

Gold Tablets FREE

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Summary

Gold Tablets is the collective name for a more or less coherent group of about thirty Greek texts, written on very thin and small gold foil and placed on the body of a deceased; they come from all over the Greek world and date between the late 5th century BCE and the 2nd century CE, with a peak in Hellenistic times. Originally, they were connected with Orphism, then with Pythagoreanism or, more convincingly, with the mystery cult of Dionysus; recent finds however have demonstrated the problematic nature of a narrow definition of their religious affiliation. The article discusses the various forms of these texts, their religious function and the history of scholarship about them.

Keywords: Gold Tablets, underworld, Orphic cult, Bacchic mysteries, Totenpass

Subjects: Greek Myth and Religion

The term “Gold Tablets” refers to a group of about thirty Greek texts, inscribed on very small pieces of gold foil and found in a number of graves from all over the Greek world; the extant examples date from the late 5th century BCE to 2nd century CE, with a spike in the 4th and 3rd centuries BCE. Most of them contain explicit or implicit instructions to the deceased about how to act in the underworld to earn a blessed existence; a few are too short to contain such information but fit into a comparable context. The first texts were found in Southern Italy, initially as stray finds and then after excavations in two mid-4th-century BCE tumuli in Thurii. Their content, as first analyzed by the Italian philologist and polymath Domenico Comparetti (1835–1927) in 1880, seemed to point to an “Orphic” Dionysiac mystery cult whose traces were seen in Plato’s eschatology. This earned them the name of *Laminette Orfiche* or *Lamellae aureae Orphicae*.¹ Since then, their designation as “Orphic” has become problematical, not only because of a general rethinking of this term that began with its rejection by Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf (1931), but also because more recent finds in the last half-century have added a new complexity to the religious background of the tablets. Using the shorter term “Gold Tablets,” however, is also unsatisfactory because, as a descriptive term, it would also include amulets and a small group of 2nd-century CE Palestinian grave texts inscribed on gold.

The Texts and Their Archaeological Contexts

The texts range from a single personal name or a few prose words to hexametrical poems of twenty lines. The texts are inscribed on thin rectangular pieces of gold foil that are usually only a few centimetres wide. Two texts from the same grave in Pelinna (Thessaly; *OF* 485 and 486²) are shaped like ivy leaves, a few other texts from mainland Greece are leaf shaped, and some texts from Crete have an ellipsoid shape that is a few centimetres wide.

Where grave contexts exist (mostly from inhumation graves), there appears to be no unity of placement, although some trends point to the ritual use made of them. Many rectangular pieces were folded and found in a position that suggests that they were placed over or in the mouth of the deceased, or next to their hand. The two ivy leaves from Pelinna were placed on the deceased's chest. One leaf from a cremation burial in Pharsalos was put into the ash urn after the cremation of the body, together with the ashes of the deceased (OF 477). The ellipsoid and leaf-shaped pieces could have been placed over the mouth. As if to confirm such a use, they were never folded, and Yannis Tzifopoulos (2010) has compared them to the much later Christian use of such ritual mouth coverings or *epistomia*.



Figure 1. Orphic tablet from Thessaly containing instructions for the underworld, 4th century BCE. Translation:

I (masculine) am parched with thirst and am dying; but grant me to drink from the ever-flowing spring. On the right is a white cypress. “Who are you? Where are you from?” I am a son of Earth and starry sky. But my race is heavenly.⁸

Digital image courtesy of the Getty Open Access program, Creative Commons License, CC BY 4.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>>. J. Paul Getty Museum, 75.AM.19. <<http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/7194/unknown-maker-lamella-orphica-greek-second-half-of-4th-century-bc/>>.

Many of the graves that contained such tablets were for relatively wealthy people; one included a richly decorated Attic bronze hydria used as an ash urn (Pharsalos), another one a marble sarcophagus and the terracotta statuette of a maenad (Pelinna). On some longer tablets, the writing was done very carefully with a stylus on the tablet while it was lying on a soft surface, presumably a piece of leather, so that the letters pressed through the foil and were as easily (or even better) readable on the back side. The letter forms correspond either to the contemporary stone inscriptions or are in a cursive script, but both point to carefully trained writers. Mistakes are relatively rare, with the exception of a few texts—notably the second of the two identical texts from Pelinna—that show evidence of haste.

Content

The content of the texts demonstrate a lack of unity that, however, is much smaller than the variations of context. It is obvious that some texts belong to the same or a similar group, but the variations are much larger than Günther Zuntz had thought when he organized the texts according to their textual form into two main groups: A and B.³ More recent finds have broken up this neat dichotomy, and other principles are even more useful, even if less neat.

One principle is the organization as to the type of information the texts contain. Many of the texts give a description of the underworld topography that the deceased will encounter; Sarah Iles Johnston called them “geographical tablets” and contrasted them with the “purity tablets” that praise the purity of the deceased’s soul.⁴ The geographical tablets come in two forms, of which the shorter is an obvious abbreviation of the longer form. They all share the description of a spring from which the parched soul is allowed to drink; the longer texts (such as the one from Hipponion in Southern Italy, *OF* 474, or from Pharsalos in Thessaly, *OF* 477) begin with a warning not to drink from the first spring that attracts all the souls but to wait for the second that is guarded by infernal guardians to whom the soul has to identify herself as the child of Earth and Sky (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Gold tablet from the Necropolis of Hipponion in Southern Italy, c. 400 BCE. Museo Archeologico Statale di Vibo Valentia.

The purity tablets are less uniform. They have the soul meet and address gods of the underworld, Persephone and her associates, with either the right password or the claim to be pure, which leads to an acclamation of the deceased as blessed or “divine instead of mortal” (Thurii 1, *OF* 487). In the variation from Pelinna, the soul addresses Persephone with the claim that it has been freed by Dionysos. Details concerning the blessed existence that awaits the deceased vary: it can be an escape from the cycle of reincarnations (Thurii 3, *OF* 488); an existence in the “meadows and groves of Persephone” (Thurii 1, *OF* 487) or at the “seats of the pure” (Thurii 4 and 5, *OF* 489 and 490); or “the fortunate honor” of wine and eternal banquets as in Plato’s caricature of what

the books of Musaios promise (Pelinna; see Plato, *Republic* .363 <<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0167%3Abook%3D2%3Apage%3D363>> CD and Axiochos 371 D). There are some verbal echoes amongst these texts that show that they derive from a common background. Shorter tablets simply greet Persephone (Pella/Dion 1, OF 496b) or Pluton and Persephone (two Cretan texts, Eleutherna 6, OF 495 and Rhethymnon 1, OF 494); even shorter ones contain a simple personal name, sometimes qualified as “initiate” (*mústēs*), as in Pella/Dion 1 (OF 496b), perhaps from the grave of the poet Poseidippos.⁵ A few texts remain fully outside such groupings: in a text from Amphipolis, a women introduces herself as “pious and sacred” to Dionysos Bakkchios (OF 496n); a text from Thessalian Pherai claims to be a password (*symbolon*) for an initiate that guarantees access to the “sacred meadow” (OF 493); and another somewhat fragmented text from the same place has the deceased ask to be sent to the thiasoi of the initiates since he or she possesses the tokens of Demeter Chthonia and of Meter Oreia; a lacuna before Demeter might have contained a third divine name (OF 493A).

This tablet deviates significantly in the choice of the mystery divinities. In most other texts, the divinity invoked is Dionysos Bakchios, the god of Bacchic mysteries; the shorter geographical texts, which do not mention a god, must belong to the same mystery cult because the “initiates of Dionysos” (*mústai kai bákchoi*) are prominent in the longest text of this group (Hipponion, OF 474) and thus determine the background. The purity texts are somewhat outside this group; they invoke Persephone and her underworldly associates, “Eukles and Eubouleus and other gods” (on these gods see Bremmer 2013⁶). But in the mythology of Bacchic Dionysos that our sources ascribe to Orpheus, Persephone is the mother of Dionysos. It has been argued that the purity texts belong to the same background, and the Petelia tablets can confirm this: they have Persephone intercede on behalf of the deceased because Bakchios has freed him. As to the second Pherai text (OF 493A), Demeter Chthonia and Meter Oreia are divinities that can have mystery cults as well, and the ecstatic Dionysos is closely connected to Meter, who healed him from madness and gave him the sacred objects of his cult (Apollodoros, *Bibl.* 3.1.1 <<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Apollod.+3.1.1&fromdoc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0021>> [3.33]). Even if the name of Bakchios cannot be restored in the textual gap, the background is not radically different, even if not the same.

Ritual Background

Ritual use is how the tablets were placed in the graves to begin with. The texts themselves show two performative gestures that are relevant to understanding their use: one group of texts is the words spoken by the deceased who makes specific claims to purity and ritual preparation, the other by an omniscient adviser who has full knowledge of the underworld topography and the necessary passwords and whose text thus functions as a guide for the soul. Whereas the first gesture points entirely to the realm of belief, the second refers to a ritual instruction of the initiate to prepare her for the critical voyage to the beyond. It is somewhat easier to think of such an instruction during the initiation and not at the grave: in the course of this ritual, the initiate received a recorded form of the instruction on a gold tablet, to be taken to the grave. It is of course conceivable that this same instruction also took place as part of the funeral, and the text of the Pelinna tablet with its reference to death and immortalization “now” would fit, although it would

also fit the initiation ritual, understood as a rite of pre-empted death. Furthermore, the Hipponion tablet calls itself a “work of Memory,” and Memory plays a role in this and other texts as the key to a blessed afterlife. This not only ties into Greek eschatological mythology about the role of the water of Forgetfulness (*Lethe*) but also reinforces the insight that the tablets contain ritual instructions that the deceased would forget only at the risk of forfeiting a blessed afterlife. Thus they must accompany her to the other side.

Discussion of the Literature

All the larger texts are written in hexameters, and many of them fall into two distinct groups (Zuntz’s A and B tablets) that resonate with one another, to the extent that Richard Janko tried to describe the development of the B texts in a codicological stemma. The underlying assumption is that there existed an original Greek hexametrical text from which all the existing B texts were derived, and the same would have to be true of the A texts, although the differences amongst the existing A texts are much larger. The texts found since Zuntz’s model point to a much more complex situation, which Bernabé and San Cristobal tried to describe by inserting the different texts into the scenario of the soul’s travel to the blessed afterlife developed in a hexametrical katabasis poem by Orpheus; both the use of hexameters—a metre that Orpheus was said to have invented—and the didactic persona in some of the texts can be seen as confirming such a hypothesis.⁷ It might be anachronistic to expect a single poem in a fixed form, given that the tradition of a pseudonymous katabasis poem was not controlled by any canonical text and its scholarly guardians but only by itinerant religious specialists and their ever-changing needs. Still, it is tempting to posit a somewhat amoebic poem ascribed to Orpheus as the starting point of these texts.

Such an assumption also justifies the use of the term “Orphic” to describe these texts—not in the sense employed by Comparetti, who used the term to describe a uniform religious and eschatological worldview distilled mostly from allusions in Plato, but in the sense that Orpheus was a name attached to hexametrical poems that were used by the itinerant initiators who were responsible for the propagation of Bacchic mysteries in the Greco-Roman world, but who also could feel attracted to other mystery cults, as those of Demeter and the Great Mother.

Primary Texts

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Notes

1. Alessandro Olivieri, *Lamellae aureae Orphicae*, Bonn: Marcus & Weber, 1915.
2. OF refers to Alberto Bernabé, *Poetae Epici Graeci. II Orphicorum et Orphicis similium testimonia and fragmenta*, fasc. 2 (Munich: Saur, 2004).
8. Translation from Graf and Johnston, *Ritual Texts for the Afterlife*.
3. Günther Zuntz, *Persephone. Three Essays in Religion and Thought in Magna Graecia* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971).
4. Fritz Graf and Sarah Iles Johnston, *Ritual Texts for the Afterlife. Orpheus and the Bacchic Gold Tablets*, 2d ed. (London: Routledge, 2013).

5. Matthew Dickie, "Poets as Initiates in the Mysteries: Euphorion, Philicus and Posidippus," *Antike und Abendland* 44 (1998): 49–77.
6. On these gods, see Jan Bremmer, "Divinities in the Orphic Gold Leaves: Euklês, Eubouleus, Brimo, Kybele, Kore and Persephone," *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 187 (2013): 35–48.
7. Alberto Bernabé and Ana Isabel Jiménez San Cristóbal, *Instructions for the Netherworld. The Orphic Gold Tablets* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2008).

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