

However, Meid shortly discusses methodological issues in the beginning of his chapter on religion. He writes about the difficulty of making statements on the essence of Celtic religiosity and how there always is a speculative element involved, when we discuss religion. For a historian of religions these kinds of claims sound banal. I would like to argue that this is the case—not only with religion—but with all aspects of Celtic culture. Religion is nothing special as a topic of scholarly research. The speculative element is as much present in the etymological interpretations of social structures or legal practices as in religion. Interpretations of archaeological artefacts or the written sources by Classical scholars include as much of a speculative element as interpretations of religious practices. I cannot see how studying religion as a cultural phenomenon would be somehow more (or less) difficult and speculative than any other aspect of Celtic culture. For Meid religion appears as something subjective and mysterious that cannot be apprehended through scholarship. But this is true with other aspect of culture as well, if we try to learn what they mean to individual members of the society. Naturally, as scholars of religion, we must know which battles to choose. Much can be said about religion without having to discuss its subjective meaning for individuals. This is why it is so important to place it in the proper cultural framework and approach it as an inherently cultural thing and not something that is beyond and outside culture.

Meid's work can be recommended as an introductory reading not only for general audience but also for introductory courses for Celtic Studies. It provides a sane, well argued, and scholarly overview of the field and our research object. Despite some of its failings, it belongs among the best available introductions to the field.

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Ancient curses, medieval charms?

Bernard Mees: *Celtic Curses*. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press. 2009. viii + 229 pages; 12 illustrations. Price £60.00. ISBN 978 1 84383 457 1.

Dr. Bernard Mees, who has published important studies on a broad range of topics, has given his newest publication the concise but ambitious title *Celtic Curses*; in the same spirit, the cover of the book maintains that the work is 'the first comprehensive study of early Celtic cursing'. As such, Mees' work supplements the scholarship published within the past years concerning magical traditions in the insular context.¹ This contribution also addresses a gap in the coverage to date by calling attention to texts from the late Iron Age and the Roman period, some of which have only been discovered recently.

The approach taken by Mees in his challenging quest to map Celtic cursing is comparative and philological, including the close readings of the various texts as well as their interpretations. This way of studying the subject is much to be welcomed and is, as Mees himself argues, more conducive to understanding than, say, an exclusively grammatical analysis of the sources. Mees makes a particular reference to 'recent developments in the understanding of ancient magic, of the rhetoric, rites and genres which have been elucidated in recent classical research' (p. 9). This could almost be read as an answer to the question Dr. John Carey posed a decade ago as to why the early Irish evidence on magic has been neglected by past and present scholarship; as he suggested, '... the sources pose daunting philological problems for those who are not specialists in early Irish; most Celticists on the other hand, lacking a knowledge of other magical traditions, cannot be expected to have insights which might guide them in interpreting particularly cryptic or ambiguous passages.'²

In his 'Introduction', Mees defines the principal focus of his work as being on 'Celtic curses and other forms of early charms' (p. 9). This twofold division of interest, a) curses and b) other charms, is clearly manifested in the structure of Mees' work; however, it is possible to divide the book also by a) ancient and b) medieval evidence. The book comprises two sections, of which the first (chapters 2–6) looks at Gaulish curse texts, Celtic Latin curse tablets and fragments of

old Brittonic tablets; while the second (chapters 7–9) investigates insular medieval sources like *loricae*, charms, incantations and prayers. By exploring material from such a wide chronological and geographical area, Mees attempts ultimately to see 'if the depth of time and space that separates the Continental Celts from their insular cousins can be breached in a principled textual and linguistic manner' (p. 9).

Chapter 2, 'Infernal Powers', focuses on the inscribed *tabula ansata* from Sources-des-Roches, Chamalières. The plaque was found in 1971 and has been the subject of much speculation ever since. Mees argues that the tablet of Chamalières is similar to the magical Greek and Latin texts known as binding spells (*defixiones* in Latin, *katadesmoi* in Greek) and his translation of the text echoes this interpretation. Mees introduces the ancient divinities mentioned in the text and explains where they are to be found in later mythology. All of this Mees does in a meticulous manner; nevertheless, at times the reader is left wondering about some of the choices which he has made in his translation. This is especially true in places where he does not explain his reasons for differing from previous scholarship.³

Earlier interpretations of this tablet have favoured seeing it as a healing charm, or possibly a plea for a victory in battle. Mees, however, marshals evidence to suggest that we are dealing with a curse tablet. He argues that the curse, some aspects of which clearly echo typical Greek and Roman styles, might reflect

the adoption of the classical *defixiones* into ‘an ancient Celtic tradition’ (p. 27). In short: ‘The Chamalières curse is clearly crucially dependent on the ancient genre of litigative binding spells; but it is expressed in a style and with a vocabulary that indicates it is much more than just a simple translation of a Greek or Roman curse’ (p. 27). Mees makes good points about the metrical structure of the text as well as the types of stylization known as ring composition (or framing) and the *figura etymologica* (which he renders as ‘destine a destiny’) that it exhibits (p. 14; 21–22).

Chapter 3, ‘Dark Waters’, discusses finds from Roman Britain, and more specifically from Bath, known in Roman times as *Aquae Sulis*. Mees focuses on two inscriptions, written in the ancient British (or Old Brittonic). The first of these inscriptions is a curse pendant from the second or third century which Mees identifies as another binding-curse. The other, more fragmented text comes from a curse lamella (a thin sheet of metal), which dates more clearly to the third century. Here Mees sees again the similarities with Latin-language *defixiones*, but notes how ‘[r]ather than being a slavish copy of a Roman text, however, it evidently features several Celticisms over and above what might strictly have been necessary in a straight translation’ (p. 38). Mees suggests that ‘a broader Celtic relationship may be at hand [here]: the existence of a shared Old Celtic vocabulary of cursing’ (p. 38).

Chapter 4, ‘Gemma’s Tomb’ concentrates on a tablet found in a woman’s

grave at La Vayssière, L’Hospitalet-du-Larzac. The Tablet of Larzac, dating from the very end of the 1st century and written with a typical Roman handwriting of the time, has proven to be a difficult text to translate. Mees acknowledges this, but is able to point out that the text is rhythmical and features widespread alliteration, similar to early Welsh and Irish poems, charms and prayers. In Mees’ interpretation, the inscription moreover features ‘an invocation, a listing of names and several supplementary sentences, some of which loosely mimic Greek and Roman expressions’ (p. 55). Mees argues that the aforementioned alliteration and regular rhymes ‘make it clear that the text is expressed as if it was supposed to be spoken’ (p. 55–56). Mees’ in-depth treatment of the text is an extremely interesting read giving new interpretations on the power of the dead and how this was used in a cursing context.

Chapter 5, ‘Vengeful Prayers’, introduces more harmful spells with a wide range of themes. The reader is again provided with transliterations as well as translations of curses such as the ones found in Montfo, Chagnon in Charente-Maritime, Chassagne in Lezoux, Les Grands Jardins in Châteaubleau and Chartres. Here, as elsewhere in the book, the black-and-white illustrations of the original lamellae, tablets, tiles etc. are enlightening and help to contextualize the texts under study. Chapter 6, ‘Fragments’, shows the multiple problems that arise when dealing with material such as *defixiones*. Mees points out that many curse tablets bear texts which are too

short or too elliptical to be properly interpreted. In addition to this there are also material limitations: lead is prone to fragmenting, and 'the analysis of many curse lamellas is consequently hampered by poor states of preservation' (p. 88). Mees astutely notes that unconventional or otherwise challenging features in the incantations can severely undermine modern interpretation. Mees argues again for a comparative approach, claiming that the texts of the Celtic curse tablets 'often seemed quite inexplicable when viewed in isolation, their proper interpretation only becoming evident in light of the formulas and themes which commonly appear in comparable classical finds' (p. 89). Another perceptive observation is that 'it is always possible that a text which was meaningful in a normal linguistic sense was not always judged necessary for a curse to be effective' (p.99).

These early chapters, in particular, provide readers with new, up-to-date research on Celtic cursing traditions of the late Iron Age and Roman period. A reader not as familiar with the relevant languages as Mees would at times have appreciated a more explanatory approach regarding some of the choices he has made in translating the texts. In the book's current form, one is tempted to speculate which came first, the theory that the texts resemble classical curses, or the translation of the texts? Which follows which? It would also have been useful, in order to make the work more accessible for the reader, to elucidate some of the terminology in a greater detail. An example is the somewhat

puzzling key term 'Old Celtic' that Mees introduces without explanation on p. 14 as well as 'Celtic Latin'. Some problems are also caused by the sequence in which Mees presents his evidence; thus his argumentation is sometimes rendered confusing by switching back and forth between the ancient Celtic texts and the evidence from Greek and Latin sources. Some of the curses are translated in segments, so one does not unfortunately get the curse or the translation *in toto*. Given the wide range of material studied, the absence of chapter subheadings is also a real deficiency.

In chapter 7, 'Breastplates and Clamours', Mees advances into studying the material from early Ireland. According to his view, the influence of *defixiones* was so 'widespread, popular and long-lasting that the legacy of binding spells can be seen in aspects of medieval Celtic tradition, albeit in somewhat curiously transformed usages and manners' (p. 113). Mees first investigates the evidence from early insular hagiography, arguing that in early medieval times the curses were both modeled and named after the Christian, biblical, tradition and the Latin-speaking Roman church, and concluding that 'Insular Celtic imprecation has little to do in origin with such Old Celtic curses as have survived...' (p. 119). Mees also pays attention to religious incantations known as *loricae*, or 'breastplates', and finds them, by contrast, to 'feature rhetoric which is strikingly similar to that found in classical binding spells [...], classical curses—and hence, too, some counter-*defixiones*' (p. 120). Mees sees charms

and prayers that were originally meant to ward off harmful supernatural influences as the media through which the ancient binding spells entered early Christian tradition. *Loricæ* for their part possibly went on to influence later medieval magical expressions, 'in fact, so much so that even their anatomical rhetoric is reflected in incantations known from later medieval collections of charms' (p. 126).

Chapter 8, 'Geases and Binding', presents curses found in early vernacular narratives. Mees studies these literary maledictions together with *geasa*, taboos of obligation or prohibition, which he sees as sharing characteristics with curses of the conditional type: 'It may well be, then, that curse-enhanced oaths or vows lie behind the notion of the *geis*-supported *fir* of early Irish tradition: that is, that geases were originally comparable to curses which fell upon those who did not remain true to "severely bound" oaths they had sworn' (p. 152). According to Mees the ancient curse tablets featuring fate and cursing suggest a semantic field which connected binding, destining, and legal compulsion. This connection 'furthermore suggests a more nuanced explanation for the origin of Irish geases than has previously been proffered' (p. 154). Mees proposes that *geasa* were literally '(malevolent) prayers' the violation of which was thought of as a curse. Mees concludes how the afterward marginalized 'Geases, [...] and 'destining a destiny' appear to have been all that remained of the pre-existing Celtic conception of cursing in the medieval literary tradition' (p. 155).

Chapter 9, 'Incantations', investigates Irish spells and poems 'which do not obviously show much in common with such earlier Continental Celtic magical expressions as have survived' (p. 159). It might be, therefore, justified to ask the relevance of these texts here. The chapter starts with a consideration of madness and prophesy being connected with magical practice.⁴ After this, Mees moves from studying concepts like *imbas forosnai* to the Gallo-Roman lamellas and further to the Gaulish medical charms written by Marcellus Empiricus as well as other charms like the apparently ninth-century collection of Old Irish spells known as the St. Gall Incantations, and Fer Fio's Cry, also known as a 'Prayer for Long Life'.

Mees acknowledges that parts of the first charm of the aforementioned St. Gall Incantations have 'proven difficult to translate' (p. 175), but unfortunately does not go into this question further. It would have been interesting to learn how Mees has come to the translations he provides. The reader is especially left hoping for some explanation when it comes to verses where Mees completely differs from the earlier translations (for example the alliterating part of the first charm and *collum Temathei* as 'joy of Timothy' in the second charm of the St. Gall Incantations).⁵ Another puzzling feature is the way in which Mees has decided to lay out the charms: they are not presented as they appear in the manuscript, nor in a traditional, normalized form, but instead sometimes in two paragraphs, which again differs greatly from any previous scholarly attempt to analyse the charms.

The rationale behind these decisions comes, one presumes, from the fact that Mees is trying to reconstruct verse forms of the texts; but more exposition of his reasoning, again, would have been of great interest. In general, Mees sees that ‘the use of versified charms and spells would still seem to be a good indication of continuity in Old Celtic magical practice’ (p. 180).

Mees continues the chapter by studying charms which have been ‘put in the mouths of characters in often substantially later Irish literary sources’ (p. 182). The rest of the chapter deals with such material from several texts, such as the *Book of Invasions* and the *Second Battle of Moytura*. Mees argues that even if the rhythmical Gaulish binding spells and the Irish compositions have some features in common, such as accent, syllabification and stylisation, all in all the verse structures and key terms used in ‘the Old Celtic metrical charms’ are very different from those found in insular poetry.

After an exhaustive study of a vast amount of material, ‘Conclusion: Cursing Wells’, is a somewhat abrupt ending for Mees’ study. The findings of individual chapters are reiterated at speed one after another and Mees lists various ‘on the one hand—on the other hand’ arguments. It is easy to agree with him when he argues that ‘[a] stronger emphasis on the textuality of early sources would suggest that evidence such as that of the Gaulish curse tablets is crucial to any proper understanding of the imprecatory world of the early Celts’ (p. 200). If one were

to search for a final conclusion to the questions asked in the introduction, it might be this: ‘The relationship of Insular Celtic magic to that attested for the ancient Britons and Gauls seems rather more like that which connects conditional curses and binding spells: they share much in general in common, even in linguistic terms, but represent quite different genres of magical practice,’ (p. 202). The cursory nature of Mees’ conclusions can be seen as an implicit comment on the optimism of his premises in attempting to bring such disparate strands of cursing practices together within one narrative, and perhaps, on occasion, Mees’ newest publication would have worked better as a collection of case-studies. That being said, *Celtic Curses* is all in all a highly valuable contribution to be appreciated by a wide scholarly audience, and a book which can be recommended to Celticists and medievalists alike as well as to anyone interested in the history of magic in general, and of cursing practices in particular.

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Endnotes

- 1 See for example the publications of Dr. Jacqueline Borsje, Dr. John Carey, Prof. David Stifter and Prof. Tatyana Mikhailova among others.
- 2 John Carey, ‘Magical Texts in Early Medieval Ireland’. A translation of the article into Irish has appeared in *Léachtaí Cholm Cille* 30, 2000, 98–117.

- 3 For an alternative translation of the Tablet of Chamalières, see for example Koch and Carey, *The Celtic Heroic Age. Literary Sources for Ancient Celtic Europe & Early Ireland & Wales*. Aberystwyth: Celtic Studies Publications, 2003, pp. 1–3. See also Koch, ‘Movement and Emphasis in the Gaulish Sentence’, *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies* 32, 1985, 1–37, and ‘Further to *tongu do dia toinges mo thiath*’ *Études Celtiques* 29, 1992, 249–61 as well as Lambert, ‘La tablette gauloise de Chamalières’, *Études Celtiques* 16.141–69, also Lejeune & Marichal, ‘Textes gaulois et gallo-romains en cursive latine : 1. Lezoux ; - 2 : Chamalières’, *Études Celtiques* 15, 1976–78, 151–71.
- 4 A note which I feel I am obliged to correct here concerns Mees’ notion on how ‘...the instances of madness suffered by these early Celtic literary figures [Suibhne Geilt and Merlin] are suggestive of some rituals which are recorded of medieval Finnish and Lappish magicians and seers.’ (p. 158). As far as I am aware, all the Finnish documents are considerably later—there are no records of medieval Finnish (or Lappish) magicians and seers (nor do the references given by Mees argue this).
- 5 Several scholars have translated individual charms from the collection of the St. Gall Incantations, but to this day the standard edition and translation is to be found in Stokes, W. and Strachan, J. *Thesaurus Paleohibernicus. A Collection of Old-Irish Glosses Scholia Prose and Verse*. Vol. II Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903, s. xxvii; 248–249.