

Justice redoubles the crime
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In January 2024, I began my research of the Bath curse tablets which were written from 2-4 century A.D. (Adams, 2) by Romano British who practiced pre-Roman Celtic religion and worshiped the Celtic goddess, Sulis (whose name is translated as 'gap, opening or orifice'). They believed her to be the interface between this world and the supernatural world (Bowman, 25), and so suitably Sulis was the goddess of their holy springs where powerful water flowed from below the ground to above.

The Bath curse tablets are artifacts from a colonized people whose narratives were only ever examined and recorded by their colonizers. Most academics have advanced the importance of Roman imperial presence in Baths and contextualized the curse tablets as evidence of successful Romanization through the study of languages used - Latin and sometimes a hybrid Celtic-Latin (Rahravan, 12). However, Louise Revell warns against "using the archaeological evidence of temples and inscriptions as diagnostic of change rather than undertaking a more rigorous analysis in order to understand ... the dynamic way in which the people of the provinces negotiated their way through the new imperial context" (210).

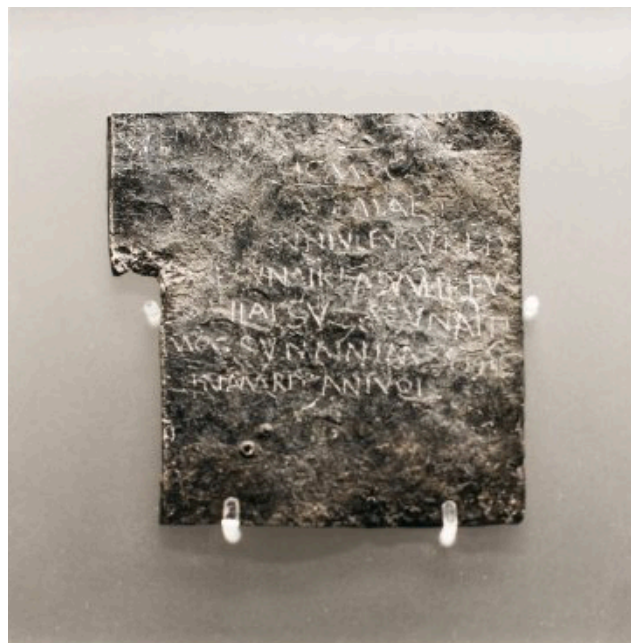


Fig. 1. A Baths curse tablet. Translated, it reads, "May he who carried off Vilbia from me become as liquid as water. (May) she who obscenely devoured her (become) dumb, whether Velvinna, Exsupereus, Verianus, Severinus, A(u)gustalis, Comitianus, Catus, Minianus, Germanilla (or) Jovina." (Roman Inscriptions of Britain) Photo credit: The Roman Baths website.

I had started the school year thinking about haunting and ways in which I could amplify ghosts in my practice. In fact, my fall semester installation gave rise to a horde of cat ghosts who had possessed drinking water fountains for cats in order to hunt the baby mouse, Nibbles, from the Tom & Jerry universe. This came from a desire to see the violently dead and the violently erased avenged, to facilitate access of a powerless group to a source of greater power that

might cause the institutions of imperialism and capitalism to finally stop and feel shame - and if not shame, then fear. As prevalent as it seemed that academics treated the Bath curse tablets as evidence of a successful Romanization, I interpreted them instead as furtive but decisive moves by a disenfranchised group to align themselves with the interests of a celestial power in order to bring about justice.

The divine powers of the Bath hot springs had been well utilized by locals since prehistoric times. In fact, by the time the Romans arrived in Bath there was an established cultural center around the springs as well as “religious specialists with tremendous knowledge of maths, astronomy, astrology and the natural sciences, all preserved in oral tradition, kept and passed on by a pre-Druidic and later a Druidic priesthood” (Bowman, 28). This is perhaps why the Romans syncretized Sulis with their goddess, Minerva, to develop the double-named identity of Sulis Minerva.



Fig. 2. Gilded bronze head of Sulis Minerva from Bath. Photo credit: The Roman Baths website.

But while the Celtic culture was matriarchal (Bowman, 28) and considered Sulis the solar deity (Rahrvan, 7), Sulis Minerva was an “active subjugation of the Celtic deity under the Roman side of the partnership, setting up an unequal power relationship and transforming its original character” (Revell, 214). The syncretized deity was only worshiped locally in a “small town” with not any “evidence that Bath was formally constituted as a chartered town within the Roman administrative system (Revell, 216). Ultimately, the double-name Sulis Minerva was only used by military and high-status administrative ranks whereas the indigenous population worshiped the goddess under a single name (Revell, 213), leading contemporary academics to argue against seeing syncretism as a stage in successful Romanization. This is also specifically seen in the curse tablets, where the majority of tablets address Sulis instead of Sulis Minerva (Roman Inscriptions of Britain). (And yet, many academic texts continue to use the name Sulis Minerva instead of Sulis in context of the tablets.)

Thus, I see the Bath curse tablets - which were part of an important ritual recognizing the tremendous power of Sulis - as an enduring resistance to Roman imperialism hundreds of years after the Invasion that started in southern Britain, where Bath is, in 43 AD. In the early period of Roman imperialism, the hot spring remained open so that locals could continue to publicly drop offerings to Sulis into the spring. Even when the Roman Baths was built on top of the spring and it became enclosed in “a barrel-vaulted, semi-dark building with columns and statues” (Rahravan, 7), the ritual continued albeit more secretly (Revell, 218).

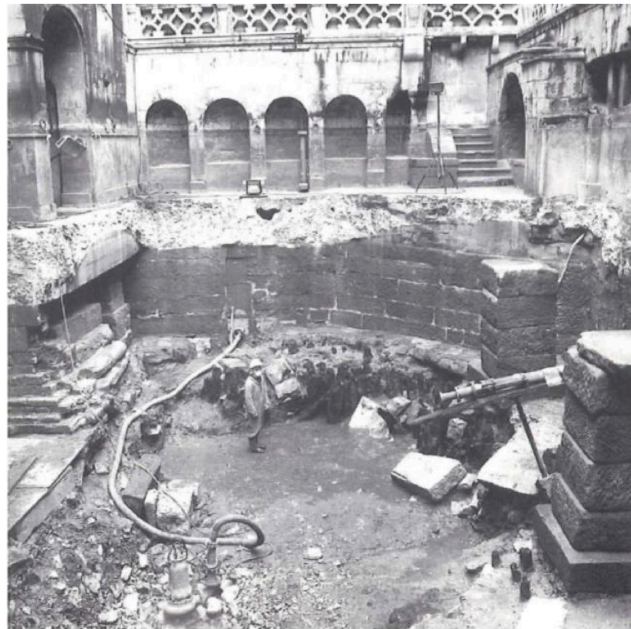


Fig. 3. Excavation of the sacred spring, 1979. Courtesy Institute of Archaeology, Oxford.

According to Revell, the secrecy and concealment of the curse became functionally important to the efficacy of the curse. The lead tablets were usually folded up to hide the text, but some were written with the letters of the curse reversed or in a mirror script. Some tablets, which were determined to be illegible and an imitation of written language, could be evidence of another form of concealment (221). Finally, by depositing the tablet into the pool, the curse became hidden “completely from the eyes of mortals, and [dedicated] to the gods” (221). Only then would the deity feel compelled to enforce the curse. Relatedly, from the curse writer’s point of view, “parts of [their] telling are confounding” necessarily to those who cannot be trusted and who might be dangerous (Tuck and Ree, 640).

The narratives of the curses themselves are of note as well. Unlike other curse tablets found throughout the rest of the Roman Empire, the Bath curse tablets are uniquely characterized by a shared complaint, specifically thievery. Tomlin claims that this is due to the pilfering of peoples’ unattended possessions while they bathed in the Roman Baths (10); I would like to put forth what could be a second truth: the writers - half of whom still used Celtic names (Tomlin, 16) - were compelled by their anger and disenfranchisement to rely on their goddess for any sense of justice within a governing system that they did not chose and that did not work for them.

As a small town, Bath was neglected by the Romans after their Baths was built on top of the sacred spring as their obligatory monument to intentionally and eternally assimilate indigenous culture and religious practices. According to Revell, there is no evidence of a basilica (a Roman court of law) or formal political organization in Bath (216); alternatively, there was no accountability from the Romans for dismantling the Celtic way of life in the town. With no political or legal authority to look to for guidance and structure and no autonomy to establish their own, thievery was commonplace amongst the Romano British in Bath and while technically punishable by death (Rahrvan, 7), ultimately logistically impossible to enforce.

By late 4 century AD, the Roman Baths “was being remodelled and repaired much more simply” (“The end of Roman Bath”) than its 2 century AD origins as a great architectural monument. Interestingly enough, even the great altar - which had acted as the most public ritual focus of the Baths - was demolished and not reconstructed. The latest Bath curse tablets end at this time.

People are often bemused by the intensity or disproportionality of the curses relative to the injustice. Tuck and Ree might identify these people as those who assume “haunting is undeserved, even random” (641). However, in the absence of the possibility of reconciliation or justice, in the face of complete powerlessness, trauma has no choice but to turn into a merciless curse because while mortals die, curses, ghosts, gods, and vengeance do not.

The name of my thesis, *Justice redoubles the crime*, comes from Marc Nichanian’s essay, “Catastrophic Mourning”, found in the essay compilation Loss: The Politics of Mourning. In it he posits that it is the “will to annihilate” (116) that disintegrates humans, a collective, and not the act of annihilation itself. The trauma of having been trampled and crushed cannot be mourned by the people because this will of annihilators to annihilate “cannot be integrated into any psychological, rational, or psychical explanation whatever” (116). He is talking specifically about the Armenian genocide. According to Nichanian, its victims are “without recourse” (116). Any act of seeking out freedom or dignity is crushed, met with the unrelenting will to annihilate. And therefore, justice only redoubles the crime.

Casting this theory to the collective genocides of our past and present, the collective struggle for liberation by all who are oppressed through imperialism and capitalism, how are people meant to process the trauma of an incomprehensible and infinite “Catastrophe”? If human justice only redoubles the crime, perhaps a deity could aid in bringing about an inescapable retribution (Tuck and Ree, 642).

Thankfully, the interests of oppressed groups and celestial beings are aligned. The rich and powerful are no longer satisfied with destroying the land and people with war and extraction and proudly proclaim their intentions to pursue the same in outer space. The sustainability of the universe is at stake, endangered by a human elite that consider themselves at the top of the power hierarchy of the universe.

The curses that I have written therefore appeal to a goddess’s sense of self preservation, which is compatible with the precise formula of cursing exemplified by the Bath curse tablets. They are

printed with uv ink on ceramic tablets that have undergone intense firing after firing, each time accumulating matter on its surface. This conjoining of ancient and contemporary techniques imbue the tablets with the magic to flatten time in hopes that their prayers reach the goddess wherever she may be in time so that not only our future may change but our present as well. Lastly, they are hidden from human eyes, buried under the soil of my recreated Roman bath excavation site.

Curses are enacted in secrecy because of the trauma created through violence, then violent silence. They must also be protected from imperialists so that they may cross the threshold into the supernatural. In my thesis installation, there is a work that stands separately across the convention hall from the excavation site. It is a single ceramic curse tablet held inside of a dusty and abandoned museum display case. The curse written on the back is worn and illegible, therefore ultimately protecting the writer's connection to the deity. For me, the display case has been abandoned because the institution that extracted the tablet from its context has finally met with justice that - while still redoubling the crime - now targets the correct party. Only the glittering tablet's surface remains untouched by time as an eternal warning of supernatural retribution.

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