

JAIME B. CURBERA

VENUSTA AND HER OWNER IN FOUR CURSE TABLETS FROM
MORGANTINA, SICILY

aus: Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik 110 (1996) 295–297

© Dr. Rudolf Habelt GmbH, Bonn

VENUSTA AND HER OWNER IN FOUR CURSE TABLETS
FROM MORGANTINA, SICILY*

In 1962 and 1963 the American excavations at Morgantina, Sicily, produced a group of ten lead tablets written in the 2nd or 1st cent. B.C. They were found in a chthonic sanctuary to the east of the theater. The nature of these texts has been the object of a recent debate, but today it is generally accepted that they are curses²⁷. Three tablets are hardly legible and one is uninscribed. Of the remaining six, four contain curses against a slave called Βενούστα²⁸. They are addressed to the same chthonic deities but use different verbs and tenses. Since the name of Βενούστα's owner varies in the different tablets, some scholars have thought that there was more than one victim. The aim of this paper is to show, with two simple restorations, that these four tablets were written against the same person.

In the first two tablets our victim is called τὸν Βενούσταν τοῦ Ῥούφου τὸν θεράπαιναν. The names *Venusta* and *Rufus* (the first typical of slaves) are two of the most frequent Latin *cognomina*²⁹, so that a name like Βενούστα Ῥούφου ἁ θεράπαινα, “*Venusta Rufi serva*”³⁰, should have been an ambiguous name. As a slave, *Venusta* has no family name, while her owner *Rufus* certainly had, but it is not expressed in these two tablets. A third text, SEG XXIX 932, runs as follows:

Γᾶ Ἑρμᾶ θεοὶ
κα[τ]αχθόνιοι
ἀπαγάγετε τὸν Βενού[σταν]
4 τοῦ Ῥούφο[υ . . .]ίου

Following a suggestion of L. Koenen, Chr. A. Faraone (l. c.) reads τοῦ Ῥούφο[υ τὸν] δού[[λαν], but this restoration does not fit either the space or the traces preserved. At the end of the text there is the genitive of a word ending in -ιος. The Greek suffix -ιος usually transcribes the Latin suffix -*ius*, characteristic of the Latin family names. We may assume, in

* My thanks to David R. Jordan for his suggestions and for improving my English

²⁷ See D. R. Jordan in *AM* 95 (1980) pp. 236–238; Chr. A. Faraone, in Chr. A. Faraone – D. Obbink, *Magika Hiera. Ancient Greek Magic and Religion*, Oxford 1991, p. 19; M. A. López Jimeno, *Las tabellae defixionis de la Sicilia griega*, Amsterdam 1991, pp. 189–192.

²⁸ These four texts are the following: i. N. Nabers, *AJA* 83 (1979) p. 464 no. 5 (= SEG XXIX, 931); ii. R. Stillwell, *AJA* 67 (1963) p. 165 (= M. Guarducci, *Epigrafia Greca* IV p. 250) and N. Nabers, *AJA* 83 (1979) p. 464 no. 4; iii. N. Nabers *AJA* 83 (1979) p. 464 no. 6 (= SEG XXIX, 932); iv. N. Nabers, *AJA* 83 (1979) p. 464 (= SEG XXIX 933). In D. R. Jordan's catalogue (*GRBS* 26, 1985, pp. 179–180) they have the numbers 118–121.

²⁹ See I. Kajanto, *The Latin Cognomina*, Helsinki 1965, p. 73 (*Venusta*) and p. 30 (*Rufus*). In Sicily there are at least six examples of *Rufus*: IG XIV 572 (Hadrantum); CIL X 7460 (Halaesa); CIL X 6980 (Messina); CIL X 7317 (Panormus); CIL X 7156 (Syracuse); CIL X 7441 (Thermae).

³⁰ M. Guarducci, *Epigrafia greca* IV p. 251, wrongly supposes that *Venusta* was the daughter of *Rufus*.

consequence, that the last letters belonged to *Rufus*' family-name, omitted in the two previous tablets. One may object that the normal order is to place first the *nomen* and then the *cognomen*, but from the end of the Republican period the inversion in the order of *nomen* and *cognomen* is well documented³¹.

A fourth tablet, SEG XXIX 933, mentions also a *Venusta*, but not a *Rufus*. Nabers' text is:

Γᾶ [Ἐ]ρμᾶ θεοὶ κατ[α]χθό-
νιοι ποτιδέξεσθε [Βε]-
νούσ[τ]αν τὰ[ν] Σεξι[του τ]ᾶν
4 θεράπαιν[αν]

He comments: "Here we seem to be concerned with another slave girl who was perhaps also named *Venusta* but who belonged to a *Sextus*." That is certainly possible, but it is easier to think that this tablet alluded to the same person. If so, we should think that, as in SEG XXIX 932, also in this case the owner's name was expressed in a different form. One could think that *Sextus* was *Rufus*' *praenomen*, but in the period when these tablets were written, the Latin *praenomina* were being displaced in the every-day language by the *nomina* and *cognomina*. Thus, in Σεξι[---] it is more likely to read *Rufus*' family-name, whose last part was partially preserved in SEG XXIX 932, that is, *Sextius* or, in Greek, Σεξιτιος³². To address a Roman only by his family-name may seem strange, but this phenomenon is well documented at this time. In *Acta Ap.* 10, 22, for example, a Roman centurion is called simply Κορνήλιος. In a *defixio* from Rhegium of the 1st cent. B.C. the victim is addressed as Σκρειβῶνις³³, and in a *defixio* from Licata, Sicily, of the 2nd–1st cent. B.C., a group of Latins, most probably *negotiatores*, are mentioned only by their family-names: Νῶνις, Κοσοῦτις, Πλῶτις, Τρεβῶνις, Νίνιος and Ἀπώνιος³⁴. It is not surprising to find in Morgantina a Roman addressed in this way.

In consequence, I propose to read SEG XXIX 932 and 933 as follows:

<p style="text-align: center;">Γᾶ Ἐρμᾶ θεοὶ κα[τ]αχθόνιοι ἀπαγάγετε τὰν Βενοῦ[σταν] 4 τοῦ Ῥούφο[ν Σεξιτ]ίου [τὰν θεράπαιναν?]</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Γᾶ [Ἐ]ρμᾶ θεοὶ κατ[α]χθό- νιοι ποτιδέξεσθε [Βε]- νούσ[τ]αν τὰ[ν] Σεξι[τίου τ]ᾶν θεράπαιν[αν]</p>
---	---

³¹ See O. Salomies, *Die römischen Vornamen*, Helsinki 1988, pp. 317–318, and the examples of p. 317 n. 1: Μαρκέλλος Κλαύδιος (SIG³ 774a), Λέπεδος Αἰμίλιος (IG II/III² 4142), etc.

³² The family name *Sextius* is well documented in Sicily. In 73–71 B.C. a *Sextius* was the first licitor of Verres in Sicily (Cic. *Verr.* 2.3.67, etc.). An inscription from Buscemi, Syracuse, of I A.D., mentions the Syracusan ἀμφίπολος Ἄπρος Σεξιτιος Αὐγουρεῖνος (PP 6 [1951] p. 71 no. 5), and we know of a *Sextius* also in Catania (CIL X 8045, 21).

³³ Published by D. Comparetti in *Archivio Storico della Calabria* 3 (1915) pp. 3–6 (it is missing in D. R. Jordan's catalogue). Comparetti dated the text in the 2nd cent. A.D., but the dative Κόραϊ and the lack of cognomen suggest an earlier date.

³⁴ SEG XXXI 837.

As M. Guarducci has pointed out, Venusta was “una persona abbastanza odiata”. The author of these curses has used three different combinations of the name of *Venusta*’s owner: single *cognomen* (Ῥοῦφος), *cognomen* and *nomen* (Ῥοῦφος Σέξιτιος), and single *nomen* (Σέξιτιος). This specification of the owner’s name shows his (or her) interest in clearly identifying the victim, and the variations in naming him show a tendency also evident in the use of different verbs and tenses in the different tablets: ποτιδέκεσθαι, ποτιδέξεσθαι and ἀπαγαγεῖν.