Curse Like a Roman! Schools Session (duration 45 min)

Aims:

- To introduce Old Roman Cursive (ORC) as the 'everyday' handwriting of the Romans
- To reflect on how people responded to crime in a province of the Roman World such as Britannia
- To reflect on the nature of Roman religious and moral conventions

Objectives:

Student should be able to:

- Recognise and read *Old Roman Cursive* (ORC) letters with the help of a key
- Observe the similarities and differences between ORC and the alphabet we use today
- Understand how a Roman used a curse tablet
- Recall some of the details about the site of Aquae Sulis (Bath)

Materials and Resources

- DIGITAL SLIDES: "How to Curse like a Roman" (PowerPoint)
- PRINT-OUTS: "Codebreaker's Key" (PDF)
- Scratch Paper squares and wooden styluses (search online for "scratch paper art") OR squares of paper (approx. 15cm^2) and pencils
- (optional, for extension activity) basin of water
- (optional, for extension activity) metal paperclips to close tablets

Activity Outline:

Duration (mins)	Slide	Explanation and Activities
2 mins	2	**Getting even in the Roman Empire** Imagine someone has done you wrong. They've cheated you, insulted your or stolen your cow. *Q. If it happened to you today, who would you go to for help?* In the Roman Empire, there was no police force in the provinces (yes, there were magistrates for bigger legal matters, but nothing for small-scale, everyday crimes and personal slights). One of the ways to get redress was to write to the gods and ask for their help. We call these messages *curse tablets* because it was traditional to ask the gods to do something horrible to the other person until you got your way! First a bit about how to write like a Roman…

3 mins	**3**	**Roman Writing Technology** (Blank screen) *Q. What different ways are there to make letter marks on a surface?* Here are the three ways used most commonly by the Romans • **Scratching:** *What's the top object?* It's a word we use often today: a tablet. This one has a wax layer, which is scratched with a *stylus.* Below it is a metal tablet, scratched with a sharp metal point. • **Inking:** (top) ink well with nibbed pen (*calamus*); (middle) a roll of papyrus, made from the pressed stems on the Egyptian papyrus plant; (bottom) a thin wooden tablet of the type used in Roman Britain, and found in large numbers at Vindolanda. • **Carving:** (top) a funerary relief. Carving is time consuming so usually only used for special monuments. Can you notice anything about the way letters are carved on these formal stone inscriptions? They're capital letters. *Q. What sort of messages does each writing technology suit?* *Answer:* Wax tablets for a range of uses including drafts and writing practice (these tablets could be easily reused) but also contracts (sealed up and not for reuse); metal tablets for small permanent messages, ink for personal letters and records, stone for formal monuments meant for show. *You can find out more about Roman Writing Equipment in this free online ebook from the LatinNow Project. Older children may find this 15-minute video on Roman writing equipment interesting:* *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G63lMb4Gh9c&t=433s*
1 min	**4**	If you wanted to write a letter to a Roman god or goddess, asking for help, how could you send it? Our best evidence comes from…
4 mins	**5 - 7**	**Evidence of real curse tablets: Aquae Sulis (Bath)** • Bath is a site in South-West England, where there was a temple to Sulis-Minerva (*pictured*, a local goddess combined with a Roman one). It was a sacred site with a hot spring coming out of the ground. • Archaeologists have found around 150 curse tablets there, which were thrown into the spring, most written between 2nd-4th centuries AD. *Q. Based on what they know about different types of Roman writing technology, what do they think was used for curse tablets?* *Answer on the next slide!*

2 mins	8 - 9	Metal tablets (often lead). These are water-resistant, small, can be rolled up or folded, and are durable. Note that some are pierced with a nail. *Q. Can the students suggest why the tablets might have been rolled/folded up and why the nail might be used*? *Answer:* It may have been to keep them secret, so that only the god could read them; and the nail may have been for hanging them up or it may be part of the "magic" to catch or hurt the culprit. In the Latin texts, the dedicator of the curse tablet often describes how they want to "bind" or "fix" the wrongdoer, so perhaps the nail represents this. *Q. What did these curses look like on the inside? Let's see…*
5 mins	1 0	This line drawing shows an unrolled curse tablet. *Q. What language is being used?* *Answer:* Latin, the official language of Roman Britain and (with a very small number of exceptions) the only language that was written down. *Q. What do the students think about the translated text? Are they surprised by what it says?* • Many curse tablets have quite violent content and mention blood and burning. • A "hooded cloak" might seem unimportant to us now, but at a time when all textiles were hand-woven and hand-sewn, and when people owned far fewer clothes than we do, such things were valuable. It may have been this person's only outer garment. *Q. Is it easy to read? Can the students make out any of the words in the neat Latin transcript on the curse tablet itself*? This curse is handwritten in what we call *Old Roman Cursive.* The letters are similar to, but not exactly the same as ours today. Let's examine them…
3 mins	1 1	These are the letters of Old Roman Cursive, ancient Roman handwriting, and their modern equivalents. *Q. Are any letters missing?* *Answer:* J, K, V, W, Y and Z Further info: K does sometimes appear before an -a-, e.g. in Kalendae, so you will sometimes see it included in versions of the alphabet, but it is only used once in the whole of the curses from Bath.

		The Greek letters Y and Z were used to write Greek loanwords, and are sometimes added to the end of the alphabet. The u is used for both the vowel u and the semi-vowel w. Try writing "dog" or "curse" using Old Roman Cursive letters.
10 mins	**1 2**	This is a curse tablet written in *English* but using Old Roman Cursive letters (*NB a real Roman would have written in Latin!*). *Q. Can the students work together to decode it?* *Answer:* It says "I have lost mi (=my) dagger. Goddess Sulis, burn the thief in fire until he returns it".
15 mins	**1 3**	Use the remainder of the session to allow your students to compose their own short curse tablet using the scratch paper and stylus (or paper and pencil). They should include: • A description of what they have lost • The name of the goddess Sulis • What they would like her to do to the thief *Suggestion:* You will know your students best and may want to discuss a few options for suitable punishments before giving free rein. Some students may not feel comfortable making a curse tablet (for personal or religious reasons), but may be happy to write a positive *wish.* If they are learning Latin they could try that out. They may even want to use some Greek letters if they know them, these were sometimes added to Roman curses to add power to the magic! Older students may find this ppt from the Roman Baths Museum helpful in constructing their curses: https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.roma nbaths.co.uk%2Fsites%2Fwww.we-romanbaths.co.uk%2Ffiles%2F2022- 09%2FSECONDARY%2520SCHOOL%2520Curse%2520tablets%2520final%2520po werpoint_1.pptx&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK
Exten sion 1		Your students might like to close their tablets with a paperclip and ceremonially dedicate them into a basin of water. If not, they may prefer to keep them dry and take them home.
Exten sion 2		You can read more about the different types of handwritten scripts used by Romans in this free ebook from the LatinNow project.
Exten sion 3		Explore the online catalogue of Roman Inscriptions of Britain online (https://romaninscriptionsofbritain.org) and type "curse" into the main search box to see and read more examples.