

Water as a Cruel Element in the Roman World*

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The present study originated in my involvement with the topic of "Roman water", which has stretched over several years.¹ Having devoted some time to the matter, I am of course well aware that in all cultures, ours included, water is regarded as a beneficiary and healthy element. To give a paper called "Water as a Cruel Element" (or, if "cruel" is too strong a word, we might speak about "Water as a Negative Element") might therefore seem somewhat awkward. However, a converse inquiry turns up more than meets the eye at first glance – although perhaps nothing quite as sensational as the finds which awaited E. H. Thompson beneath the surface of the Mayan sacrificial pond at Chichen Itzá.

Before embarking on my investigations, it should also be conceded that the present work by no means is the first to mention negative features connected with water in antiquity,² although it would seem that the cases dealt with below have not been considered in the way done here.

As background, a brief glance at the Greek world and at Greek concepts will be necessary. Pindar's first Olympian ode starts with the words "Ariston men hydor" – best of all things is water. This is no accidental phrase, and is probably a proverbial saying. Thales designated water as

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¹ See my *The Water Supply of Ancient Rome. A Study of Roman Imperial Administration*, Helsinki 1991, preceded by "Statio aquarum", in: E. M. Steinby (ed.), *Lacus Iuturnae I*, Rome 1989, 127–147 and a few other works.

² See e.g. K. Preisendanz, "Fluchtafel (Defixiones)", *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* 8 (1972) 1–29, esp. 6 and 20 f.; and A.-M. Tupet, *La magie dans la poésie latine*, Lille 1976, esp. 19 f. and 27 f.

the basic element, and water is praised on a number of other occasions in Pindar's lyrics; so for instance in the third Olympian ode an almost identical passage occurs (3,42).³

What we know about the Roman world can only strengthen the presupposition that water was a thoroughly positive phenomenon. There is no need to go into details about the various cults and rites which were connected with the element water: the Romans venerated the nymphs and sacred springs (it would in fact seem that all springs were sacred), we have the cult of Fons or Fontus, of Tiberinus pater and other rivers and their gods, and we have the cult of Neptunus.

Neptunus, the god of the Ocean, might provide the first clue for the present investigation. At a younger age, when indulging in novels about World War II, I read a book called "The Cruel Sea" (written by Nicholas Monsarrat). How did the ancients look upon the salt sea? Indeed, even though the Mediterranean was a unifying element rather than a dividing one in classical antiquity, we can safely assume that to the average country man the sea would have been an unfriendly element. The Romans were not a seafaring nation. Of course the aristocracy enjoyed their *villae maritimae* on the coast,⁴ but when it came to undertaking a voyage by sea, this was considered a most frightening thing to do.⁵ There is also brief mention in the *Fasti Ostienses* for A.D. 147: *aqua alta fuit*,⁶ to remind us of the perils of living near large and intimidating bodies of water.

Should we therefore, when talking about water in antiquity, firstly make a distinction between the dangerous and unfriendly salt water of the sea, and sweet water in springs and rivers? Moreover, does it perhaps follow that other distinctions might be necessary as well? In proposing

³ Thus G. Kirkwood, *Selections from Pindar*. Edited with an Introduction and Commentary, (Amer. Philol. Ass. Textbook ser. 7), Chicago 1982, 48. On Pind. Olymp. 3,42 and the mention of water see e.g. M. J. Verdenius, *Commentaries on Pindar I*, (Mnemosyne Suppl. 97), Leiden 1987, 36, who also stresses the great importance attributed to water by the Greeks.

⁴ L. Friedländer, *Darstellungen aus der Sittengeschichte Roms I* (9. ed), Leipzig 1919, 469–473.

⁵ See L. Casson, *Travel in the Ancient World*, Old Woking Surrey 1974, 149 f.: "And the Romans, a lubberly lot in general, were particularly nervous when it came to sea voyages ... the farewell poems they address to friends departing for overseas sometimes read like elegies on their certain deaths."

⁶ See L. Vidman, *Fasti Ostienses*, Prague 1982, 51.

this, I argue that this approach will have consequences for other aspects of the Roman world as well.

To return briefly to the Greeks: the Greek world actually provides a first reminder that water can be evil and cruel. In the Greek Underworld ran the river Styx, known especially from Homer but also mentioned by Hesiod. There was a real world counterpart to this mythical river, the "stygòs hydor", a gigantic waterfall in North Arcadia. Its water was regarded as bringing death to both men and animals, and so, for example, it is commonly said in ancient literary sources that Alexander the Great was poisoned by water from the Styx, as can be seen in Pausanias 8,18,4-6.⁷

In the Roman world, we find cruelty, or at least evil deeds, in connection with water on many occasions. The first case concerns evil emperors and water in the City of Rome. As there was a huge supply of water through the aqueducts in Rome, there were also very large sewers for drainage. Basically, the same water which first was brought in through the aqueducts, was then washed out into the Tiber through the sewers; as the geographer Strabo put it (Geogr. 5,3,8): "And water is brought into the city through the aqueducts in such quantities that veritable rivers flow through the city and the sewers."

Clearly, the quality of the water changed in this process. From drinking water it turned to sewage water at some point. Is it at all appropriate to talk about water here? To us it would seem to be polluted water, while still being water. How did the Romans look at the matter? Was it still the same element to them?⁸ Be this as it may, if we turn to the *Historia Augusta*, it is clear that the water of the sewers on several occasions fulfilled a cruel function. In the *vita* of the emperor Elagabal it is told that after the emperor had been killed, his body was dragged through the sewers and finally thrown into the Tiber (HA. Heliog. 33,7; HA. Heliog. 17,1: *addita iniuria cadaveri est, ut id in cloacam milites mitterent* and 17,2: *in Tiberim abiectum est, ne umquam sepeiri posset*). Although the *Historia Augusta*

⁷ For this, see in general RE IV A (1932) 457-463 "Styx" (Bölte).

⁸ Most liquids contain water to some extent, but at what point do they change from "water" and become "a different liquid"? The question is perhaps not as academic as it might seem at first. For instance water and wine are totally different entities to us, but one may notice the comment by Verdenius (*supra* note 3), 43 f. when discussing Pindar's conceptions: "The use of wine or honey instead of water is most naturally explained if these liquids are assumed to be 'pregnant' forms of water ...".

largely is fictitious regarding Elagabal, there is also the testimony of Cassius Dio to vouchsafe for these events (79,1,1; 79,20,2). In this episode the sewers and the Tiber clearly have negative features, since they are essential instruments in the vengeance on the dead emperor. There is also a mention that after the murder of Commodus, the Senate decided that his corpse was to be thrown into the Tiber, but Pertinax later overruled this decision (HA. Comm. 17,4).

The *Historia Augusta* further tells that after his death, Elagabal was given the name Tiberinus, among others. This is clearly not an honorific name, but a nickname due to the fact that the corpse was thrown into the Tiber. Recently Géza Alföldy has given a more complex explanation for the name. He points to the fact that in the Tiber there lived a species of fish commonly called Tiberinus, a species known to live off the wastes washed into the river through the sewers. According to Alföldy the name *Tiberinus* referred to this fish, which was regarded as repulsive by the Romans.⁹ If Alföldy is right, this would mean that also the Tiber and what lived in it were regarded in quite a negative light by the Romans. In any case the water of the sewers was, understandably enough, seen in a negative light.

We now come to the main evidence to be discussed here; the so-called *tabellae defixionis* or curse tablets, a rather common feature in the Graeco-Roman world. Over 100 lead tablets, found in the sacred spring in present day Bath in England, in ancient *Aquae Sulis*, have recently been masterfully edited and commented upon by Roger Tomlin.¹⁰

Most of these inscribed curse tablets from Bath are concerned with

⁹ G. Alföldy, *Die Krise des römischen Reiches. Geschichte, Geschichtsschreibung und Geschichtsbetrachtung. Ausgewählte Beiträge*, Stuttgart 1989, 217-228 (earlier as "Zwei Schimpfnamen des Kaisers Elagabal: Tiberinus und Tractatitius", *BHAC* 1972/ 1974, Bonn 1976, 11-21. Some doubt does however pertain to how the fish was regarded; in Macrobius (*Sat.* 3,16,11-18) one gets the impression that the fish was much appreciated, even though it fed in the vicinity of the *Cloaca Maxima*. Thus also e.g. R. Lanciani, *The Ruins and Excavations of Ancient Rome*, London 1897, 15 f., who mentions that fish from the Tiber tasted well still in his days. I hope to deal more closely with the nicknames of Elagabal in the near future in a paper on pejorative nicknames of the Roman emperors.

¹⁰ R. S. O. Tomlin, *Tabellae Sulis. Roman Inscribed Tablets of Tin and Lead from the Sacred Spring at Bath* [part II.4 of B. Cunliffe (ed.), *The Temple of Sulis Minerva at Bath*], Abingdon 1988.

thefts; people who have suffered thefts ask the gods that the thieves may be punished in various ways.¹¹ Sometimes the hoped-for punishments are described in detail, and are certainly cruel to some extent. It is obviously no accident that the curse tablets have all been found in the well,¹² but this is perhaps one aspect which Tomlin does not explore to the full in his commentary. He writes, "But if this healing process be credited to the divinity of the uncanny hot spring, it is an easy step to believing that the process can be reversed, that the classical features of Sulis Minerva can become a gorgon's head."¹³ The question is, of course, how to explain such a reversal.

The important thing for this enquiry is that, even though the spring at Bath certainly was thought to cure illness, its water (or forces connected to the water) was evidently also considered to provide the power to punish and to cause pain. To be sure, the people who inscribed the curse tablets certainly thought that they were acting for a good cause, but this does not detract at all from the fact that in this way water was connected also with punishment and, by this perspective, with cruelty.

D. R. Jordan, one of the greatest experts on *tabellae defixionis*, points out that curse tablets have been found in wells located not just at Bath, but also in Athens, for example. Altogether, of the over 600 tablets for which the source locations are known, at least 200 come from wells, twelve from baths, and six from fountains.¹⁴

¹¹ That thieves are cursed on *tabellae defixionis* is actually a phenomenon which occurs all over the Roman world; see the list of such texts in H. Solin, "Tabelle plumbee di Concordia", *Aquileia Nostra* 48 (1977) 145-164, esp. 148 f.

¹² That the lead curse tablets at Bath had been put in the spring for magical reasons can be regarded as certain. But this explanation is of course not valid for all lead tablets found in wells. For instance, the archive of the Athenian cavalry, inscribed on lead tablets, was found in two wells in Athens. The lead tablets had been put there either because they needed to be hidden in the face of an enemy attack [thus K. Braun, "Der Dipylon-Brunnen B1. Die Funde", *AM* 85 (1970) 129-269, esp. 194], or just because the wells provided convenient places for discarding obsolete documents [thus J. H. Kroll, "An Archive of the Athenian Cavalry", *Hesperia* 46 (1977) 83-140, esp. 100 f.].

¹³ Tomlin (*supra* note 11), 102.

¹⁴ D. R. Jordan, "Defixiones from a Well near the Southwest Corner of the Athenian Agora", *Hesperia* 54 (1985) 205-255, esp. 205-207. Other works by Jordan on the *tabellae defixionis* include "A Survey of Greek Defixiones Not Included in the Special Corpora", *GRBS* 26 (1985) 151-197, and the review mentioned in note 21.

Clearly, the spring of Minerva Sulis was not unique in its ability to cause wrongdoers punishment and pain, as a few explicit texts show. A curse tablet from Siscia in the Balkans asks the river god Savus to drown the enemies of the supplicant,¹⁵ while the late antique writer Solinus mentions healing springs in Sardinia which also had the power to blind thieves.¹⁶ A late antique lead tablet from Carthage asks *libera me de aquas malas*,¹⁷ and the “*aquae malae*” (rain or hail?) again remind us of the fact that water sometimes had negative qualities. One could also point to the Egyptian magical papyrus, which prescribes that water used for drowning a cat should be employed in a curse against charioteers and racehorses.¹⁸

Why water at Bath and in other places was thought to possess these sinister powers is an interesting and difficult question. The first explanation which logically comes to mind is probably that, because the water came from below, it was thought to make up a connection to the chthonic deities and to the dark forces of the Underworld.¹⁹ We know in fact that curse tablets often were addressed to chthonic deities and placed in shrines or springs belonging to these powers.²⁰ A specific body of water, Lake Avernus in Campania, actually was regarded by the Romans as con-

¹⁵ AE 1921, 95, with much improved reading by E. Vettters, “Eine lateinische Fluchtafel mit Anrufung des Wassermannes”, *Glotta* 36 (1958) 204–208 and idem, “Eine lateinische Fluchtafel mit Anrufung des Wassermannes”, *Glotta* 39 (1961) 127–132. Vetter’s second contribution improved some readings on the basis of a better photograph. It would seem that his second reading disposed of the “bösen Wassergeister”, *deprementes*, which appeared along with the god Savus in the first version. Still, that Savus represents an evil or punitive water force is beyond doubt.

¹⁶ Solin. collect. 4,7: *nam quisquis sacramento raptum negat, lumina aquis adtrectat: ubi periurium non est, cernit clarius, si perfidia abnuit, detegitur facinus caecitate et captus oculis admissum fatetur* (mentioned by Tomlin, supra note 11, 102).

¹⁷ AE 1939, 136 discussed by H. Solin, *Eine neue Fluchtafel aus Ostia*, *Comm. Hum. Litt.* 42,3, Helsinki 1968, 31 no. 43.

¹⁸ See H. D. Betz (ed.), *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation I*, Chicago 1986, 18 f. = K. Preisendanz (& A. Henrichs), *Papyri Graecae Magicae. Die griechischen Zauberpapyri I* (2. ed.), Stuttgart 1973, no. III,1–3 and III,40–44.

¹⁹ This is the explanation advocated by e.g. Preisendanz (supra note 3), 5 f.

²⁰ D. R. Jordan, “Curses from the waters of Sulis” (= review of Tomlin’s book), *JRA* 3 (1990) 437–441, esp. 437.

stituting the entrance to the Underworld²¹ (but to my knowledge no curse tablets have been found in the lake).

However, a majority of the curse tablets contain no mention of chthonic deities, and it might well be that another explanation for the immersion of these tablets in wells or other bodies of water must be sought. A rather particular explanation was given by some authorities at the beginning of this century, namely that tablets were thrown in wells *ut per quam via pateret ad manes eorum, qui naufragio perierunt*.²²

A third explanation is possible: in tablets excavated by Jordan in Athens we find formulas such as “that you may chill him and his purposes ... the blackening out and chilling of Eutygianus”, “let Attalos the ephebe grow cold”, “I hand over to you Karpodora ... and Trophimas ... that you may chill them and their purposes” (the Greek word is *catapsucho*).²³ Here it is clear that the punishment is described as chilling, i. e. weakening, the forces of the enemy. Jordan uses the term “sympathetic magic” for this phenomenon; “the phrase [involving the verb *catapsucho*] referring no doubt to the chill of the lead itself or of the water in the wells”.²⁴ This may well be another explanation for why water (and lead) were thought of as appropriate contexts for a curse tablet, even if the concept of “sympathetic magic” might be worth a closer look in another place.²⁵

To sum up: It cannot be denied that the Romans (and other ancient people) thought that water at least occasionally possessed sinister, evil, or indeed cruel, forces.

²¹ See the discussion in Tupet (*supra* note 3), 27 f.

²² See A. Audollent, *Defixionum tabellae*, Paris 1904, cxvii, taking up a suggestion of Wünsch. It was believed that such tablets normally were thrown in the sea or in rivers, and that wells were used only where such water bodies were not available. Audollent (*ibid.*) furthermore refuted an earlier suggestion that a particular well near Arezzo had been used for a curse tablet because it produced an evil smell which might even have been lethal.

²³ The verb appears in all the thirteen curse tablets presented by Jordan, *Hesperia* 1985, 214–233 and 248 f. The examples are taken from tablets nos. 1, 4, and 7.

²⁴ Jordan, *Hesperia* 1985, 207, 241 f.

²⁵ The studies on submerged *tabellae defixionis* and sympathetic magic referred to by Jordan are W. Sherwood Fox, “Submerged tabellae defixionum”, *AJPh* 33 (1912) 301–310 and T. Hopfner, “Mageia”, *RE* XIV (1930) 301–393, esp. 311 and 315.

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Preface

The present volume is a collection of the papers read at the conference which was held in May 1991 at the University of Turku on the theme *The Politics of Cruelty in the Ancient and Medieval World*. The general aim of the conference was to advance interdisciplinary and international collaboration in the fields of humanistic studies and particularly to bring together scholars who have common interests in the study of our past. The choice of the subject of cruelty naturally resulted from different study projects concerning the political and social history of late antiquity and the Middle Ages – the Roman imperial propaganda, the conflict between paganism and christianity, the history of the Vandals, the Byzantine empires, the Medieval miracle stories, to name some of them. Perhaps also contemporary events had an influence on the idea that cruelty could be the theme which conveniently would unite those various interests. And the idea emerged irrespective of considerations whether or not we should search for models in the Ancient World or join those who, as it seems to have been a fashion, insist on investigating what we have common with the Middle Ages.

One might argue – and for a good reason indeed – that cruelty is a subject for anthropologists and psychologists, not for philologists and historians. Where does the student of history find reliable criteria for defining the notion of cruelty in order to judge the men of the past and their actions, to charge with cruelty not only individuals but also nations and even ages (“the *crudelitas imperatorum*”, “the Dark Ages”, “the violence of the Vikings”, “the cruel Muslims”)? Is it not so that the only possibility is to adapt our modern sensibilities to the past and to use our own prejudices in making judgements about others? The prejudices – yes, but this is just what makes the theme interesting for the historian because our prejudices – our conception of cruelty, for instance – are part of the heritage of past centuries. The events of our own day – maybe more clearly than ever – have demonstrated that we live in a historical world. When we investigate the history of the concept of cruelty we, as it were, look ourselves at a mirror and learn to understand ourselves better. The concept of cruelty has two sides. It is a subjective concept used to define and describe those persons

and those acts that according to the user of the term are negative, harmful, humiliating, harsh, inhumane, primitive and unnatural; in everyday life it is associated with religious habits – with crude remnants of primitive religion, it is associated with passion, an uncontrolled mental state, or with violence and with the exercise of power without justice. On the other hand the term is used to classify people by their ethical and social habits, to accuse, to invalidate and injure others; therefore the accusation of cruelty refers to basic features of ancient and also Medieval thought, to the fear of anything foreign, to the aggressive curiosity to define and subsume others simply by their otherness.

Such were the considerations which gave inspiration for arranging the “cruelty”-seminar. The conference was accommodated by the Archipelago Institute of the University of Turku, in the island Seili (“Soul island”), in an environment of quiet beauty of the remote island and sad memories of the centuries when people attacked by a cruel fate, lepers or mentally ill, were banished there from the civilized community.

The conference was organized by the Department of Classics of the University of Turku in collaboration with the Departments of Cultural History and Italian language and culture of the same university. It is a pleasure to us to be able to thank here all those who helped to make the congress possible. We would like especially to express our gratitude to Luigi de Anna and Hannu Laaksonen for their assistance in preparing and carrying out the practical arrangements. The financial assistance given by the Finnish Academy and by the Turku University Foundation was also indispensable. Finally, we close by expressing our gratitude to Gerhard Jaritz, the editor of the *Medium Aevum Quotidianum* for the *Gesellschaft für Erforschung der materiellen Kultur des Mittelalters*, for his kind cooperation and for accepting this collection of papers to be published as a supplement to the series of the studies on the Medieval everyday life. One of the starting-points for organizing the “cruelty”-conference was the firm conviction that the Graeco-Roman Antiquity did not end with the beginning of the Middle Ages, but these two eras form a continuum in many respects, and the continuity was felt not only in the literary culture, in the Greek and Latin languages which were still used, but also in the political, social and religious structures of the Middle Ages. We think that this continuity is amply demonstrated by the studies of the present volume.

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