Languages of Magical Power in Ancient Italy
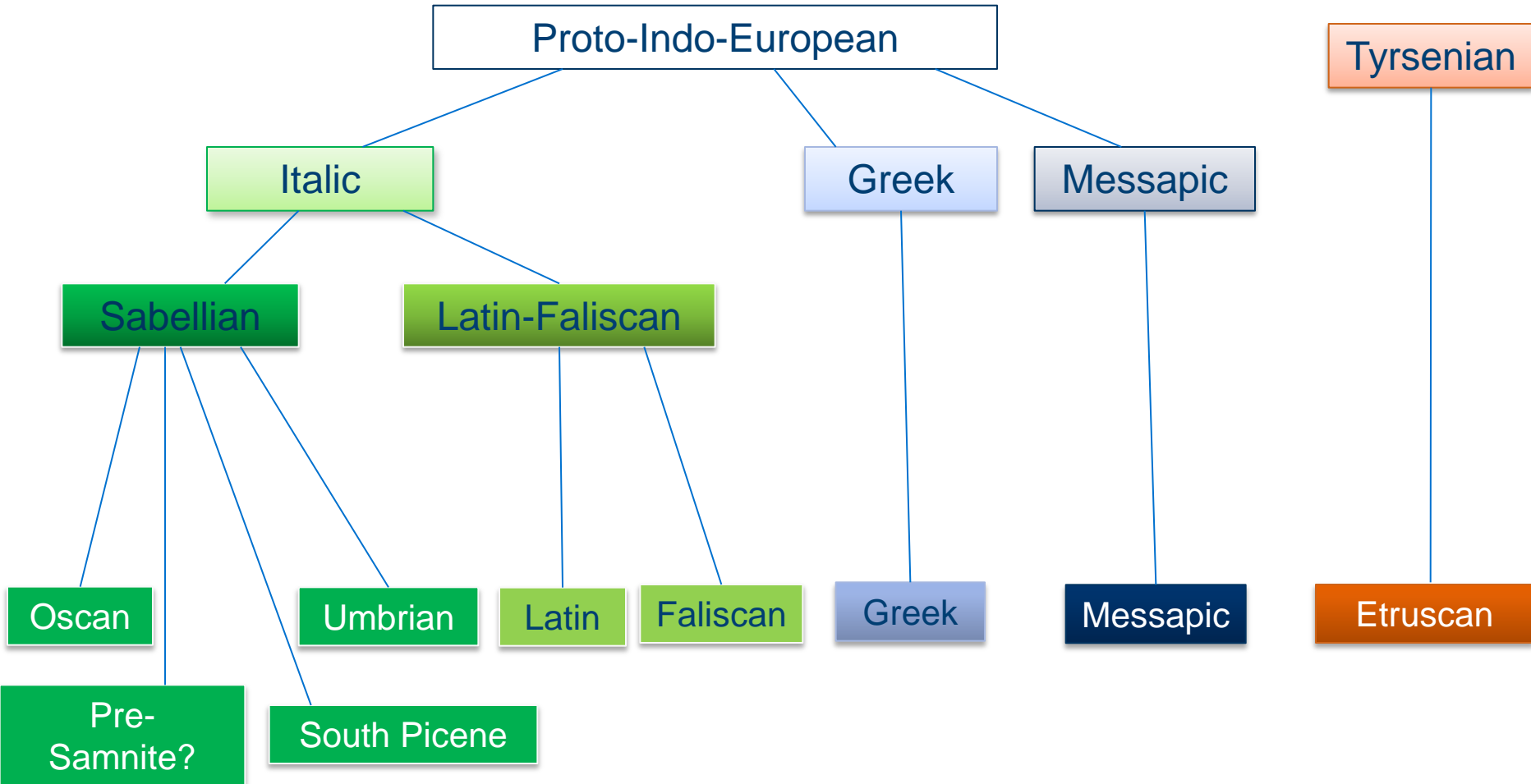
Katherine McDonald, Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge

Languages of Central and Southern Italy

Languages of Italy

Wikimedia Commons, by DBachmann

Curse tablets

Laos 3/Lu 63, Laos, c.300 BC

Curse tablets

- First examples are from Attica and Sicily, in Greek, c. C6th BC

- Found all over the Greek and Roman worlds

- Usually written on lead or lead alloy (soft but durable)

- Normally folded over; sometimes pierced with nails or accompanied by figurines

- Found in graves, wells and springs, and sanctuaries

Wikimedia Commons, by Marie-Lan Nguyen

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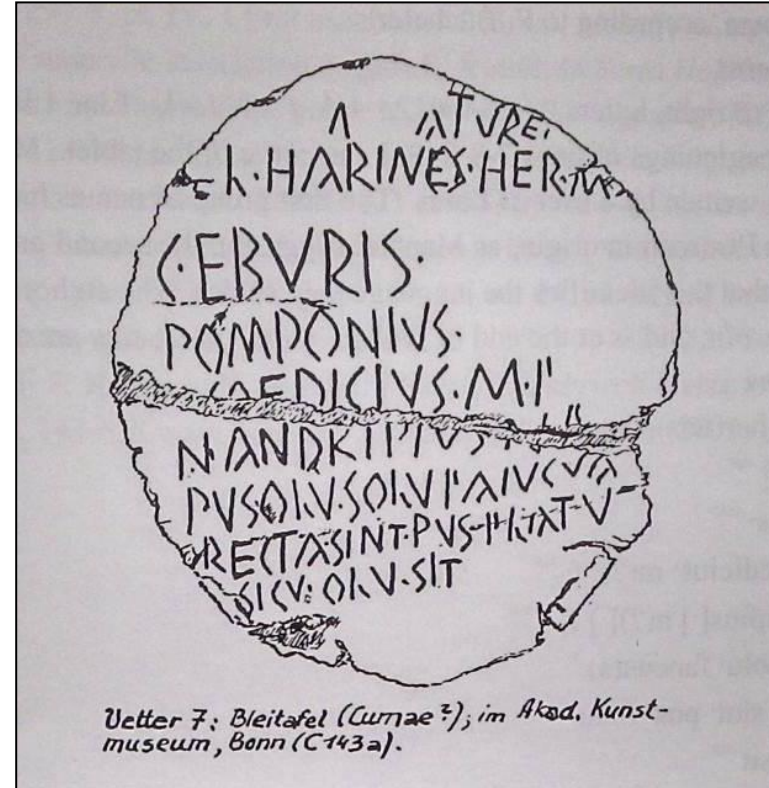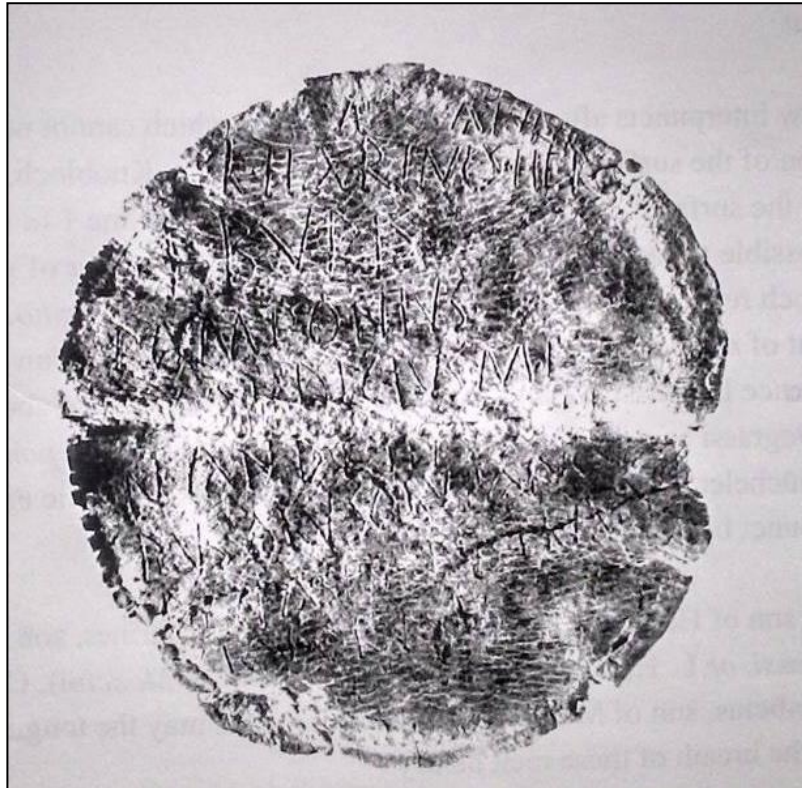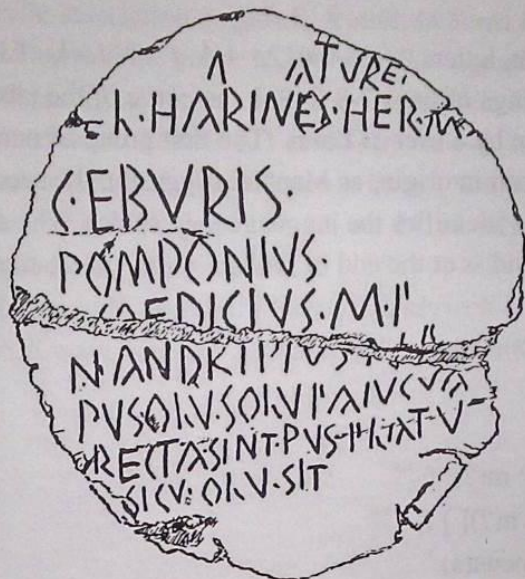# Roman association of magic with Oscan

Image from Crawford (2011)

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Vetter 7: Bleitafel (Cumae?); im Akad. Kunst-museum, Bonn (C 143a).

Oscan names
l. harines. her. mature[-?-]
c. eburis.

Latin names
pomponius.
m. caedicius. m. f.
n. andripius. n. f.

Mixed curse formula
pus. olu. solu. fancua(s)
recta(s). sint. pus. flatu
sicu. olu. sit

"May the tongues of these men be rigid; may the breath of these men be dry." (?)

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Roman association of magic with Oscan

" The curse which follows the names is in a mixture of Latin and Oscan… *Defixiones* are special texts, in which obfuscation was often deliberately sought to enhance the power of the magic, and it is that fact which probably lies behind the language mixing in this case." Adams (2003) 128.

"Once bilingual Oscan speakers had begun to draw heavily on the form of Latin official phraseology, they were succumbing to the dominance of Latin culture… But curse tablets add a different dimension to the picture. Here the imitation seems to operate in the reverse direction, no doubt because of **the potency of Italian regional magic** in the sub-culture of regions in which Latin and Italic existed side by side." Adams (2003) 145.

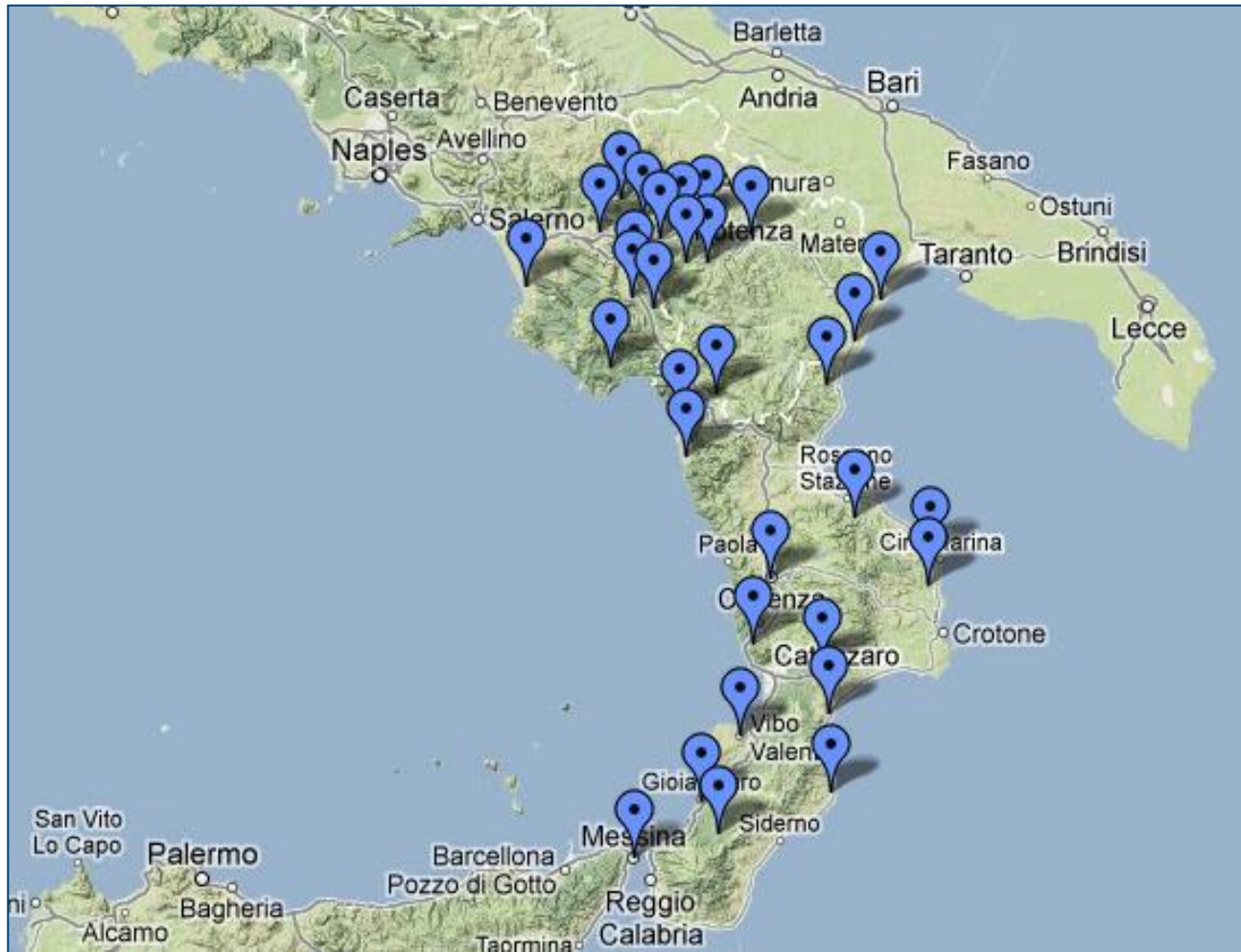AESAR

Suetonius 97;
Cassius Dio
56.29

Curse tablets in Italy by language

Century	Greek	Greek / South Oscan	South Oscan	Central Oscan	Central Oscan/ Latin	Latin	Etruscan
5th BC	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
4th BC	3	2	4	0	0	0	0
3rd BC	3	0	2	2	0	0	0
2nd BC	1	0	0	3	0	2	1
1st BC	0	0	0	0	1	10	5

South Oscan

- c. 400 – 100 BC
- Written in an adapted form of the Greek alphabet
- Found in Lucania (Basilcata), Bruttium (Calabria) and Messana (Messina)

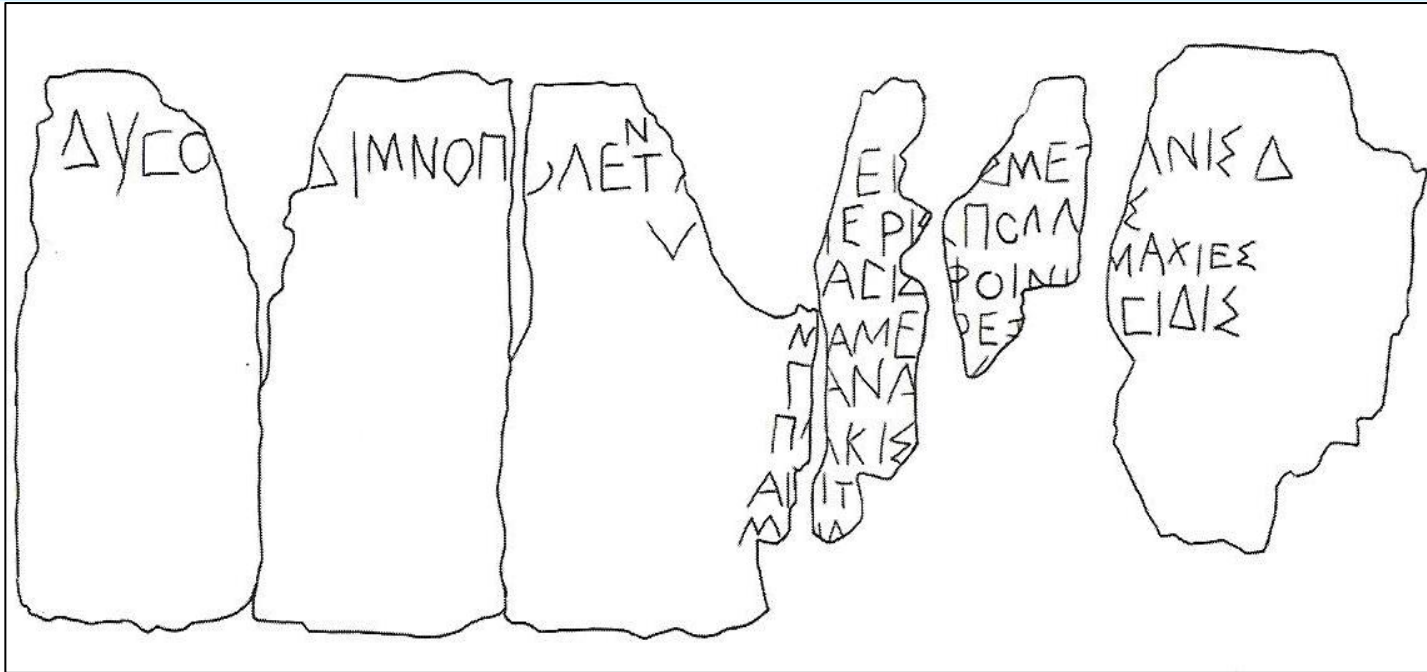# Buxentum 3/Lu 45, Roccagloriosa, undated.

Image from Crawford (2011), by P. Poccetti

δυϝο [με]διμνο πολε'ν' τα[ι 3-4]ει[2-3]σ μετ[ισ 1]ανισ {δ}
υ[ϝισ] ḥερισ πολλ[ιε]σ
[γ]αϝισ φοινι[κισ] μαχιεσ
μαμερεξ [4-5]ϝιδισ
γανα[τ]σ / πακισ [-?-] / αντ[-?-] / μιν[-?-]

duwo [me]dimno polenta[i 3-4]ei[2-3]s met[is 1]anis {d}
u[wis] heris poll[ie]s
[g]awis phoini[kis] makhies
mamerex [4-5]widis
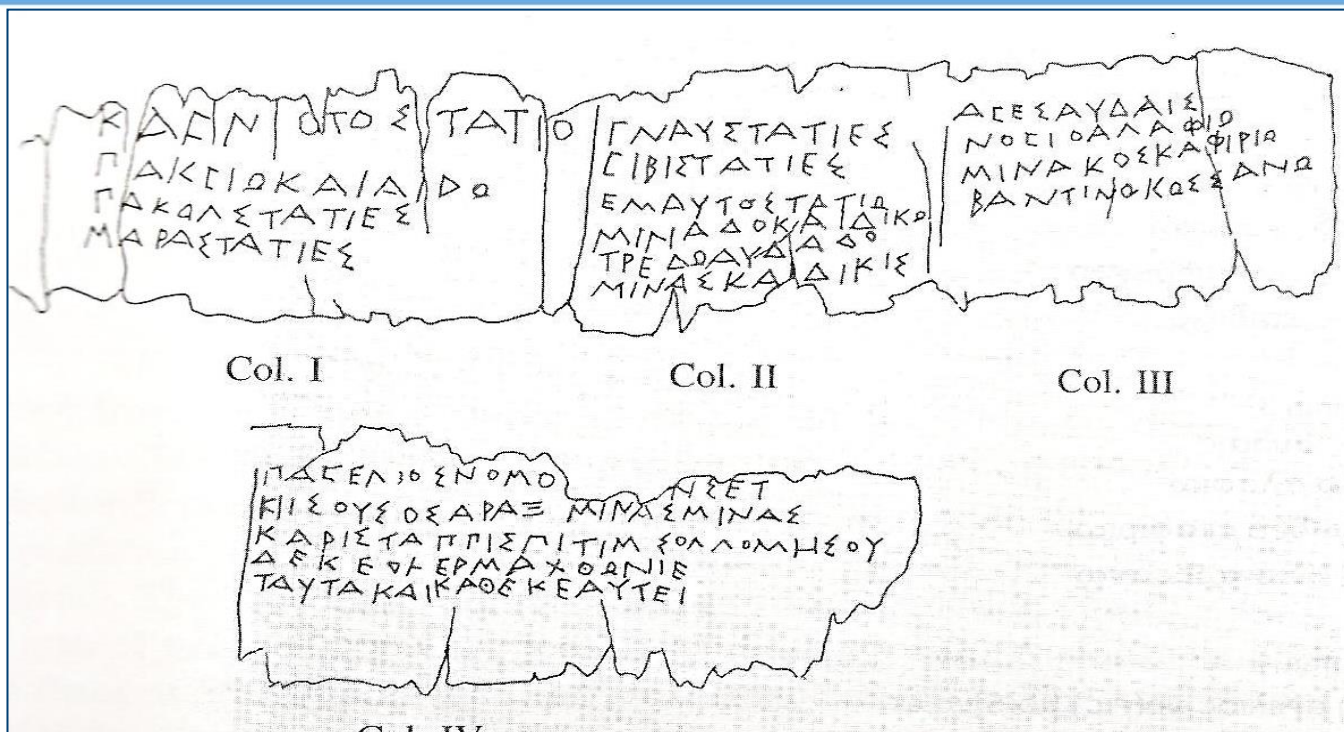gana[t]s / pakis [-?-] / ant[-?-] / min[-?-]
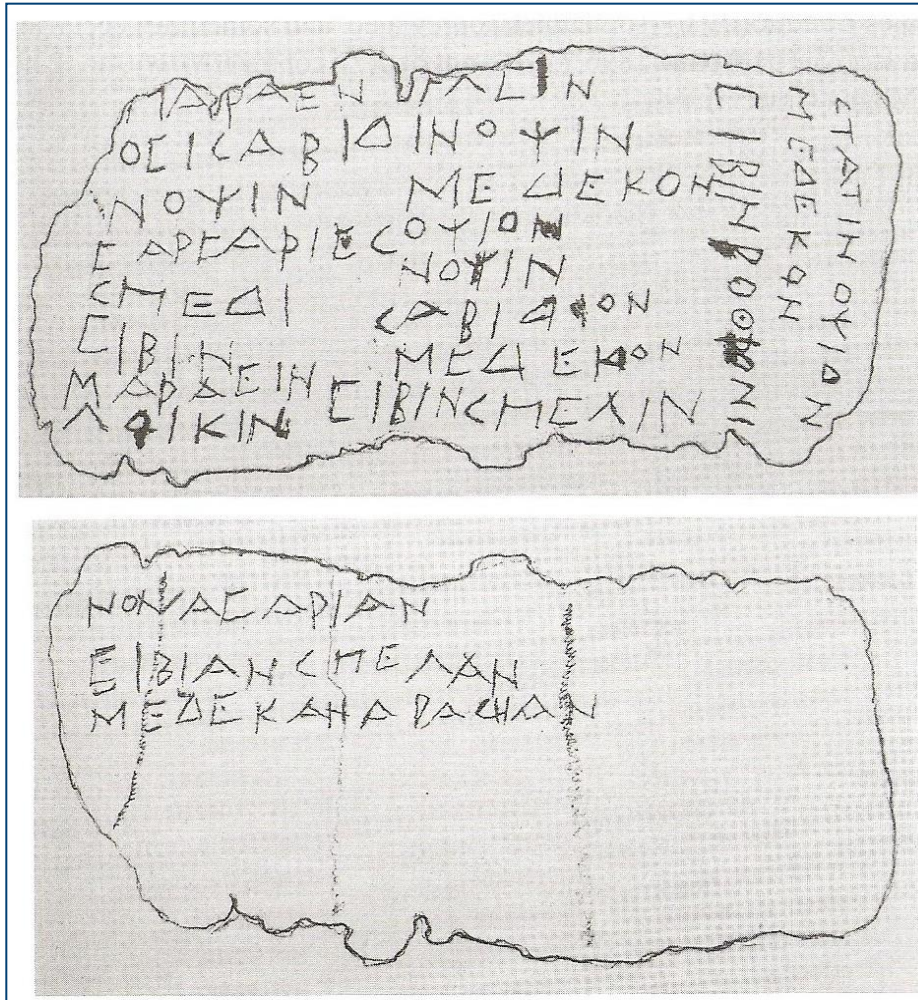
Petelia 2, Petelia, c. 300 BC

π(?) αϝελιοσ νο(ϝισ) μο[-5-]νσ ετ
κησ ουσοσ αρα μ[ι]νασ μινασ
καρισ ταπ(?) <u>πισπιτ ι(νι)μ σολλομ ησου</u>
<u>δεκεο ηερμα χθωνιε</u>
<u>ταυτα και καθεκε αυτει</u>

p(?) awelios no(wis) mo[-5-]ns et
kes ousos ara m[i]nas minas
karis tap(?) <u>pispit i(ni)m sollom esou</u>
<u>dekeo herma khthonie</u>
<u>tauta kai katheke autei</u>

Laos 2/Lu 46, Laos, 330-320 BC.

νοψ(ι)α(ν) ϝαρια<u>ν</u> ϝιβια<u>ν</u> σπελ(ι)α<u>ν</u> μεδεκα<u>ν</u> αραδια<u>ν</u>

nops(i)a(n) waria<u>n</u> wibia<u>n</u> spel(i)a<u>n</u> medeka<u>n</u> aradia<u>n</u>
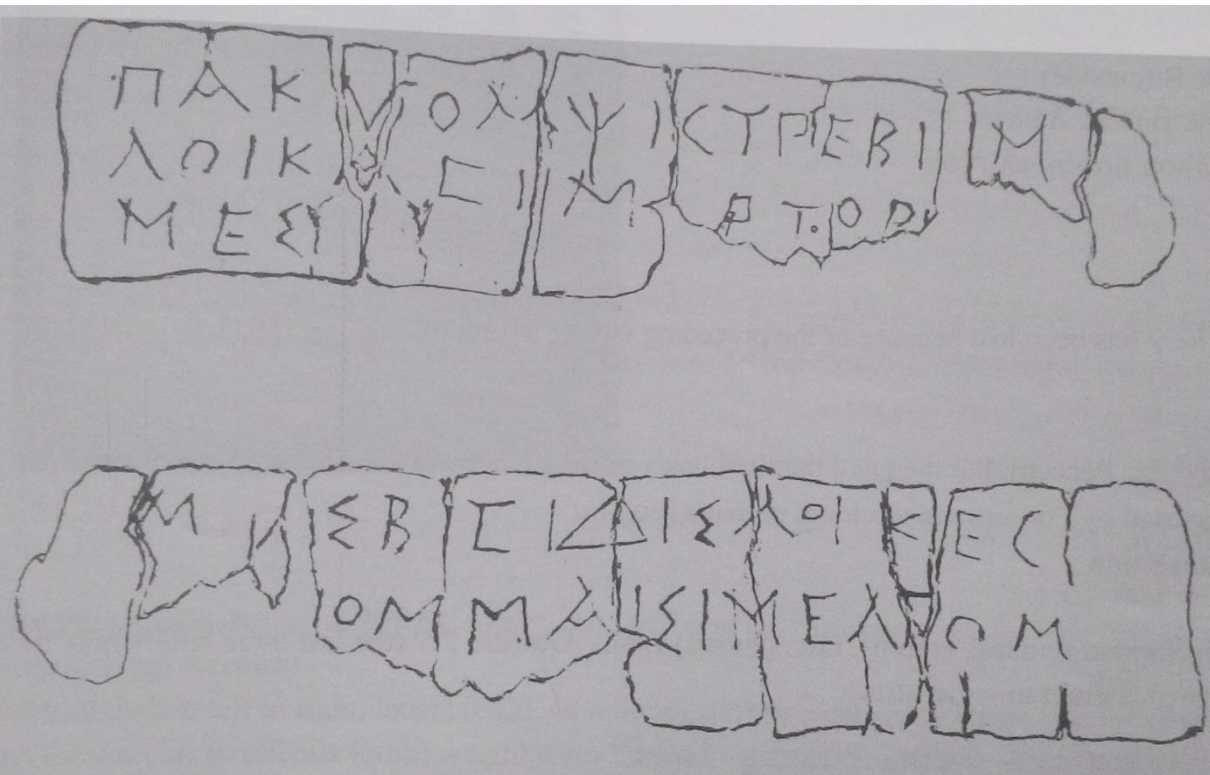
Laos 4, Laos, c. 300 BC

[πα]κιοσ καιλιοσ
ϝι[λ]λ[ιο]σ ασελλιοσ
νυμψιοσ ποππαλαιοσ
μινιοσ ϝαριοσ
[τ]ετοσ ϝαριοσ
vacat

[pa]kios kailios
wi[l]l[io]s asellios
numpsios poppalaios
minios warios
[t]etos warios
vacat

Local developments in Bruttium

- Not always straightforward borrowing or code-switching

- Unusual local/regional developments that don't happen elsewhere in either Greek or Oscan

- Can we see these kind of developments as contact-induced?

- Might instead show the importance of local tradition in magical language

NOM (VERB) ACC

Thurii Copia 1/Lu 47
Thurii, 350-300 BC
Image from Crawford (2011)

πακ(ισ) νομψισ τρεβιμ
λοικ(ισ) <γ>αϝιμ [α]ρτορ[ιμ]
μεσ

μινισ βιϝιδισ λοικεσ
[2-3]ιομ μαισιμ ελ[ϝ]ομ
[-?-]

pak(is) nompsis trebim
loik(is) <g>awim [a]rtor[im]
mes

minis biwidis loikes
[2-3]iom maisim el[w]om
[-?-]

Conclusions

- South Oscan appears to associate magical power with Greek

- This may be linked to the earlier use of Greek in curse tablets in Italy

  - May be tradition

  - May be the "correct" language for magic

  - Cf. Roman association of magic with Oscan, divination with Etruscan

  - Might compare also Roman association of Greek with medicine

- May be deliberate obfuscation, using the two languages best known to these individuals, to make the curse more powerful

The Greek in Italy Project

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