

Don't Tread on Me:
Curses on Ancient Tombstones

by: L.A. Curchin

Viewers of "The Mummy" reruns on the Late, Late Show will recall the horrible fate awaiting anyone who violated an Egyptian tomb. What is less generally known is that offenders of Greek and Roman tombs were threatened with equally sinister disasters. Dozens of these classical curses have been discovered on excavated tombstones, guarding ancient graves against sacrilege. The theme runs consistently from the seventh century B.C. into Christian times, though it tends to be more popular in certain regions (notably Rome and Asia Minor).

Tombs and tombstones were liable to a variety of abuses. The tomb might be walked upon, dug up or reused for a second burial. The gravestone could be broken, removed, reused or sold. Pagan cemeteries were robbed for stone to build Late Roman defences, and the reverse of a pagan tombstone is occasionally used for a Christian epitaph. Worse, inscriptions might be fouled by late-night revellers in search of a latrine (as readers of the Decree-Seller scene in Aristophanes' Birds may recall). All these violations are cited and cursed on ancient tombstones.

The earliest preserved curses threaten divine retribution, a motif which persists throughout Antiquity:

"May Zeus destroy anyone who disturbs this tomb."

"If anyone does harm to this grave, may the Titan Helios do the same to him." (Helios, the sun, sees all crimes on earth.)

The Underworld gods were frequently invoked:

"Whoever lays a hand here, may he

be haunted by the demons of dark Hecate."

"Whoever tries to harm this tomb, may the Shades punish him."

"If anyone comes here to do harm, may he incur the hostility of all the gods of the Underworld."

"Whoever relieves himself here will anger the gods above and below."

Jewish and Christian epitaphs naturally employ their own tradition:

"If anyone abuses this tomb and harms me, let him not escape the notice of God."

"He will be flagellated by Everlasting God."

"May the curses written in the Book of Deuteronomy afflict him and his children and descendants and all his race."

"If anyone violates this tomb, may he share the fate of Judas."

"In the name of Christ, let happen to him what is in the 108th Psalm" (which says, "God ... will trample on our adversaries").

Those who did not fear the wrath of the gods might be deterred by legal penalties. Harming tombs was both sacrilege and a violation of civil law, as a great many inscriptions point out:

"Whoever builds a fire beside the grave altar will find himself in trouble with the priests."

"He who dares to place another body here will pay to the Catholic Church

of Salona three gold pieces." (from Salona in Dalmatia)

"And if anyone buries (someone else here) he will pay to the Sidymean people 1500 drachmas, of which the informer will receive a third."

"Whoever either sells this monument or gives it away will pay 50,000 sesterces to the Temple of Saturn" (at Rome).

Determined threateners wished affliction on their transgressors:

"Whoever moves me, may he anger the gods and be roasted alive."

"Whoever troubles me, whoever lays a hand on my corpse, I will give him quartan-fever."

"Whoever defecates among the tombstones or violates them, may he lose the use of his eyes."

"Whoever digs here, may an iron rake scratch his face."

"I hope he lives a long time with pain in his body."

"Evil man, do not remove this stone from the earth, lest dogs mangle your unburied corpse when you are dead."

The sins of the father were visited upon his progeny through the curse of extirpation:

"Whoever removes or damages this, may he die as the last of his line."

"Whoever erases the dead face of this child [from the tombstone], let him be plagued with untimely death among his own children."

"If anyone touches my tomb to open it, let him not profit from his hopes nor in having children, but let his whole line perish utterly."

Less usual are threats to deprive the trespasser of material comforts, access to land and sea, or even electoral victory:

"Whoever lays a hand on this inscription, may he lack salt and water."

"Whoever steals this, let him neither sail the sea nor walk on dry land."

"Graffiti-writer, I beg you, pass by this monument. Whatever candidate's name is inscribed on this monument, may he be defeated and never hold any office."

In general, Latin epitaphs (such as the last example above) tend to be more polite than their Greek counterparts, which demand rather than request the wayfarer's good will. But all are vigorous in their imprecations, and woe betide the passerby who ignored the warning,

"Don't trample my ashes with shameless feet."

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