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*SEDE IN TUO LOCO: A FOURTH-CENTURY UTERINE PHYLACTERY IN LATIN
FROM ROMAN BRITAIN*

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SEDE IN TUO LOCO:
A FOURTH-CENTURY UTERINE PHYLACTERY IN LATIN FROM ROMAN BRITAIN

This magical protective text or ‘phylactery’ was found in 1994 during excavation¹ of a Romano-British rural site north-west of modern Peterborough (Cambs.), at West Deeping on the Roman road from *Durobrivae* (Water Newton) to *Lindum* (Lincoln). It is a rectangle of thin lead sheet, 54 by 103 mm, inscribed in New Roman Cursive of fourth-century date.² It was then rolled up from the bottom into a tight cylinder, a process which has left eight creases from side to side at widening intervals. The exposed edges, the top and bottom in particular, have been damaged by corrosion, but after unrolling and cleaning most of the text can still be read (see Fig. 1 and Pl. VI).

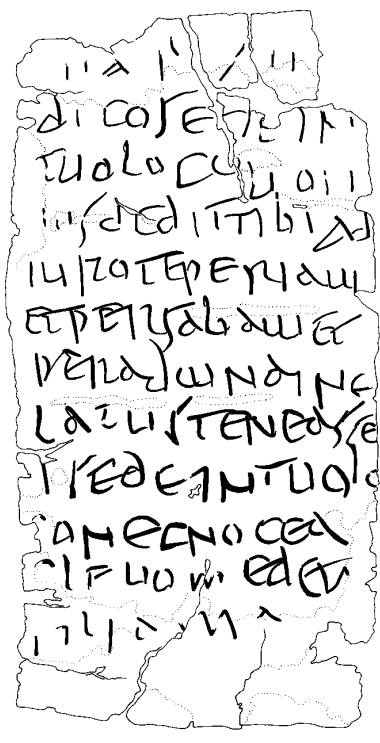
	Diplomatic transcription ³	Reconstructed text ⁴
	<p>ma.r[.]x.i[.] .]</p> <p>dicosedein</p> <p>tuolocoꝰo. .</p> <p>. .sdeditibiad</p> <p>5 iuroteperiaꝰ</p> <p>etpersabaꝰet</p> <p>peradꝰonaine</p> <p>latusteneasꝰe</p> <p>ꝰsedeintuolo</p> <p>10 ꝰonecnocea[.]</p> <p>ꝰleuomedem</p> <p>.i.liama[. . .]</p> <p>[. . .]</p>	<p>ma[t]r[i]x, [t]i[bi]</p> <p>dico: sede in</p> <p>tuo loco ꝰO. .</p> <p>. .S dedit tibi. ad-</p> <p>iuo te per Iaoꝰ</p> <p>et per Sabaoꝰ et</p> <p>per Adonai ne</p> <p>latus teneas, ꝰe-</p> <p>ꝰ sede in tuo lo-</p> <p>ꝰo nec nocea[s] 10</p> <p>ꝰleuomedem</p> <p>[f]iliam A[. . .]</p> <p>[. . .]</p>

Fig. 1 West Deeping Phylactery
Scale 1 : 1

¹ By Tempus Reparatum of Oxford on behalf of Lincolnshire County Council, directed by David Davison, who has allowed it to be published here. It was not stratified, but there is evidence from the site of increased economic activity and ‘Romanising aspirations’ after the mid-third century. Only two substantial phylacteries, both in Greek, have been hitherto found in Britain: *RIB* 436 (Caernarvon) = Kotansky, *Amulets*, No. 2, and a 30-line text from Vintry, London, which I hope to publish soon.

² Comparable hands are tabulated in R. S. O. Tomlin, *Tabellae Sulis: Roman inscribed tablets of tin and lead from the Sacred Spring at Bath* (1988), 94, also in B. W. Cunliffe (ed.), *The Temple of Sulis Minerva at Bath, II: the Finds from the Sacred Spring* (1988). This hand is firm and regular, but the scribe pressed harder on vertical strokes than on horizontal or curving strokes, which are sometimes faint or even lost. The drawing (Fig. 1) represents only what is visible.

³ Letters are transcribed as in the original, without spacing or punctuation. The dotted letters are now incomplete, and their reading depends on the context.

⁴ Lost letters have been restored where possible, words separated, modern punctuation and hyphenation added, proper names given initial capitals. The capital letters in 3–4 mark a word which has not been interpreted.

‘Womb, I say to you, stay in your place [. . .] has given to you. I adjure you by Iaō, and by Sabaō and by Adōnai, not to hold onto the side; but stay in your place, and not to hurt Cleuomedes(?) daughter of A[. . .].’

The invocation of the three magical protective deities in 4–7 identifies this lead tablet as a *phylacterium*, not a ‘curse tablet’ or *defixio*. It is addressed to a womb: even without restoring *matrix* in 1, this can be deduced from the distinctive command ‘Stay in your place’, which occurs in Greek spells intended to stop the womb from ‘moving’.⁵ The tablet is therefore a uterine phylactery to prevent ‘movement’ of the womb, or perhaps to cure the specific medical condition of displacement of the uterus. A non-specific Graeco-Egyptian haematite uterine amulet has already been found in Britain (*RIB* II.3, 2423.1), attesting the use there of magic for gynaecological disorders, but this tablet is the first textual evidence; indeed, it seems to be the first instance anywhere of such a spell translated into Latin.

Commentary⁶

1. *ma[t]r[i]x, [t]i[bi]*. No individual letter can be read with certainty, but this restoration accords with the surviving traces. Whatever has been lost was governed by *dico* (2), and must have been the person (or thing) addressed. Since this was the womb [see next note], one might at first expect the dative of *uterus, volva* or *matrix*, but this would be only 5, 6 or 7 letters long, in a line-width of 10–12 letters. So restore instead *matrix* (vocative) and the dative *tibi* governed by *dico*, a direct invocation of the womb like that in *PGM* VII 260–271 and Kotansky, *Amulets*, No. 51 [both quoted in the next note] and in some uterine amulets [see note to 4–7 below].

2–3. *sede in tuo loco*. There is no sign of the loop of D, and the succeeding letters are damaged, but the reading is guaranteed by its repetition in 8–10.

The phrase translates a command characteristic of Greek spells against ‘movement’ of the womb. There are four prime examples, all of them formularies in which the patient’s name would have been inserted when they were used. (i) *PGM* VII 260–271, a spell ‘for ascent of the uterus’: ‘I adjure you, O Womb, by [God the Creator], to return again to your seat, and not to turn to the right-hand side, nor to the left . . . but stay put and remain in your proper place.’⁷ (ii) Taylor-Schechter Collection, Cambridge, K 1.157, lines 12–23, part of a text on parchment from the Cairo geniza which reproduces *PGM* VII 260–271 almost word for word, but in Aramaic. The editors derive both spells from a common Greek original.⁸ (iii) Kotansky, *Amulets*, No. 51 (a gold tablet from Beirut): ‘I adjure you, O womb of *Ipsa* whom *Ipsa* bore – in order that you never abandon your place – in the name of the unconquerable, living

⁵ Cited in the commentary which follows, in the note to 2–3.

⁶ The following are cited in abbreviated form:

C. Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets chiefly Graeco-Egyptian* (1950)

C. Bonner, Amulets chiefly in the British Museum: a supplementary article, *Hesperia* xx (1951), 301–345

R. G. Collingwood and R. P. Wright, *The Roman Inscriptions of Britain*, Vol. II. 3 (1991)

A. Delatte and P. Derchain, *Les intailles magiques Gréco-Egyptiennes* (1964)

R. Kotansky, *Greek Magical Amulets*, Part I (1994)

H. Philipp, *Mira et Magica: Gemmen im Ägyptischen Museum der Staatlichen Museen* (1986)

K. Preisendanz (ed.), *Papyri Graecae Magicae. Die griechischen Zauberpapyri I–II*, 2nd ed. A. Heinrichs (1973–74).

⁷ A literal translation adapted from that by Scarborough in H. D. Betz (ed.), *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation* (1986), of ἐχορκίζω σε, μήτραν . . . ἀποκατασταθῆναι ἐν τῇ ἔδρᾳ μηδὲ κλιθῆναι εἰς τὸ δεξιὸν πλευρ[ῶ]ν μέρος μηδὲ εἰς τὸ ἀριστερὸν πλευρῶν μέρος . . . ἀλλὰ στάθῃ καὶ μένοις ἐν χωρίοις ἰδίοις.

⁸ P. Schäfer and S. Shaked (eds.), *Magische Texte aus der Kairoer Geniza*, I (1994), 108–119, a reference I owe to Roy Kotansky. For my knowledge of the text I depend upon the editors’ German translation. The only significant divergences from *PGM* VII 260–271 seem to be the magical names (*nomina barbara*) and the clause which follows the repetition of the ‘Stay in your place’ formula: (in your place) ‘in which you were created’.

Lord God (to) remain in your place, (that of) *Ipsa* whom *Ipsa* bore.’⁹ (iv) Bonner, *Studies*, 81–82 (a stone amulet now lost): ‘Raiser of the Sun’s disc, put the womb of so-and-so in its proper place’.¹⁰

The evidence is collected by Kotansky, *Amulets*, 265–267, and by Aubert.¹¹ The rationale of these spells is the ancient belief (e.g. in Plato, *Timaeus* 91C) that the womb is a separate living creature liable to move about a woman’s body and cause her various illnesses. This survived as a popular belief, despite being rejected as early as the second century A.D. by the Greek physician Soranus.¹² But these spells, so far as their language goes, could also apply to a specific medical condition: note the Latin of a late-Roman translation of Soranus’ description of displacement of the uterus and how to treat it. If the womb is displaced to one side, painful symptoms follow: ‘etenim <in> obliquum vel *latus* facta inclinatione . . .’ Downward displacement is particularly difficult to put right: ‘tunc et *sedendi* difficultas accidit’.¹³ In the description of a specific medical condition, therefore, the womb can be said in Latin to move to one ‘side’ [*latus*] and to be ‘seated’ or stabilised [*sedere*], in the same words as the West Deeping tablet.

The repetition of *sede in tuo loco* in 8–10, where syntactically the direct imperative interrupts two subjunctives of indirect prohibition (*ne teneas* and *nec noceas*), reinforces the impression that it was a formulaic phrase.

3–4. *VO. ./ .S dedit tibi*. *VO* looks fairly certain, followed by two downstrokes; *S* is certain, and before it there is space for 2–3 letters of which three downstrokes survive; so perhaps a word ending in *VS*. Syntactically a relative clause might be expected here: (the place) ‘which [the deity] has given to you’.¹⁴ Unfortunately *QVEM* or similar cannot be read. The subject of *dedit* has evidently been lost: the final *VS* (?) suggests it was masculine.¹⁵

4–7. *adiuro te per Iaw et per Sabaw et per Adonai*. The scribe retained Greek omega instead of writing Latin *O* when he transcribed these three divine names. This strengthens the impression given by the vocabulary [see notes to *sede in tuo loco*, *adiuro te*, and *latus*] that he was translating a Greek spell.

IAO, *SABAOTH* (better than *SABAO*) and *ADONAI* or *ADONAIE* are frequent in magical protective texts, individually or together, and derive from attributes of God in the Hebrew scriptures: *IAO* from *YHWH* (‘Jahweh’), *SABAOTH* (‘of Hosts’), and *ADONAI* (‘Lord’). Graeco-Roman magicians invoke them, however, not as attributes of the Jewish God, but as independent deities. They occur on uterine amulets: *IAO* quite often alone (e.g. in *RIB* 2423.1), but with *SABAOTH* on Philipp, *Mira et Magica*, 112 No. 184; and on Delatte and Derchain, *Intailles*, 247 Nos. 339 and 340; and all three deities, *ibid.* 257 No. 362 (with *ABRAXAS*) and on Bonner, *Amulets*, 326 No. 24.

⁹ ἐχορκίζω σε, μήτρα Ἰψας ἣν ἔτεκεν Ἰψα, ἵνα μήποτε καταλείψῃς τὸν τόπον σου, ἐπὶ τῷ ὀνόματι τοῦ κυρίου θεοῦ ζῶντος ἀνεικήτου μένειν ἐπὶ τῷ τόπῳ Ἰψης ἣν ἔ[τ]εκεν Ἰψα. *Ipsa*, Kotansky notes, is not a personal name but the Latin *ipsa* transcribed, ‘herself’, the place to ‘personalize’ the amulet by inserting a real name.

¹⁰ τάσσον τὴν μήτραν τῆς δεῖνα εἰς τὸν ἴδιον τόπον ὁ τὸν κύκλον τοῦ ἡλείου (ἐξάίρων). The Moon is being addressed.

¹¹ J. J. Aubert, Threatened Wombs: Aspects of Ancient Uterine Magic, *GRBS* xxx (1989), 421–449. Schäfer and Shaked [see above, n. 8] also cite G. Veltri, Zur Überlieferung medizinisch-magischer Traditionen: das μήτρα-Motiv in den *Papyri Magicae* und den Kairoer Geniza, as forthcoming in *Henoch* xvi (1994) or xvii (1995), but it has not appeared in either of them.

¹² *Gynaecia* (ed. P. Burguière, D. Gourevitch and Y. Malinas, 1994), i 4.

¹³ *Gynaecia* iii 17 = Caelius Aurelianus, *Gynaecia* (ed. M. F. Drabkin and I. E. Drabkin, 1951) ii 61–63, *De matricis inclinationibus et eversionibus*. This question is further discussed by Schäfer and Shaked [see above, n. 8], 116–117.

¹⁴ Compare the parallel clause in the Cairo spell [see above, n. 8], (the place) ‘in which you were created’. This is not found in *PGM* VII 260–271, which therefore cannot be their common Greek original.

¹⁵ *Dominus dedit tibi* does not really fit the surviving traces; this would be in parataxis, ‘the Lord has given (it) to you’. The goddess Isis, though an appropriate agent, cannot be read either: there is no trace of the first *S* where the surface is undamaged. Uterine amulets regularly invoke *ORORIOUTH*, but this is quite impossible.

Adiuro te is a literal translation of the ἐχορκίζω σε of *PGM* VII 260–271 and Kotansky, *Amulets*, No. 51, both quoted above [see note to 2–3]. It is a standard phrase, whether to ‘adjure’ a deity or to ‘adjure’ someone ‘by’ [*per*] a deity, both in religious texts and in ‘curse tablets’.¹⁶

7–8. *ne latus teneas*. Compare *PGM* VII 260–271 and Taylor-Schechter Collection K 1.157, 12–23 [see note to 2–3 above], in both of which the womb is told ‘not to turn to the right-hand side, nor to the left’. The Greek word is πλευρά, which Scarborough translates as ‘ribs’ with the comment that ‘perhaps the author was quite vague in the knowledge of internal anatomy’; but Liddell and Scott, *Lexicon* s.v., show that it regularly means ‘the side’ (of the body). For this *latus* is the Latin equivalent. Note also that the womb can be said medically [see note to 2–3 above] to incline ‘to one side’, <*in*> *latus*.

11–13. *Cleuomedem [f]iliam A[. . .]*. The first letter of 11 is C or G (if E, the cross-bar would have been visible); M is damaged by a break in the tablet; the last letter looks like another M half-lost to corrosion. In 12 the second down-stroke has a leftward extension, as if ligatured to an initial F.

These lines must contain the object of *noceas*, most likely a personal name, that of the woman for whom the phylactery was written, followed by her matronymic. This formulation is frequent in phylacteries, e.g. Kotansky, *Amulets*, No. 51, and *CIL* xiii 10026. 86 (citing other examples), as well as in ‘curse tablets’.¹⁷ But although [*f]iliam* is an acceptable reading, and implies a personal name in 11, this name is a problem: *Cleuomedes* is otherwise unattested.¹⁸

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¹⁶ See *TLL* s.v. *adiuro*.

¹⁷ D. R. Jordan, *CIL* VIII 19525 (B).2 *QPVVVLA = Q(UEM) P(EPERIT) VULVA*, *Philologus* cxx (1976), 127–132.

¹⁸ It might be a variant of the Greek name *Cleomedes* or *Cleumedes*, for which see P. M. Fraser and E. Matthews (eds.), *A Lexicon of Greek Personal Names*, I (1987), s.vv., but this seems to be masculine.



West Deeping Phylactery, Scale 2 : 1