

A CURSE IN A CHYTRIDION A CONTRIBUTION TO THE STUDY OF ATHENIAN PYRES

1. For initial permission to publish the pot and the curse tablet discussed below we are indebted to T. Leslie Shear Jr., and for their drawings of Figures 1 and 3, to Richard Anderson and Anne Hooton, respectively. The wizardry of Craig Mauzy is responsible for the digitally enhanced image in Figure 2, created from a contact print for which the negative had been destroyed. Thanks are due as well to Jan Jordan, who arranged access to the objects. We are also pleased to acknowledge here the suggestions made by *Hesperia's* anonymous referees.

All ancient dates in this article are B.C.

2. Young 1951, pp. 110–130.

References to more recently discovered pyres are listed in *Agora XXIX*, p. 212, note 48.

3. *Agora XIV*, p. 16.

4. Knigge and Kovacovics 1981, p. 388. Nonetheless, the pyres have occasionally been cited in general handbooks as possible evidence for infant cremation in Hellenistic Athens, e.g., in Garland 1985, pp. 82, 161, and Kurtz and Boardman 1971, p. 99.

5. Shear 1973, p. 151, note 68; see also below, p. 148, with note 10.

6. See *Agora XXIX*, pp. 212–217 for recent discussion of the pyres and speculation about the nature of the pyre ritual.

7. *Agora XXIX*, p. 212.

In the earliest years of their work in the Athenian Agora, American excavators came upon a number of deposits of an unusual type: a shallow depression or irregular pit, with marked evidence of burning on its floor, containing multiple vessels of a limited range of standard forms.¹ Most of the pots were miniatures—commonly, small plates and saucers, lekanides, and cooking pots—but alabaster, larger plates, and a full-size drinking cup or lamp were sometimes included. Occasionally a few tiny and calcined fragments of bone were recovered. These deposits never appeared within the Agora square itself, but they were common among the houses and workshops that surrounded it. They were particularly numerous in the so-called Industrial District southwest of the Agora, which Rodney Young excavated in the late 1930s and the 1940s. Taking the bone fragments to be human, Young published the contents of fourteen such deposits from that part of the city in his article “Sepulturae intra urbem,”² interpreting them as the cremation graves of infants and christening them “pyre burials.”

This conclusion has long been viewed with skepticism. Homer Thompson expressed his doubts in the early 1970s, citing the shallowness of the deposits and the absence of markers.³ A decade later, Ursula Knigge and Wilfried Kovacovics rejected this interpretation of similar deposits under Bau Z in the Kerameikos, pointing out that infant cremation is otherwise virtually unknown.⁴ Finally, study of better-preserved bones from similar deposits more recently unearthed in the Agora has shown that the bones are animal rather than human.⁵ These deposits seem, then, to bear witness to some kind of sacrificial ritual rather than human burial, and the name has been adjusted to “ritual pyre,” “saucer pyre,” or simply “pyre.” Recent speculation has connected them with rites attending the construction or remodeling of a building, the memorializing of the dead, or the propitiation of the spirits of the deceased.⁶ Full investigation of the phenomenon lies outside the scope of this paper. As a contribution toward that investigation, however, we would like to present a unique conjunction—a lead curse tablet found inside a typical pyre vessel, a chytridion—that has previously received only brief mention in the literature.⁷ Because of its importance for the understanding of Athenian pyres, we offer here the full documentation of context, chytridion, and curse.

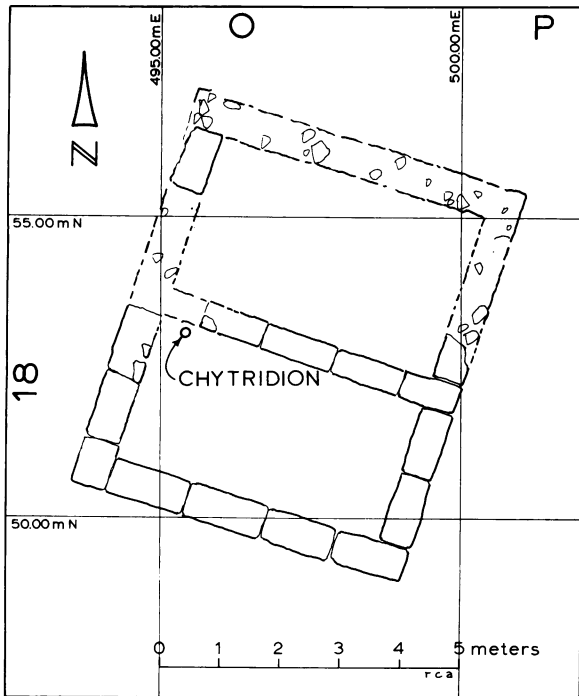


Figure 1 (above, left). Plan of house on lower slopes of the Areiopagos. Drawing by R. C. Anderson

Figure 2 (above, right). P 27880 in situ

CONTEXT

Excavations in 1938 and 1957 on the lower slopes of the Areiopagos, south of the Agora square, uncovered a small rectangular building, probably a private house of the 4th century or somewhat later (Fig. 1).⁸ Further cleaning in 1967 revealed an east–west crosswall dividing the building into two rooms of approximately equal size. The chytridion and curse tablet in which we are interested here were found in the northwest corner of the southernmost room, apparently just over bedrock (Fig. 2); on the other side of the crosswall, which was robbed out at this point, was found a fragment of a cooking pot. No floor levels associated with the structure are reported, but we must assume that these vessels lay under the floors or had been placed in a pit dug through them.

A close parallel to this situation may be found in the House of Menon and Mikion outside the southwest corner of the Agora, where an olpe, a rilled-rim saucer, and a full-size chytra containing a handful of small bones had been buried in the line of the southeast wall of the house (deposit F 16:7).⁹ Like our deposit, this one contained one larger pot (the chytra), along with a vessel commonly found in pyres (the rilled-rim saucer), and lay in the line of a robbed-out wall. The bones from the chytra were analyzed in 1975 by J. Lawrence Angel and proved to be the remains of a small animal, possibly a canid.¹⁰ This deposit, then, was probably sacrificial, and T. Leslie Shear Jr., in his preliminary publication of the excavation, likened it to the pyre burials described above.¹¹ The similarity of our deposit to this one and the inclusion of a chytridion, a typical pyre vessel, serve to link our deposit also to pyre burials, and we would argue that it shared their function, whatever that was.

8. Shear 1939, p. 214; the building (without the crosswall, which was discovered later) appears on the actual state plan of the Agora at O–P 18: see *Agora XII*, fig. 24.

9. Miller 1974, p. 210, note 80, pl. 35; for the location see p. 195, fig. 1.

10. Angel's identification of the bones is noted in unpublished Agora records. Miller (1974) interpreted the deposit as an infant burial.

11. Shear 1969, pp. 393–394.



Figure 3. Chytridion P 27880.

Drawing by A. Hooton

CHYTRIDION

The chytridion is a miniature form of the chytra,¹² the round-bottomed, lidless, one-handed cooking pot that was a standard item of the Classical kitchen. The term is a modern one, coined to distinguish the shape from the larger one on which it was modeled.¹³ Both its size and its material—our chytridion is made of ordinary household fabric, rather than the hard, highly fired cooking fabric used for large chytrai—suggest that it was a votive, since it could not have withstood the heat involved in the functional use of the shape. Votive rather than household use is also suggested by the fact that chytridia of this fabric are common in the pyre deposits discussed above but rarely occur in deposits of household debris, where they ought to have been well represented if they were part of the normal kitchen assemblage: only two of the eighteen inventoried chytridia of household fabric from the Agora excavations were found in deposits other than pyres.¹⁴ The chytridion under discussion here, then, is probably part of a ritual deposit rather than chance household debris.

Agora inv. P 27880

Fig. 3

Agora XXIX, p. 212.

H. to rim 6.3; Diam. 8.5; Diam. of rim 5.7 cm

Intact.

Globular vessel with greatest diameter below half height. Rounded bottom formed by wheel-trimming the underside when pot was leather hard; trace of original flat underside with string mark remains. Slightly outturned rim with wheel-run groove at junction with body. Small, irregular strap handle from rim to shoulder. Household fabric: hard, fine clay, between 5YR 7/4 and 5YR 7/6 on Munsell Soil Color Chart; abundant fine, sparkling inclusions and a few larger white inclusions. Patches of thin, dull red gloss at handle attachments, probably applied as adhesive to aid in placement of handle.

12. For the chytra, see *Agora XII*, pp. 224–225.

13. *Agora XII*, p. 198.

14. P 741 from cistern H 16:3 (Thompson 1934, p. 341, B 32, fig. 21) and P 8412 from cistern D 11:2 (*Agora XXIX*, p. 387, no. 1482, fig. 87, pl. 111).

CHRONOLOGY

Chytridia are chronologically restricted to the period when the pyre ritual was practiced, from the end of the 5th century to the 3rd century B.C.¹⁵ No evolution can be discerned in this simple shape, but the fabric of our piece allows us to date it with some accuracy. Chytridia in earlier pyres, still closely following the model of the larger, utilitarian chytrai, are always made of cooking fabric.¹⁶ In the last quarter of the 4th century chytridia begin to be made in household fabric. This soon becomes the standard fabric, and all chytridia of the 3rd century are made of it. Although pyres continue to be dedicated well down into the 3rd century, the latest ones are poor in offerings and do not contain chytridia.¹⁷ The latest pyres with chytridia are probably to be dated within the second quarter of the 3rd century, on the basis of the kantharoi that were included in the offerings.¹⁸ These factors place our chytridion between ca. 325 and ca. 250. The treatment of the bottom, with a tiny area of the original flat base remaining, suggests that the vessel was made later rather than earlier in that range, for this feature appears, though much more pronounced, in chytridia of the very end of the span.¹⁹

CURSE

The tablet, opisthographic, is broken into several pieces that can be easily reassembled with virtually no loss of text. Each side preserves two columns of names, eight of men and one of a woman, the same names repeated on each side and in the same order; the spelling is deliberately distorted. Mere lists of names, or such lists followed by generalizing phrases, constitute the commonest and most primitive type of earlier curse texts. Frequently, in 5th- and 4th-century curse tablets, the spelling of such texts is deliberately disordered, the twisting of the words being obviously a device of sympathetic or analogical magic. The result may be retrograde writing,²⁰ texts with the letters facing canonically but with retrograde spelling,²¹ or texts with canonical spelling but retrograde letters;²² occasionally the scrambling is more complicated, with the syllables themselves spelled canonically but with their order reversed,²³ or with individual words and phrases retrograde but not whole lines,²⁴ or, as here, with names of the shape ABCDEF converted into the shape BADCFE, the general principle being to reverse the spelling of every successive pair of letters. As far as we know, our tablet provides the only instance of a curse with this last method of twisting words.

A minor feature is the inconsistency in the form of Σ, a letter of which the tablet preserves fourteen instances, one (ΔιδυμίαΣ, B 1) or possibly two (ΔῶροΣ?, A 9) of them four-barred, the rest wedge-shaped "lunates." At a period when the lunate sigma was gaining ground against the four-barred in informal script, such mixture in the same text is by no means rare on curse tablets. Usually there seems to be no rule at work, e.g., τούτουC / ἅπανταΣ (DTWü 43.1–2), τὰ{ι}Σ φρέναC (94.4, both Attic, 4th century?).

15. For the dates, see *Agora* XXIX, p. 213.

16. See *Agora* XXIX, p. 216. For chytridia made of cooking ware, see Young 1951, p. 115, pyre 1, no. 7, pl. 50:a; p. 116, pyre 2, no. 11; p. 120, pyre 5, no. 11; p. 121, pyre 6, no. 13; p. 125, pyre 8, nos. 9 and 10, pl. 52:b; p. 126, pyre 10, no. 9; p. 127, pyre 11, nos. 5 and 6; Shear 1984, p. 46, note 91, pl. 11:c (P 31357, of cooking ware, not household ware as stated). For the dates of some of these pyres, see *Agora* XXIX, pp. 434, 436, 437, 439, under A 20:3, B 17:4, B 19:5, B 22:3.

17. Young 1951, p. 130, pyre 14, pl. 54:b, as well as pyres P 6:5 and P 6:6 (Shear 1973, p. 141, note 50). See *Agora* XXIX, pp. 443, 467, under D 16:6, P 6:5, P 6:6.

18. Young 1951, pp. 122–123, pyre 7, pl. 52:a and pp. 129–130, pyre 13, pl. 54:a. For the dating of these pyres, see *Agora* XXIX, pp. 438, 440, under B 19:6 and C 17:2, where the relevant kantharoi are listed.

19. E.g., *Agora* XXIX, p. 387, no. 1481, fig. 87, pl. 111.

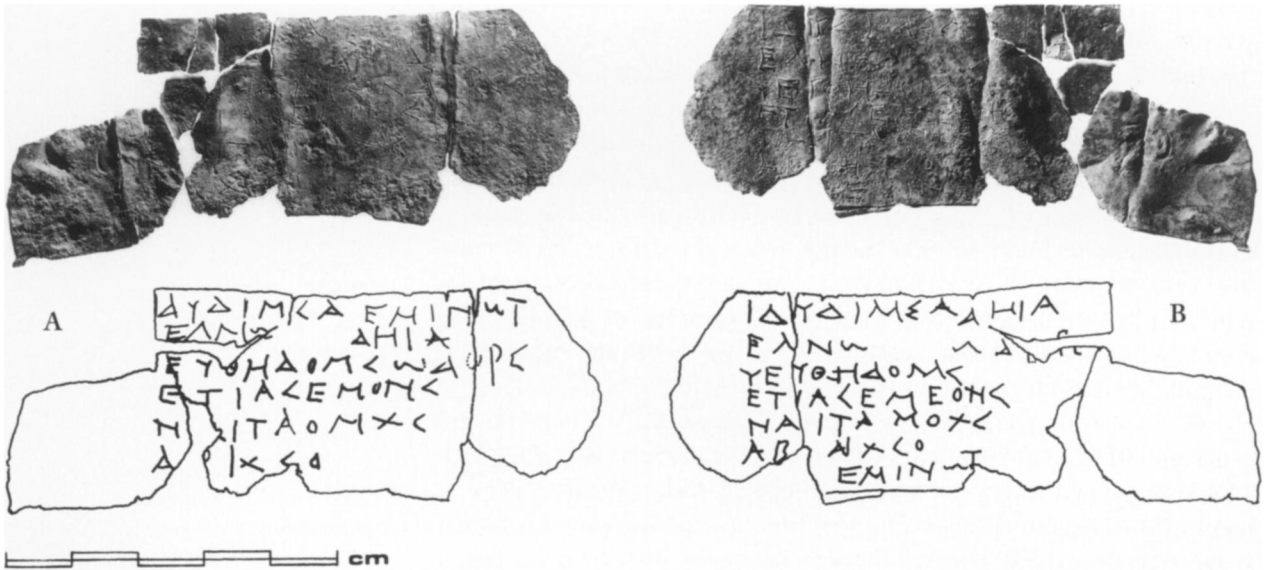
20. *Agora* XXVIII, C 1 (4th century); DTWü 58 (Attica, 4th century?); Curbera and Jordan, forthcoming, no. I (Mytilene, 4th century); Trakosopoulou-Salakidou 1997, pp. 153–164, no. 3 (Akanthos, 4th/3rd century); Bechtold and Brugnone 1998, pp. 118–127, no. 2 (Lilybaion, 2nd century).

21. E.g., DTWü 57 (Attica, 4th century?); *Kerameikos* III, pp. 96–97, no. 7 (late 4th century); Curbera and Jordan, forthcoming, no. II (Mytilene, late 4th century).

22. E.g., *Kerameikos* III, no. 2 (late 4th century).

23. E.g., ΧΟΣΜΑΡΔΑ for Δάμαρχος, Curbera and Jordan, forthcoming, no. III (Mytilene, 4th century).

24. E.g., ΝΟΤΑΡΑΥΕΩΔΑΤΑΚΝΑΤ/ΤΩΛΓ for Εὐάρατον καταδῶ, γλῶτταν, DTWü 66.1f (Attica, 4th century?); cf. Youtie 1938.



As found

Figure 4. Curse tablet IL 1504.
Drawing by D. R. Jordan

Agora inv. IL 1504

H. 0.035, W. 0.089 m

Late 4th/early 3rd century

Fig. 4

Transcription ²⁵		Text	
<i>Side A:</i>			
Col. I	Col. II	Col. I	Col. II
1 ΙΔΥΔΙΜΣΑ	7 ΕΜΙΝΩΤ	1 Διδυμίας	7 Τείμων
2 ΕΛΝΩ	8 ΔΗΙΑ	2 Λέων	8 'Ηδία
3 ΕΥΘΗΔΟΜΣ	9 ΩΔΟΡΣ	3 Ε(ύ)θύδημος	9 Δῶρος
4 ΕΤΙΑΣΕΜΟΝΣ		4 Τεισαμενός	
5 ΝΑΙΤΑΜΟΧΣ		5 'Αντίμαχος	
6 ΑΒΙΧΣΟ		6 Βά(κ)χιος	
<i>Side B:</i>			
Col. I	Col. II	Col. I	Col. II
1 ΙΔΥΔΙΜΣΑ	8 ΔΗΙΑ	1 Διδυμίας	8 'Ηδία
2 ΕΛΝΩ	9 ΩΔΟΡΣ	2 Λέων	9 Δῶρος
3 ΥΕΥΘΗΔΟΜΣ		3 Εύθύδημος	
4 ΕΤΙΑΣΕΜΕΟΝΣ		4 Τεισαμε(ε)νός	
5 ΝΑΙΤΑΜΟΧΣ		5 'Αντίμαχος	
6 ΑΒ[.]ΑΙΧΣΟ		6 Βά(α)[κ?]χιος	
7 ΕΜΙΝΩΤ		7 Τείμων	

25. In the tracing (Fig. 4) the vertical between M and Σ at A 1 is a split in the lead, not a deliberate mark.

The disordering of the individual names is not entirely consistent: instead of ΕΤΙΑΣΕΜΟΝΣ (A 4), ΕΤΙΑΣΕΜΕΟΝΣ (B 4), ΕΜΙΝΩΤ (A 7, B 7), and ΔΗΙΑ (A 8, B 8) we might have expected ΕΤΣΙΜΑΝΕΣΟ, ΕΤΜΙΝΩ, and ΔΗΑΙ, respectively. The spellings Τείμων (ΕΜΙΝΩΤ tab., A 7, B 7) for Τίμων and 'Ηδία (ΔΗΙΑ tab., A 8, B 8) for 'Ηδεία show that εἰ and ἰ here represent the same sound, [i:]. The usage (so Thraette 1980, §9.022), though

attested in Attica as early as ca. 350, remained rare there until the later 3rd century. The letter forms on our tablet being compatible with the date of the chytridion, we have here another very early instance of this pronunciation. If the spelling Βαχιος (*A* 6) reflects pronunciation, it is a rare early Attic example of the simplification κχ > χ, a possible contemporary being Βαχιδα at *DTAud* 72.2 (Attica, 4th or 3rd century?), although Leslie Threatte (1980, §43.05) records no instance before the late 2nd century; in any case, the name seems to have caused some difficulty at *B* 6. Because the left-hand edges of the text on both sides are regularly aligned, we assume that there never was a letter Υ at the beginning of *A* 3; this may reflect pronunciation (see Threatte 1980, §20.00*b* for rare instances of ευ > ε before consonants) or it may be simply a careless omission.

The names on the tablet are themselves all banal. Any hope of certainty in linking their bearers with known persons is lessened by the lack here of patronymics, demotics, or other such civic identification. We can look only for suggestive collocations of the names in inscriptions contemporary with the tablet. A search through the names of Athenian citizens listed in Osborne and Byrne 1994 reveals, for example, that three of those on the tablet were borne by *bouleutai* of the very late 4th century: Tisamenos of Kydathenaion in 304/3 (*Agora* XV, no. 61, line 69) and Antimachos of Kephale and Euthydemos of Acharnai in 303/2 (*Agora* XV, no. 62, lines 92, 144). Were these three men among the cursed? Also, in 303/2, one Timon of Pallene proposed a decree whereby the tribe Antiochis honored one Euthydemos, for whom the text gives no further civic identification (*SEG* III 117); this Euthydemos presumably need not therefore have been of Antiochis. If he is the Euthydemos of Acharnai (of the tribe Oineis), *bouletes* of that year, may the men cursed have included the proponent of the decree and its honorand? Alternatively, if we look in Osborne and Byrne 1996 for noncitizens resident in Attica, we find a Bakchios and a Leon, both Leukanians, together in a list of mercenary soldiers of around 300 B.C.: *IG* II² 1956, lines 48–49; the list includes, though, another Bakchios (of Thrace?), line 6, and a Timon of Lokris, line 169.

CONCLUSION

The original identification of the Agora pyres as infant burials is weakened by the identification of bones within them as animal rather than human. It was not only the bones, however, that led Young to argue that the pyres had a funerary character. Six of the pyres he published contained dummy alabastra, well known as grave offerings, and some of the other shapes typical of pyres are also commonly used as grave goods.²⁶ To the instances that Young lists we may add the fusiform unguentaria of one later pyre, for the shape figures prominently in Athenian graves of the Hellenistic period.²⁷ Furthermore, closely similar deposits, with an analogous assemblage of shapes, have been found beside graves in the Kerameikos, where their funerary character can hardly be in doubt.²⁸

The placement of a curse tablet in a chytridion, in what appears to have been a disturbed pyre or a pyrelike deposit, provides additional evi-

26. Young 1951, pp. 111–112. See *Agora* XXIX, pp. 212–213 for further discussion.

27. Pyre P 6:6, with unguentaria P 28980–28982 (Shear 1973, p. 141, note 50). For unguentaria in Hellenistic Athenian graves see, for example, *Kerameikos* IX, pls. 96, 97, and Boulter 1963, pp. 125–126, graves H–K, pl. 46.

28. E.g., *Kerameikos* XIV, pyres 4, 12, 17, 18, 21, 25, 28, 35–37, 54, 57, 60, 79, 126, and 159, pls. 28–32, 36–41, 43–45, 47, 48, 52, 54, and 55.

dence for the character of the pyres. The Classical and Hellenistic curse tablets with known findspots generally come from cemeteries or, less frequently, from chthonic sanctuaries.²⁹ Unfortunately, the record of provenience of Attic examples, more numerous in these periods than tablets from anywhere else,³⁰ is particularly bad,³¹ but tablets in increasing numbers from the cemetery in the Athenian Kerameikos³² and so far one from the sanctuary of the chthonic Pankrates³³ suggest that the pattern of deposit in Attica was the same as elsewhere.³⁴ In other words, one chose a place that had an association with the dead or the underworld. Our curse tablet in the chytridion is not the first to be found in a pot,³⁵ but it is the first recorded to have any association with a pyre. If a pyre could provide the required contact with the dead, it becomes even clearer that there was a chthonic element to these puzzling deposits.

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30. *DTWü* (220 examples), *DTAud* 48–79 (32), Ziebarth 1934 (23); for others see those listed at Jordan 1985b, pp. 158–166.
31. For the circumstances of the lack of this information, see *DTWü*, p. I.
32. *Kerameikos* III, pp. 89–100; *Kerameikos* XIV, pp. 142–151; Peek 1956, pp. 59–61, nos. 205–207; Jordan 1983; Costabile 1998.
33. Jordan, forthcoming; for the cult at the sanctuary, see Vikela 1994.
34. Excavations of the Athenian Agora show that in the Roman period curse tablets were also deposited in wells (see Jordan 1985a, p. 208, fig. 1 for a plan). One well there (well I on the plan) and another in the Kerameikos (Jordan 1980) have yielded curse tablets of the Classical and Hellenistic periods, but these tablets were probably not in situ when found.
35. For parallels, however, we have to look to Roman Imperial times: *SupplMag* 47 (Middle Egypt), 49, 50 (Oxyrhynchos?). These examples are erotic spells that follow a formula preserved at *PGM* IV 301–406, where instructions are given that the texts should be deposited beside graves.
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