to publish them.⁷

When I searched for these tablets in the Bibliothèque Nationale, I could find only seven whose numbers in *DTAud* were indicated: 276; 277; 278; 279; 281;

³ Cagnat 1903, 259.

⁴ Audollent 1904, 360–361.

⁵ Audollent 1906, 379.

⁶ Audollent 1904, 360: „Nuperrime a. 1903, undecim (263, 276–285) largitus est Goetschy, et ipse dux franco-gallus, Bibliothecae Nationali Parisiorum.”

⁷ Audollent 1906, 379.

283; 284.⁸ The tablets are in very poor condition, their surface is corroded, some of them have disintegrated into small pieces. Yet, I have found on tablet 276 the sign sequence of the first series of *charakteres* (or more precisely the first four signs). According to the inventory, the tablets entered the collection in March 1906, but it is not mentioned if Goetschy was the donor.⁹

Sign sequence **a** appears on two other tablets that were published by Audollent in 1906, twice on the first one and four times on the second.¹⁰ On the reverse of the second tablet we can see sequence **b**.

Sign sequence **c** consisting of 8 signs is known only from three tablets (*DTAud* 272-274), and it occurs twice on each of these, at the beginning and at the end of the tablets, immediately after the *vox magica Sarbasmisarab*.

Sign sequence **d** consisting of 24 signs appears only on a tablet from Hadrumetum (*DTAud* 275), but there it occurs seven times (see fig. 12). The *charakteres* from sequence **a** are not known from anywhere else, or more precisely, the fourth sign consisting of two concentric circles appears on a lead tablet from Carthage (*DTAud* 241) as the third sign of a sequence of *charakteres* that frames the curse.¹¹ The curse was directed at the charioteers and the horses of the blue faction.

The Audollent archive in Clermont-Ferrand

I searched for the manuscripts of Audollent in Clermont-Ferrand in the Archives Départementales du Puy-de-Dôme in 2009. Among the papers in box „19 J art 12” I found a thick lead tablet in good condition (size: 122 x 108 mm) and I was surprised when I discovered the symbols of sign sequence **a** three times on it. The rest of the inscription is hardly readable, but based on its size and the position of the *charakteres* I unambiguously identified the tablet as *DTAud* 280. I did not succeed in finding any information on how this text, first published by Cagnat, got to Clermont-Ferrand instead of Paris.¹²

⁸ Inventory number: reg.F. 10396.1 à 10. Two tablets did not have a *DTAud* number, the size of these is 13,5 x 9,5 cm, 10 x 8 cm.

⁹ They got into the inventory exactly on March 16, 1906 as a donation of the Ministère de l'instruction publique, with this remark: „dix plaques de plomb trouvées dans un tombeau à Sousse”.

¹⁰ Audollent 1906, 378–387.

¹¹ *CIL* VIII suppl. 12511 gives the drawing of the tablet, and it says that the lamella is of rectangular shape although it is squared. The original proportions can be seen in Audollent's drawing. Cf. Tremel 2004, 167–168.

¹² Cagnat 1903, 262.

Fig. 1. Drawing of *DTAud* 280 (Németh)

Fig. 2. Photo of *DTAud* 280

In the same archive and in the same box, in an envelope mailed on March 22, 1905 by the Ministère de l'Instruction Publique I found two tablets published in 1906, each of which was pressed between two wooden plates coated in blue cloth. Someone glued the smaller, thin, square-shaped one on a piece of black cardboard (0,08 x 0,09 m). Since it was Audollent who reported on the two signs on the back-side of the tablet, it was presumably he who stuck the plate that had broken to pieces on the cardboard.¹³ In any case, today a piece is missing from the middle of the tablet, which was – according to the drawing by Audollent – still there at the time.

The larger lead plate, which is also thin, has broken into two pieces. Despite the corrosion, the sequence of *charakteres* in the first line is well readable (0,123 x 0,047 m).¹⁴

Fig. 3. Drawing of table *BCTH* I (Audollent)

Fig. 4. Drawing of table *BCTH* I (Németh)

Fig. 5. Photo of table *BCTH* I

Fig. 6. Drawing of table *BCTH* II (Németh)

Fig. 7. Drawing of table *BCTH* II (Audollent)

Fig. 8. Photo of table *BCTH* II

The sizes of the tablets with sign sequences in reality and according to Audollent:

276 : 11 x 10,2 cm;	Audollent 0,105 x 0,10 m
277 : 5,5 x 9 + fragments	Audollent 0,055 x 0,09 m
278 : 9,5 x 5,5 cm „scanty”	Audollent 0,085 x 0,09 m
279 : 12, x 10 cm	Audollent 0,115 x 0,10 m
280: 12,2 x 10,8 cm	Audollent 0,125 x 0,095 m
281 : 12,5 x 9, 3 cm	Audollent 0,125 x 0,105 m
283 : 13,5 x 8,9 cm	Audollent 0,135 x 0,09 m
284 : 14,5 x 8,7 cm	Audollent 0,125 x 0,095 m

The tablets bearing sign sequences **a** and **b** are closely linked to each other, so much so that with the exception of a single tablet (*DTAud* 285), sign sequence **b** occurs only on the reverse of texts that contain series **a**. The tablet with se-

¹³ Audollent 1906, 380.

¹⁴ Audollent 1906, 382.

quence **d** is directed against the same charioteers as those of series **a** and **b** (e.g. Privatianus, Naucellius, Superstes, Castor, etc. from the red faction). The tablets bearing sign sequences **a**, **b** and **d** are framed on the four sides partly by spells, partly by *voces magicae* and series of *charakteres*.

Fig. 9. Sign sequence **a** on different tablets.

Today we can examine the *charakteres* of sign sequence **a** on the three tablets kept in Clermont-Ferrand. This analysis shows us that the individual signs in the sign sequences are sometimes slightly different from one another in their present state. The triangle-shaped sign almost always has a small circle on top, but in one case there is no circle at all, and in other cases a small circle can be found in the left or right lower vertices. In four cases a small wave starts up from the right lower vertex, but in three other cases there is no wave. The number of circles that can be found at the end of each line of the T-shaped sign varies as well. In one case, the sign composed of concentric circles is closed at the bottom, but elsewhere the inner circle is not visible. All this suggests not only that the signs have faded over time, but also that they were originally carved in a slightly different form on the surface of the lead tablets. However, their position in the sign sequence makes it obvious that the magician considered these slightly different *charakteres* to be the same.

Thus, if we want to collect the *charakteres* into a database, we must decide in each and every case if two slightly different signs are two versions of the same *charakter* or two separate *charakteres*. Unfortunately, no useful drawings of the other sign sequences survive, and the location of the tablets is unclear. Moreover, we cannot check if the *charakteres* that Audollent considered the same in his edition definitely matched in every detail, or if the publisher regarded them to be the same despite the small differences. I must point out that in this respect the drawings of tablet *DTAud* 241 differ even in *CIL* and on Audollent's own drawing.

Fig. 10. Drawing of *DTAud* 241 (Audollent)

Fig. 11. Drawing of *DTAud* 241 (*CIL* VIII Suppl. 12511)

On the three tablets of sign sequence **c** only names of horses can be found, several of which can be found on each of the three tablets: Delicatianus, Capria, Volucer, Nervicus, etc. *DTAud* 272 contains only 35 horse names, *DTAud* 273 has 26 horse names, although the inscription – incorrectly – refers to names of humans as well: „*haec nomina hominum et equorum qu(a)e dedi vobis cadan(t), precor bos*”. The word „*bos*” of course stands for „*vos*,” but to whom

could this *vobis* and *vos* refer to? Although the spell *Sarbasmisarab* occurs twice on all three tablets, it would require the singular. There is a *vox magica* on the back-side of *DTAud* 272 and 273: FEIUB. The abbreviations „*Aur*” and „*iub*” can be read on the verso of *DTAud* 274, although the latter could also be part of the word FEIUB. *DTAud* 274 names the same 26 horses as *DTAud* 273, but the petitioning formula becomes more obvious: „*precor bos, sancta nomina, cadant homines et equi frangant*”. The sorcerer probably used a ready-made formula, since he mentioned the charioteers (*homines*) again, but wrote only names of horses on the tablet. However, he gives the names of those from whom he expects help, namely from the intervention of the *sancta nomina*. As there are no names of demons on the tablet, except *Sarbasmisarab*, the only possible candidates for *vos, vobis* are the *charakteres* themselves, which are addressed as holy names. This is not unparalleled.

„Most holy Lord Charakteres, tie up, bind the feed, the hands, the sinews, the eyes, the knees, the courage, the leaps, the whip (?), the victory and the crowning of Porphuras and Hapsicrates, who are in the middle left, as well as his co-drivers of the Blue colours in the stable of Eugenius.”¹⁵

As the sorcerer of Hadrumetum, this *defixio* in Greek from Apameia dating from the 5th c. AD attributes individual personality to the *charakteres* that are able to bind the victory of the rival charioteers. The first two lines of the inscription of Apameia contain no less than 36 *charakteres* that are called on to act by the magician. It is remarkable that in Egyptian astrology the „astronomical time” was divided into 36 decans, too.¹⁶ On a magical papyrus from the 4th c. AD, six *charakteres* are called „strong gods”, and this is preceded by the listing of six or eight *voces magicae* (*chremillon Muloch, kampy, chre ophtho, Maskelli-formula, Erekiphthe/Iabezebyth*). Whether we can identify the names with the *charakteres* or not depends on their arrangement, nevertheless, the magician addresses the signs as „strong gods”.¹⁷

There is a magical sentence from Hadrumetum that contains not 36, but 5, 6 and 8 *charakteres* and that was used by at least two sorcerers. The magician who used sign sequence *c* applied three of his spells to the same horses in effect, ostensibly because he wanted to influence three races that followed one another almost immediately. The error in the other two spells (i.e. the magician did not write down the names of the charioteers but the spell applies to their names as well) proves that he worked with the help of a handbook. This means that the use of the „magical sentence” consisting of *charakteres* was not his

¹⁵ Tremel 2004: 108. Translation in: Gager Nr. 6.

¹⁶ Kákosy 1982, 164–165; Kákosy 1998, 189–190.

¹⁷ PGM VII 417–422; Collins 2008, 77.

invention or that of the magician using sign sequence **a-b**, but it was a special, dominant element of the *defixio* dialect in Hadrumetum.¹⁸

It is obvious that the magician emphasizes the names of those whom he wants to bind especially strongly and puts them between two series of *charakteres*. At the beginning of the tablet containing sequence **d**, the names of Privatianus, Naucellius, Superstes and Castor are squeezed between two lines of *charakteres*, and further down he again mentions Privatianus and Naucellius as his most dangerous rivals.¹⁹ *DTAud 276* highlights the names of Privatianus, Naucellius, Castor, Romanus, etc. between two lines of sign sequences. In the first six lines of *DTAud 277*, the same names are framed as in lines 13-17 of *DTAud 278*, etc. Sign sequence **b** occurs mainly on the back-side of the tablets, as a sort of enhancement, whereas sign sequence **c** appears only when – together with the *vox magica* – it forms a frame around the entire curse against horses. Thus, the magician binds the rivals with the help of „Lord Charakteres”, and the most dangerous antagonists are encircled in the tightest way.

Fig. 12. *DTAud 275*

Fig. 13. Drawing of *DTAud 275* (Audollent)

The surviving drawings

Finally, I would like to present the surviving drawings on the tablets. The photos of *DTAud 275* and its transcription indicating the *charakteres* are published by Audollent and the latter also by Cagnat (Figs. 12; 13).²⁰ This transcription was based on Audollent's drawing, which I found in the Archive of Clermont-Ferrand. This drawing, in typical Audollent fashion, is much sketchier than the transcription; the position of the letters of the Latin text is only suggested, and even the *charakteres* are transcribed exactly only up to a point. What is a reliable piece of information, however, is the shape and size of the tablet, since Audollent simply traced the outlines of the lead tablet (or in other cases, its photo). Still, the photo published in the journal confirms the author's statement. Audollent's drawings include the A and B sides of *DTAud 272* and *274*, as well, but only the recto side of no. *273*. These drawings offer a number of surprises. *Defixio* no. *272* was identified by Audollent himself, since he wrote the number on the drawing. Without his note it would be difficult to match the published *defixio* to the text consisting of four columns, even if we know that the author seldom transcribed the letters, only indicated their position (Fig. 14).

¹⁸ Gordon 2005, 80–82.

¹⁹ Gordon 2002, 92.

²⁰ Audollent 1902, 418; Cagnat 1903, 258; *DTAud 275*.

The verso side of the tablet can be identified unambiguously based on the shape of the tablet, but instead of the published FEIUB *vox magica* we would rather read: NA^o (Fig. 15). An analysis of the recto side of *DTAud 273* is virtually impossible against the edition of the text (Fig. 16). And based on *DTAud 274* it seems that sign sequence **c** was not written in a separate line but continuously after the *vox magica*, first four *charakteres* in line 14, the and the other four in line 15. The letters AUR are visible on the verso side, but the letters IUB appear only if the tablet is held upside down, and even then only in reverse order (Fig. 17). But the most peculiar thing is that I have not found the drawings of tablets *DTAud 276-284* in the bequest. I myself made a drawing of *DTAud 280* and the two *defixiones* published in 1906, even though Audollent also copied the latter two. The *charakteres* are legible only on *BCTH 1*, not on the drawing of the longer tablet. The fact that Audollent followed Cagnat's edition when publishing *DTAud 276-280* suggests that even if he had studied these tablets, he had not made a drawing of them. And yet, as I demonstrated, *DTAud 280* is still in Clermont-Ferrand, which means that he had sufficient time to study it thoroughly.

Fig. 14. Drawing of *DTAud 272* recto (Audollent)

Fig. 15. Drawing of *DTAud 272* verso (Audollent)

Fig. 16. Drawing of *DTAud 273* recto (Audollent)

Fig. 17. Drawing of *DTAud 274* recto (Audollent)

Fig. 18. Drawing of *DTAud 274* verso (Audollent)

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