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for
Eduqas GCSE Latin
Component 2



Latin Literature and Sources (Themes)
Superstition and Magic

For examination in 2021-2023

Source Images

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Information about several of the pictures in this booklet, together with useful additional material for the Theme, may be found in the support available online for **Cambridge Latin Course, Book I, Stage 7** and **Book III, Stages 22-23**.

Picture 1: road surrounded by tombs

This picture shows the tombs lining the road out of Pompeii towards Herculaneum. These marble tombs were in a prestigious location, as this was also the main route to and from Rome itself, and they commemorate important citizens and families who played an active role in the life of the town.

Key information for students

Roman burials took place outside towns as the dead were seen as having a *miasma* or contagion which could pollute the living. The Romans were concerned about being forgotten after death, however, and so the dead also required contact with the living and regular visits to keep them happy. Roman tombs often have dining rooms or gathering areas attached which would have been used on special occasions.

If the dead became unhappy, they could cause trouble for the living. Tombs were also seen as a place where the living could make contact with spirits and could use them for magical purposes.

Aside from the magical atmosphere of the necropolis, these areas often presented the traveller with real dangers as they provided cover and housing for bandits and robbers.

Additional notes for teachers

The Romans had specific rites and rituals to keep spirits happy, and to deal with angry spirits if needed. The *Parentalia* was a nine-day festival in February to honour the dead ancestors. It concluded with the public festival *Feralia* and offerings of food, wine and flowers.

The restless dead, however, especially those without family to perform ceremonies for them, would not be appeased by these actions and would need to be dealt with during the *Lemuria* festival in May when evil spirits were driven out. Ovid describes the ceremony in the *Fasti*, saying that the head of the household must get up at midnight and walk around the house

with bare feet, casting black beans over his shoulder and chanting “These I send; with these beans I redeem me and mine”. He would do this nine times, and then the whole house would loudly beat bronze whilst commanding the spirits to be gone.

The tombs of the untimely dead (victims of suicide, child deaths etc.) were seen as a suitable place to deposit curse tablets: the spirit, bitter at its own fate, might be more likely to come to your aid. The *miasma* could also be harnessed by removing objects from the tombs to be used in spells: this often meant that tombs were raided for their bones. Disturbing a tomb was punishable by death.

Picture 2: a defixio

This picture shows one of the curse tablets found at Bath (*Aquae Sulis*) in the reservoir under the King's Bath. It is 6.8 cm square, made of lead, with an inscribed text which has been written in Latin with each word reversed.

It says "May he who has stolen Vilbia from me dissolve like water. May she who has devoured her be struck dumb, whether it be Velvinna or Exsupereus or Verianus or Severinus, Augustalis, Comitianus, Catus, Minianus, Germanilla or Jovina."

Key information for students

Defixiones, were written on lead then folded or rolled, often pierced, then deposited in a magical location. The victim needed to be clearly identified, a divine power invoked and magical words used. The words might be arranged into a magical shape, and mystical pictures might also be included.

Additional notes for teachers

It is not clear exactly what the Romans themselves called these tablets. They appear all across the empire, and were used by pre-Roman societies as well.

Most *defixiones* are lovers' curses, although many relate to trade and sporting competitions. Unusually, most of the tablets found at Bath are appeals for justice, mainly relating to stolen property.

Defixiones seem to be particularly a way to achieve restitution for poorer individuals who were unable to afford or expect justice through the law courts.

There are some features common to most *defixiones*. They were usually written on lead (the Romans believed that some materials had sympathetic properties – the cold hard materials would invoke the cold finality of death and the coldness of the spirits being called upon – and they are folded or rolled, often pierced with a nail (this is

to 'bind' and 'fix' the magic, not to keep the contents secret). They were then deposited in a magical location. This was frequently a grave or chthonic sanctuary in order to invoke the spirits therein, or in a body of water.

The language used to write a *defixio* is also specific: a victim and a divine power should be identified. Then the tablet is made more magical by the use a range of devices: using *voces magicae*, magical words which have no obvious meaning; mixing up the alphabet being used – e.g. Greek and Latin letters; arranging the words into shapes, especially triangles and winged shapes; writing upside down, or in spirals or as a 'boustrophedon' text (i.e. with lines read in alternate directions); including mystical pictures such as demons, bound figures and mummies. As can be seen from these examples, 'twistiness' was seen as inherently magical.

Picture 3: preparations for a sacrifice

This relief from an altar is housed in the museum in the Royal Palace in Stockholm.

Key information for students

This is a typical scene of sacrifice. The flaming altar stands in front of the temple. The *victimarius* with his sacrificial axe leads the willing victim, decorated lavishly, to be slaughtered. The priest, head covered, stands at the altar, ready to conduct the ritual. Beside him, a figure holds a tray ready to conduct offerings, such as the *mola salsa* – sanctified grain which would be sprinkled on the animal's back as a sign of dedication to the gods.

Additional notes for teachers

The Roman sacrifice had six phases, each of which had to be carried out smoothly for it to be deemed a success.

The victim, usually a domesticated animal such as an ox or pig, is led in a parade (*pompa*) towards the altar. This victim must be blemish-free and garlanded, and should behave calmly throughout, giving the impression that it is in some way 'willing'. Next offerings and prayers are made at the altar. This might take the form of a libation (pouring out of wine) and the burning of incense. The prayers must be completed without any stumbling over the words, otherwise it would have to be started afresh. Once this was completed, the victim was dedicated to the gods. This was done through a ritual which symbolically took it out of our world and placed it into the world of the gods. Wine and *mola salsa* (sacred grain) were poured over the animal, and the knife passed over its back.

The killing was carried out by a team of people, although only the *victimarius* is depicted here. The victim would be stunned (some sources show a mallet being used) then the throat of the animal was cut and it was bled to death. If the animal struggled then it was a bad portent.

Once the victim was dead, the entrails would be inspected by a *haruspex* for any signs of blemishes or abnormalities which would indicate that the offering was ill-omened. If this was the case, then they would start again with a fresh animal. If all was well, the entrails were burned as an offering to the gods and then the remainder of the animal cooked and portioned out to the gathered crowd. This would not happen in all sacrifices; animals were sometimes offered in their entirety to the gods (a *holocaust*).

Picture 4: bronze model of a liver

This is a life-sized bronze model of a sheep's liver, found in Piacenza in Italy (ancient Etruria) and dating from the 2nd century BC. The inscriptions are Etruscan, although the people would have been speaking Latin by this time.

Bronze is associated with magic; iron was, in contrast, for warding off magic.

Key information for students

This model would have been used by a *haruspex* as they read in the entrails of a sacrificial victim in order to tell the future. They would be checking for blemishes or abnormalities which would indicate misfortune or an unfavourable sacrifice.

Additional notes for teachers

The *haruspices* were a college of priests who interpreted unusual events and prodigies, including lightning and monstrous births as well as the reading of entrails. The origins of this priesthood seem to be Etruscan (pre-Roman Italian tribe), and the practice shares elements with Hittite and Babylonian practices. Similar models to this one have been found from Mesopotamia (one particularly good example is in the British Museum). It is possible that the Romans even fostered the idea that the *haruspex* was in some way foreign in order to demarcate these rites from other priesthoods which carried out divination.

After an animal had been sacrificed, the innards would be read by the *haruspex*.

This model liver is probably a guide to interpreting the organ. It is marked out to show a map of the heavens, each section inscribed with the name of a god. This indicates to the *haruspex* the relationship between the liver and the world of the divine. If there was a blemish, the sacrifice would be carried out again unless it was impossible to do so.

By the 1st century BC, there seems to have been some scepticism surrounding this form of divination, even though augury and dreams were still followed. Cicero is frequently sarcastic about *haruspices*, and quotes Cato the Elder as saying "How can two *haruspices*, upon meeting, not laugh at each other?"

Picture 5: Romulus' and Remus' augury

This picture is a print by Giovanni Battista Fontana dating from around 1573. It shows the legendary brothers Romulus and Remus using augury to resolve their dispute over who should be the ruler of their new city.

Key information for students

Romulus and Remus had decided to found a city but, being twins, could not reach a decision who would rule. It was agreed therefore that the gods should decide and that augury (the reading of bird signs) would be the method of determining their will. Romulus climbed to the top of the Palatine Hill to make his observations, and Remus climbed to the top of the Aventine.

Remus was the first to receive a sign, seeing six vultures. But whilst they were reporting this sign, Romulus saw twelve vultures. Each declared himself the winner, Remus because he had received a sign first and Romulus because he had seen the greater number.

At this point, according to Livy, the competition dissolved into taunts and violence. Eventually Remus was killed and thus the city became Romulus' and Rome was its name. The famous version of the story is that Romulus himself slew his brother after Remus had jumped over the new walls whilst mocking him and his nascent city.

Additional notes for teachers

For more on augury in general, see the notes on picture 6.

Picture 6: Augustus (centre) as an augur

This picture shows the *Vicus Sandaliarius* altar from Rome, now on display in the Uffizi gallery in Florence.

It was dedicated in 2 BC and was dedicated to the *lares Augusti* –the imperial cult. Augustus himself is in the middle, flanked by a member of his family to the left (probably Gaius Caesar) and a female figure on the right (perhaps Livia but more likely a priestess of the *Magna Mater*). Unusually, the *lares* themselves are on one side of the altar rather than on the front.

Key information for students

The *augur* is in the middle, head covered, holding an augural staff (*lituus*). This was used by an augur to mark out the sky into sections in order to observe the behaviour of birds. The left-hand side was generally considered unlucky. At his feet is a chicken pecking at the ground. This indicates another aspect of augury: the observation of birds eating.

Additional notes for teachers

The emperor Augustus is depicted with his head covered (he has pulled his toga over his head at the back, *capite velato*). This was traditional when acting in a religious role. In his left hand he holds a scroll: a volume of religious instruction. In his right hand he holds a curved augural staff, the *lituus*. The observation of chickens pecking was part of the *tripudium*, the military auspices taken before a campaign. In 2 BC Gaius led a military campaign to Asia Minor, Parthia and Armenia.

Augures were mainly concerned with the observation of bird signs, but they also read signs in thunder and lightning, and the behaviour of animals. The ceremony and observation itself would be carried out by the magistrates who wished to know the will of the gods, the *augur* advising and confirming that

everything had been carried out correctly.

The *augur* used his *lituus* to mark out a religious space called a *templum*. Any place designated a *templum* was a window of communication with the divine. A building could be a *templum*, but so could any space.

Interestingly, Roman *augures* tended to face south when they marked out divine sections, and so the east –the lucky direction- was on his left (*laevus* = left / lucky). Greeks, however, faced north and so for them left was unlucky (*sinister*). Roman authors, especially the Augustan poets, confuse the whole matter by describing things as if they themselves were actually Greeks, so the left-hand side is unlucky in the texts we have here!