Abracadabra

Latin as the Language of Magic



For most of European history the language of power and the language of sorcery were the same. This sheet collects the Latin from the episode, adds the vocabulary of curses, charms and spirits, and offers a curse tablet from Roman Bath and an ancient fever cure with a handful of exercises. No translations are given for the texts: the notes are there to help you read them yourself. An answer key for the exercises is on the last page.

1 Words from the episode

Latin	Meaning	Note
defixio, -onis *f.*	binding curse	from *defigere* ‘to fix down, to pin’; plural *defixiones*
rogo · exigo · dono	I ask · I demand · I give	the legal register of the curse tablets
ligo · obligo	I bind · I bind fast	*ligare*; compare *obligation*
devoveo	I consign, I curse	*devovere* ‘to vow away’ to a god
carmen, -inis *n.*	song; spell	plural *carmina*; hence *charm*
magus, -i *m.*	magician	through Greek from Old Persian; originally a priest
lex Cornelia	the Cornelian law	*lex*, legis *f.*; Sulla’s law, later applied to magic
coniuro · adiuro	I conjure · I adjure	both from *iurare* ‘to swear’; pagan curses, then exorcism
grammatica, -ae *f.*	grammar	Old French *gramaire*, then *grimoire*
ars notoria	the notory art	*ars*, artis *f.*; *nota* ‘sign’
tabula smaragdina	the Emerald Tablet	*smaragdus* ‘emerald’
lumen, -inis *n.*	light	behind the invented spell *Lumos*
expellere · arma	to drive out · weapons	behind *Expelliarmus*
accio	I summon	real Latin: *accire* ‘to call to oneself’
crucio	I torture	real Latin: *cruciare*, from *crux* ‘cross’
abracadabra	(a word of power)	first attested about 200; origin unknown

Say it aloud

The acute accent marks the stressed syllable; it is a reading aid and not part of the spelling.

defíxio, defixiónes · rógo · éxigo · dóno · lígo · óbligo · devóveo · cármen, cármina · mágus · lex Cornélia · coniúro · adiúro · grammática · ars notória · tábula smarágdina · lúmen · áccio · crúcio · abracadábra

2 More Latin of magic

These words are not all in the episode, but they are the ones you meet most often in curse tablets, charms and the condemnations of magic.

Practitioners

maga, -ae *f.*	sorceress
saga, -ae *f.*	wise woman, witch
venefica, -ae *f.*	poisoner, witch
incantator, -oris *m.*	enchanter
sortilegus, -i *m.*	diviner by lots
haruspex, -icis *m.*	reader of entrails
mathematicus, -i *m.*	astrologer
exorcista, -ae *m.*	exorcist

Spirits and powers

numen, -inis *n.*	divine power
daemon, -onis *m.*	spirit; demon
angelus, -i *m.*	angel
spiritus, -us *m.*	spirit
umbra, -ae *f.*	shade, ghost
manes, -ium *m. pl.*	spirits of the dead
inferi, -orum *m. pl.*	the underworld

The arts

magia, -ae *f.*	magic
divinatio, -onis *f.*	divination
astrologia, -ae *f.*	astrology
alchimia, -ae *f.*	alchemy (medieval)
necromantia, -ae *f.*	necromancy
maleficium, -ii *n.*	harmful magic
superstitio, -onis *f.*	superstition

Words that act

incantatio, -onis *f.*	incantation
votum, -i *n.*	vow
devotio, -onis *f.*	curse, consecration
exsecratio, -onis *f.*	curse
preces, -um *f. pl.*	prayers
nomen, -inis *n.*	name
character, -eris *m.*	magical sign
formula, -ae *f.*	set form of words

Things

tabella, -ae *f.*	small tablet
plumbum, -i *n.*	lead
stilus, -i *m.*	stylus
clavus, -i *m.*	nail
amuletum, -i *n.*	amulet
ligatura, -ae *f.*	amulet tied on
herba, -ae *f.*	herb
venenum, -i *n.*	potion; poison
circulus, -i *m.*	circle

What the magician does

incantare	to enchant
defigere	to fix, to bind
solvere	to release
invocare	to call upon
exorcizare	to drive out
fascinare	to bewitch
divinare	to foretell

3 What the texts say

Three sentences of power

> *ducite ab urbe domum, mea carmina, ducite Daphnin* — Virgil, Eclogue 8.68
> *Vade retro me, Satana.* — Mark 8:33, Vulgate
> *Quod est inferius est sicut quod est superius.* — Tabula Smaragdina

Notes. *ducite*: plural imperative of *ducere* 'to lead, to bring' · *domum* 'home' · *mea carmina*: vocative · *Daphnin*: Greek accusative · *vade*: imperative of *vadere* 'to go' · *retro* 'back, behind' · *inferius*, *superius*: neuter comparatives, 'what is below', 'what is above' · *sicut* 'just as'.

Questions. (a) Whom does the speaker of Virgil's line address? (b) What form do all three sentences avoid, and which two use an imperative?

Text 1 · A curse tablet from Bath, Tab. Sulis 10 (second to fourth century)

Docilianus has lost his hooded cloak at the baths. Text after R. S. O. Tomlin, *Tabellae Sulis* (1988), no. 10: square brackets mark letters lost on the lead, round brackets a letter the writer left out.

> *Docilianus Bruceri deae sanctissim(a)e Suli. Devoveo eum [q]ui caracallam meam involaverit, si vir si femina, si servus si liber, ut [...]um dea Sulis maximo letum [a]digat nec ei somnum permittat nec natos nec nascentes, do[ne]c caracallam meam ad templum sui numinis per[t]ulerit.*

Notes. *Docilianus Bruceri*: 'Docilianus, son of Brucerus' · *deae sanctissimae Suli*: dative, 'to the most holy goddess Sulis' · *devoveo*: see page 1 · *caracalla*, -ae *f.* 'hooded cloak' · *involaverit*: from *involare*, colloquial for 'to steal'; future perfect · *si ... si*: 'whether ... or' · *ut ... adigat*: 'that she may drive' · *letum*, -i *n.* 'death'; the grammar of *maximo letum* is loose · *nec ... permittat*: 'and not allow' · *nati* 'children'; *nascentes* 'those being born' · *donec* + future perfect, 'until' · *sui numinis*: 'of her divinity' · *pertulerit*: from *perferre* 'to bring'.

Questions. (a) What has been stolen, and what is the Latin verb for the theft? (b) Which four words cover every possible thief? (c) Name the two things the goddess is to withhold. (d) What ends the curse? (e) Which verb in the text is a performative, doing what it says?

Text 2 · Quintus Serenus, *Liber medicinalis* 935–940 (c. 200)

The first appearance of the word, as a remedy for fever. The lines are hexameters.

> *Inscribes chartae quod dicitur abracadabra*
> *saepius et subter repetes, sed detrahe summam* [...]
> *donec in angustum redigatur littera conum:*
> *his lino nexis collum redimire memento.*

ABRACADABRA
ABRACADABR
ABRACADAB
ABRACADA
ABRACAD
ABRACA
ABRAC
ABRA
ABR
AB
A

The charm as Serenus describes it

Notes. *inscribes*, *repetes*: futures used as instructions · *chartae*: dative, 'on a sheet' · *quod dicitur* 'what is called' · *saepius* 'several times' · *subter* 'underneath' · *detrahe summam*: 'take away the end (letter)' · *donec ... redigatur*: 'until it is reduced' · *in angustum conum* 'to a narrow cone' · *his lino nexis*: ablative absolute, 'these being tied with a linen thread' · *collum* 'neck' · *redimire* 'to bind round' · *memento* 'remember to'.

Questions. (a) On what is the word to be written? (b) What happens to the word in each new line? (c) Which shape results? (d) Where is the finished charm worn?

4 Exercises

A · I do it by saying it

The curse tablets and spells work in the first person singular. Give that form of each verb.

1. rogare
2. exigere
3. donare
4. ligare
5. devovere
6. coniurare
7. accire
8. cruciare

B · Si vir si femina

The tablets name every possible culprit in pairs. Complete the pairs with *femina* · *liber* · *puella*.

1. *si vir si* _____
2. *si servus si* _____
3. *si puer si* _____

C · Magic words in English

Match each Latin word to the English word that descends from it.

1 carmen	2 incantare	3 sors	4 grammatica	5 praestigiae	6 fascinare
a prestige	b sorcery	c charm	d fascinate	e enchant	f grimoire

D · Spell-check

Six spells from a modern school of wizards. Match each to its Latin meaning. Then decide which of the six are Latin words exactly as they stand.

1 Lumos	2 Nox	3 Accio	4 Crucio	5 Reparo	6 Imperio
a I repair	b night	c by command	d I summon	e (from) light	f I torture

E · Your own tablet

Something of yours has gone missing. Write a tablet on the model of Docilianus: your name, the deity in the dative, *devoveo eum qui* … *involaverit*, a *si* … *si* formula, and *donec* … for the condition of release.

5 Further reading

Owen Davies, *Grimoires: A History of Magic Books* (2009) · Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (3rd ed. 2022) · Frank Klaassen, *The Transformations of Magic: Illicit Learned Magic in the Later Middle Ages and Renaissance* · Amina Kropp, "How Does Magical Language Work? The Spells and Formulae of the Latin Defixionum Tabellae" · Roger Tomlin, *Tabellae Sulis: Roman Inscribed Tablets of Tin and Lead from the Sacred Spring at Bath*. The full list of sources is in the episode description.

Answer key

A 1 rogo · 2 exigo · 3 dono · 4 ligo · 5 devoveo · 6 coniuro · 7 accio · 8 crucio.

B 1 femina · 2 liber · 3 puella.

C 1c · 2e · 3b · 4f · 5a · 6d.

D 1e · 2b · 3d · 4f · 5a · 6c. *Nox*, *accio*, *crucio* and *reparo* are Latin as they stand, and *imperio* is a form of *imperium*; *Lumos* is invented from *lumen*.

Three sentences of power (a) her own spells, *mea carmina* · (b) none is a request in the subjunctive; the first two command with an imperative, the third states.

Text 1 (a) a hooded cloak; *involare* · (b) *vir*, *femina*, *servus*, *liber* · (c) sleep and children · (d) the return of the cloak to the temple · (e) *devoveo*.

Text 2 (a) on a sheet of papyrus, *charta* · (b) it loses its last letter · (c) a narrow cone · (d) round the neck, tied with linen thread.