“Throwing Curses in the Sea: A Lost Greek Tradition?”

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More than a century ago, Richard Wünsch suggested that the Greeks and Romans most probably deposited curse tablets in the sea, because there were so many ghosts in the sea of those who had died of shipwreck and remained unburied. He was, however, unable to give any example of a curse tablet that had been found in salt water and as far as I can tell there are no extant examples. Wünsch was able to cite, however, a papyrus recipe that lists the sea, alongside river, tomb or spring, as a possible site of deposition and in my paper I plan to take up his passing comment and provide more evidence for it. I begin with a lead tablet from Cyrene inscribed with a hexametrical binding curse that ends: “I shall deposit these things (i.e. words) in an ox-horn (ἐν βοέῳ κέρατι) and beneath the hoary earth”1; nearly twenty years ago I argued that this hexametrical text originally ended with a well known Homeric formula “beneath the hoary sea” and invoked the sea-nymph Tycha. I also pointed to a famous Homeric simile describing Iris’ swift descent from Olympus (Iliad 24.81-83): “She plummeted to the sea floor like a lead-weight, which mounted along the horn of an ox (βοὸς κέρας) …. comes bringing destruction to the raw-ravening fish.” The scholia inform us that a βοὸς κέρας was used as a protective cover attached to the fishing line to prevent the fish from cutting the line with their teeth, but modern scholars drawing on ethnographical parallels suggest that the horn itself was a lure, into which the lead weight was inserted. Twenty years ago, I thought that this was the sole evidence for curses in the sea, but more recently I became aware of recent interpretations of Pindar’s Olympian 1.75-78, according to which on the night before his macabre race with Oenomaus, Pelops stands on a beach and prays to Poseidon for help: “shackle (πέδασον) the brazen spear of Oinomaeus, speed me (πόρευον) upon the swiftest chariots … and bring me near (πέλασσον) to victory!” Commentators have suggested that the triple repetition of the three aorist imperatives in Pindar’s prayer produces an incantatory effect that reflects his knowledge of the kinds of binding formulas found on later curse tablets. I will press this argument further by suggesting that this evening prayer to Poseidon at the edge of the sea was an oral version of curses that were later thrown into the sea and I will further flesh out the practice by looking at other recipes from the magical papyri that use the sea in cursing rituals or artifacts from it, such as a nail from a shipwreck or seashells. I will close by discussing a curse against charioteers from Carthage that was apparently (or was supposed to be) deposited in seashells.

Bibliography:
R. Wünsch, Defixionum Tabellae Atticae, Appendix to Inscriptiones Graecae III (Berlin 1897).

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1 Wünsch 1898: iv, col. 2 [= p. 13 in reprint]: “non solum ad sepulcra diras suas ferebant, verum etiam in aquam coniecerunt, ut per quam via pateret ad manes eorum, qui naufragio perierunt” cited by Audollent 1904: cxvii.” He was able to cite a passage from Diogenes Laertius (8.31) to the effect that Hermes Chthonius, despite his “chthonic” epithet, conducts souls of the dead from both from the earth and from the sea.

2 Olympian 1.75-78. For discussion, see Fisker 1990 ad loc., and Hanson 2000: 25-26. Instone 1996: 109 points out the alliteration.