

# Dionysus and the Gold Tablets from Pelinna

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**I**N 1987 K. TSANTSANOGLOU AND G. M. PARÁSSOGLOU published the texts inscribed on two ivy-shaped gold leaves found in a woman's sarcophagus in Pelinna, Thessaly.<sup>1</sup> Both the objects in the burial and the style of the letters suggest a date at the end of the fourth century B.C. The two leaves, labelled *a* and *b* by the excavators, have the same text, except that the shorter version (*b*) omits lines 4 and 7 of *a*. Despite a few uncertainties the text, for the most part, is fairly clear. The longer form (*a*) is as follows:

- 1 νῦν ἔθανες καὶ νῦν ἐγένου, τρισόλβιε, ἅματι τῶδε.  
εἰπεῖν Φερσεφόνα σ' ὅτι Βάκχιος αὐτὸς ἔλυσε.  
ταῦρος εἰς γάλα ἔθορες.  
αἶψα εἰς γάλα ἔθορες.
- 5 κριὸς εἰς γάλα ἔπεσες.  
οἶνον ἔχεις εὐδαίμονα τιμῆν
- 7 κάπιμένει σ' ὑπὸ γῆν τέλεα ἄσσαπερ ὄλβιοι ἄλλοι.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> K. Tsantsanoglou and G. M. Parássoglou, "Two Gold Lamellae from Thessaly," *Hellenika* 37 (1987) 3–16.

<sup>2</sup> Now you died and now you were born, thrice happy one, on this day.  
Tell Persephone that the Bacchic one himself released you.  
A bull, you rushed into the milk.  
Suddenly you rushed into the milk.  
A ram, you fell into the milk.  
You have the fortunate wine as your honor [or, You have wine as  
your fortunate honor].  
And there await you beneath the earth the rewards that the other  
happy ones (have).

*Telea* in the last line can mean both 'rewards', 'prizes' or 'honors', 'dignities', perhaps also with a reference to the initiatory sense of the word too. See Tsantsanoglou and Parássoglou (*supra* n.1) 15. In the last line *a* has κάπιμένεις. On the problems of the last line see W. Luppe, "Zu der neuen Goldblättchen aus Thessalien," *ZPE* 76 (1989) 13f.

The similarity of the Pelinna texts to Zuntz's "A" group of the South Italian gold leaves increases the probability of a common Dionysiac-Orphic context for *both* the "A" texts and the Pelinna leaves.<sup>3</sup> Along with the recently discovered inscriptions from Olbia and especially Hipponion, they confirm that, from at least the middle of the fifth century, Dionysiac-Orphic mysteries are diffused over much of the Greek world: Magna Graecia, Crete, Thessaly, and now southern Russia.<sup>4</sup> Zuntz's view that these texts reflected only Pythagorean practices is much harder to maintain in the face of the Pelinna texts, with their explicitly Dionysiac language and their indications of at least some of the eschatology known as Orphic.<sup>5</sup> In particular, the second line of both of the Pelinna texts, "Tell Persephone that Bacchus himself has released you," seems to be drawing on the 'Orphic' notions of the afterlife familiar to us from the fragments of Pindar's *threnoi* (esp. fr. 133 Snell-Maehler) and the South Italian gold leaves.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> As Fritz Graf ("Dionysian and Orphic Eschatology: New Texts and Old Questions," in a paper presented at the conference, "Masks of Dionysus," October, 1990) observes, this hypothesis is strengthened by the similarity between the Hipponion text, published in 1974, and the Pelinna texts. Both the Hipponion text and the longer form of the Pelinna text end with reference to the experiences of the "other" initiates: "There awaits you beneath the earth the *telea* that *the other* blessed ones (have)" (P), and "You traverse the road which *the other* glorious *mystai* and *Bacchoi* tread" (H).

<sup>4</sup> On the conclusions to be drawn from the new discoveries see W. Burkert, *Greek Religion*, tr. J. Raffan (Cambridge [Mass.] 1985 [hereafter 'Burkert, GR']) 296f and *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1987 [hereafter 'Burkert, Cults']) 21f, 33f; for the implications of the Olbia inscriptions see M. L. West, "The Orphics of Olbia," *ZPE* 45 (1982) 27f. A convenient listing of the recent finds, with bibliographies, up to the early 1980s in A. Henrichs, "Changing Dionysiac Identities," in B. F. Meyer and E. P. Sanders, ed., *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition*, III: *Self-Definition in the Graeco-Roman World* (London 1982) 154ff with n.152; R. Janko, "Forgetfulness in the Golden Tablets of Memory," *CQ* n.s. 34 (1984) 89; H. Lloyd-Jones, "Pindar and the Afterlife," in *Pindare (=Entretiens Hardt 31 [Vandoeuvres-Geneva])* 264ff; Tsantsanoglou and Parássoglou (*supra* n.1) 3 n.1. Texts, Italian translations, and bibliographies for most of the tablets, including that from Hipponion, are collected in G. Colli, *La sapienza greca* I (Milan 1977).

<sup>5</sup> G. Zuntz, *Persephone* (Oxford 1971) 337ff. See now Burkert, *Cults* 21f, 33f.

<sup>6</sup> See R. Merkelbach, "Zwei neue orphisch-dionysische Totenpässe," *ZPE* 76 (1989) 15f; Graf (*supra* n.3). For a different view of what Pindar's "ancient grief" might be, see R. Seaford, "Immortality, Salvation, and the Elements," *HSCP* 90 (1986) 5-9.

*Bakchios* on the Pelinna lamellae is strong, if not incontrovertible, proof of the Dionysiac nature of these mysteries.<sup>7</sup> It removes some of the objections that M. L. West raised in 1975 against the Dionysiac context of the Hipponion text.<sup>8</sup> The wine of the new Pelinna texts also suggests a Dionysiac context. In Zuntz's "B" tablets and the new Hipponion table the initiate's 'thirst' is an important motif, but the drink is always water from the pure spring of Memory. Even in the Hipponion tablet, where the initiates are *bakchoi*, the drink is still water.

The repetitive, rhythmic, and formulaic qualities of the new texts, as of many of the previously discovered texts, would make them highly suitable for oral performance.<sup>9</sup> If the Pelinna texts are unmetrical in places, they are certainly not unrhythmical, especially in the sequence of the four short lines 3–6 of the longer text. The rhyming effect of the verse-beginnings is particularly striking:<sup>10</sup> τὰῦρος εἰς, αἶψα εἰς, κριὸς εἰς, οἶνον ἔχεις. Discovery of all texts of this type in tombs favors funerary performance, although of course an initiation rite for a *mystes* cannot be excluded. Identical texts of the two inscriptions, except for omission of two verses in the shorter, could also suggest that both are copies of a pre-existing ritual formula rather than an *ad hoc* creation for this burial.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> E.g. Soph. *Ant.* 154; S. G. Cole, "New Evidence for the Mysteries of Dionysus," *GRBS* 21 (1980) 228f with nn.22f for further references.

<sup>8</sup> West (*supra* n.4) 234f. See Cole (*supra* n.7) 230ff; G. S. Kirk, J. E. Raven, and M. Scholfield, ed., *The Presocratic Philosophers*<sup>2</sup> (Cambridge 1983) 30. Burkert ("Le laminette auree: Da Orfeo a Lampone," in *Orfismo in Magna Grecia: Atti del quattordicesimo convegno di studi sulla Magna Grecia*, Taranto, 6–10 ottobre, 1974 [Naples 1975]) 89–92) has suggested that the Pythagorean-Orphic eschatology was a deliberate refashioning of the Dionysiac elements, replacing the Dionysiac loss of the self in ecstasy with a new emphasis on personal memory and responsibility in the afterlife.

<sup>9</sup> See Janko (*supra* n.4: 90), who suggests, apropos of the Hipponion tablet, that "we may be dealing with memorised or oral texts, not written ones."

<sup>10</sup> For a similar assonantal effect in ritual repetition cf. *Hymn. Hom. Cer.* 228ff and N. J. Richardson, *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter* (Oxford 1974) *ad loc.* (p.229).

<sup>11</sup> So too the texts take no account of the gender of the deceased woman, although *trisolbie* in line 1 could also be the feminine form. On a possible feminine participle in the last verse see Luppe (*supra* n.2) 15f.

Funerary performance would also suit the urgent tone.<sup>12</sup> We may observe, for instance, the repeated  $\nu\upsilon\nu$  in the first line;  $\acute{\alpha}\mu\alpha\tau\iota\ \tau\hat{\omega}\delta\epsilon$  at the end of the line; the imperative (in infinitive form),  $\epsilon\acute{\iota}\pi\epsilon\acute{\iota}\nu$ , shortly after;  $\acute{\alpha}\acute{\iota}\psi\alpha$ , in the fourth line of the longer text. These markers of urgency contrast with the calmer mood of the last line, the assurance of the bliss that awaits the addressee. This movement from intensity to reassurance constitutes the dynamics or the implicit drama of the represented event. While this quasi-dramatic movement would also be effective to mark the initiate's symbolic death and rebirth, it seems more plausible, given the circumstances of the leaves' placement, to understand it literally. Is it possible that the aorist,  $\epsilon\theta\alpha\nu\epsilon\varsigma$ , instead of the perfect  $\tau\acute{\epsilon}\theta\nu\eta\kappa\alpha\varsigma$ , that one would expect, reflects the situation of the funeral, when the moment of dying is indeed a past event, three days previous?

The two Pelinna lamellae are literally 'leaves,' ivy-shaped leaves. The other early mystic texts, so far as I know, make no mention of ivy. The new ivy-shaped tablets evoke Dionysus through their very form.<sup>13</sup> Ivy may have suggested persistent vegetative life-energy and thus would be appropriate in a context promising some kind of existence after death.<sup>14</sup> The object itself, then, evokes the presence of that Dionysiac power that its words create through its ritual formulae. The reminder of the life-energy and vitality of the god of the circling vine-shoots, the bursting grape, and the fermenting wine could offer consolation in the face of death.<sup>15</sup> Both the immortalizing gold

<sup>12</sup> This feature of the Pelinna texts is also well noted by Graf (*supra* n.3).

<sup>13</sup> There is a possible parallel in the first word of the Hipponion text if one reads  $\theta\pi\acute{\iota}\omicron\nu$  (in the dialectal form  $\sigma\pi\acute{\iota}\omicron\nu$ ), 'leaf'. See M. Marcovich, "The Gold Leaf from Hipponion," *ZPE* 23 (1976) 222.

<sup>14</sup> For ivy and Dionysus see Henrichs (*supra* n.4) 157 with abundant references, including two funerary inscriptions of the Hellenistic period from Erythrae "decorated with a single standing ivy leaf." See also Burkert, *Cults* 22f with nn.56f, observing the Dionysiac funerary imagery on South Italian vases of the fourth century B.C. We may compare also the presence of Dionysus as the "ivy-bearing child,"  $\pi\alpha\acute{\iota}\varsigma\ \acute{\omicron}\ \kappa\iota\sigma\sigma\omicron\phi\acute{\omicron}\rho\omicron\varsigma$ , beside the resurrected Semele on Olympus in Pindar *Ol.* 2.27–30, an ode probably reflecting South Italian mystic beliefs about the afterlife.

<sup>15</sup> This aspect of Dionysus is heavily stressed by K. Kerényi, *Dionysos: Archetypal Image of Indestructible Life* (Princeton 1976). For a discussion and qualification see Henrichs (*supra* n.4) 210.

and the ivy-leaf shape reinforce their message by the physical form of their medium.

The progression from crisis in the present to a calm view of the future that ‘awaits’, ἐπιμένει, in the last line of the longer text is strengthened by two other formal qualities: the return to the long hexametric verse in the final line of the long text, answering the long hexametric (though slightly unmetrical) text of line 1; and the shift from the aorist verbs of the first five lines to the present tense in the last two verses, ἔχεις and ἐπιμένει. This last verse (which occurs only in *a*) also harks back to the first line, in ring composition: *olbioi* in line 7 takes up *trisolbie* in line 1. Through this repetition the individual initiate, addressed as *trisolbie* in the first line, is united with “the other *olbioi*” at the very end.<sup>16</sup> The same effect is conveyed by the repetition of the addressee, in the second person, in line 2, σ’ ὅτι Βάκχιος αὐτὸς ἔλυσε, and in the last line, κάπιμένει σ’ ὑπὸ γῆν.

The problem of ‘rushing’ (not just falling) into the milk and the presence of the non-Dionysiac ram remain puzzling.<sup>17</sup> The combination of wine and milk in the context of “Bakchios’ releasing,” however, may remind us of the combination of wine, milk, and honey among Euripides’ Maenads in *Bacchae* (705ff), just after they release “the bonds of their fawnskins” (σύνδεσμ’ ἐλέλυτο: 697). The context of the Euripidean miracle, furthermore, is the power of Dionysus to release from bonds. The motif of ‘falling into milk’ too may have associations of Dionysiac salvation if one recalls the Maenads’ suckling of the young of wild animals here in the *Bacchae* (599–702) and, later and in a specifically mystic context, the famous scene of the Fauness who offers the breast in the fresco in the Villa of the Mysteries in Pompeii.

<sup>16</sup> The formula of joining “the other” initiates also occurs in the Hipponion and Petelia texts, as Graf (*supra* n.3) notes.

<sup>17</sup> See Tsantsanoglou and Parássoglou (*supra* n.1) 12. The motif of a kid (*eriphos*) falling into the milk appears twice on Zuntz’s A tablets (A1.9 and A4.4) and has been variously explained. See e.g. Zuntz (*supra* n.5) 323–27; Burkert (*supra* n.8) 99 and GR 295; Lloyd-Jones (*supra* n.4) 276. The ram and the bull of the Pelinna texts are more problematical, though of course the bull is a familiar Dionysiac motif. As to the ram, Luppe (*supra* n.2: 13) adduces the hypothesis of Cratinus’ *Dionysalexandros*, where Dionysus apparently metamorphoses himself into a ram, as an instance of possible Dionysiac associations of this animal; but the comic context militates against this view. In fact, the episode has more comic point if the ram is *not* Dionysiac and the god, in his terror, is willing to try even this unfamiliar shape.

The penultimate line of the longer inscription (which forms the last line of the shorter version) presents a problem of text and interpretation. It is possible to read, as the excavators suggest, οἶνον ἔχεις, εὐδαίμων, ἄτιμον.<sup>18</sup> It seems more in keeping with the elevated tone and elaborate promises of the tablet, however, to read οἶνον ἔχεις εὐδαίμονα τιμήν, with the sense, “You have wine as your fortunate honor” (Graf [*supra* n.3]), or possibly, “You have the wine of good fortune as your honor.” Line 6 of Zuntz’s first “A” text from Thurii is somewhat analogous in form (though not, of course, in content): ἱμερτοῦ δ’ ἐπέβαν στεφάνου ποσὶ καρπαλίμοισι.<sup>19</sup> In both cases the initiate’s happiness in the hereafter is symbolized by his or her attainment of a concrete object, defined by an epithet that marks its positive value as a token of success in the passage to Hades (οἶνον εὐδαίμονα, ἱμερτοῦ στεφάνου). Both also have a personal verb of reaching or attaining (ἔχεις, ἐπέβαν), standing between the noun and its adjective.

The language of the first verse of the Pelinna tablets and the rôle of Persephone have suggested possible Eleusinian connections.<sup>20</sup> But we should note that our tablets, unlike the Eleusian texts, emphasize the ‘release’ rather than the initiate’s visual experience.<sup>21</sup> and they give Persephone no particular emphasis. She is just *Phersephona*, without epithet, whereas in Zuntz’s A texts she receives much more elaborate attributes as ‘queen of those below’ or ‘mistress (*despoina*), the chthonic queen’ or as *hagne Persephoneia*. This feature of the Pelinna texts seems to be in keeping with their emphasis on the experience of the initiate rather than the awe and power of the chthonic divinities or the landscape of Hades. In this, they differ from both the A and B sets of the Thurii leaves, and they are somewhat closer to the Hipponion text.

The new texts make Dionysus look even more multiple than before; but they also make him more serious too. How does

<sup>18</sup> “You, happy one, have cheap, *i.e.*, abundant, wine”: Tsantsanoglou and Parássoglou (*supra* n.1) 14.

<sup>19</sup> “I came upon the desired crown with swift feet” (A 1.6). On the mystic associations of the crown in this passage see Seaford (*supra* n.6) 24.

<sup>20</sup> Merkelbach (*supra* n.6), citing the *trisolbioi* and the mystic context of Soph. fr. 837 Radt. See also Graf (*supra* n.3) and Burkert (*supra* n.8) 100ff on the Thurii gold leaves.

<sup>21</sup> *E.g.* *Hymn. Hom. Cer.* 480; Pindar fr. 137a Snell-Maehler; Soph. fr. 837.2 Radt. See in general Richardson (*supra* n.10) 310ff.

the serious and somber aspect of the god revealed in these new texts fit with the revelry, exuberance, surrender to the moment, and fusion with the ecstatic excitement of the group in the Dionysiac cult familiar to us from the vases and from much of the literary evidence? The new texts may also encourage us to take rather more seriously the motif of his catabasis and successful rescue of a dead mortal from Hades parodied in the *Frogs* and the associations with Semele and her death that Euripides presents in the *Bacchae*. We may also now think differently about the invocation of Dionysus in the much-discussed fifth stasimon of Sophocles' *Antigone* (1114–21), the “many-named god” who has power in Italy and “in the enfolding hollows, common to all, of Eleusinian Demeter.” Not only is the *Antigone* as a whole deeply concerned with the proper relation between upper and lower worlds, but this passage comes just after Creon is persuaded by the prophet Teiresias that he stands in a wrong relation to the powers of Hades. He then sets off on what becomes a kind of initiatory passage between life and death, going to the underground place where Antigone is buried alive. “O harbor of Hades, hard to purify,” he will cry out soon after (ἰὼ δυσκάθατος “Αἰδοῦ λιμῆν: 1284). And both of these passages also refer to the purificatory function of Dionysus, to which the new texts refer in a personal and eschatological sense (ἔλυσε: 2).<sup>22</sup>

We may now have a rather different view too of Heraclitus' famous “Dionysus and Hades are the same” or his “There await men when they die such things as they neither expect or think of,”<sup>23</sup> or of Herodotus' account (4.78) of the Scythian King Scyles' initiation into Dionysiac Mysteries at Olbia. We can also reconsider the golden amphora in the Second Nekyia of the

<sup>22</sup> See Tsantsanoglou and Parássoglou (*supra* n.1) 12; also, apropos of the *Antigone* ode, Burkert (*supra* n.8) 103; Lloyd-Jones (*supra* n.4) 264.

<sup>23</sup> Heraclitus 22B15, 27 D.-K., cf. B62, 88 D.-K. With the motif of what ‘awaits’ (*menei*) the dead in Heraclitus B 27, we may compare the rewards that ‘await’ (*epimenei*) the initiate “beneath the earth” in the last verse of Pelinna a. M. Gigante (“Una nuova lamella orfica e Eraclito,” *ZPE* 80 [1990] 17f) argues that the Orphic texts are drawing on Heraclitus, rather than the other way around. Seaford (*supra* n.6: 14–20), on the other hand, argues that the mysteries should be regarded as “an important source, though not necessarily of course the only one, of Herakleitos' philosophy” (18). Whatever the direction of the influence, the new texts force us to consider the relationship between Heraclitus and the mystery cults.

*Odyssey* (24.73ff), the “gift of Dionysus,” in which the bones of Achilles are to be mingled with those of Patroclus. We may now wonder if Dionysus’ presence here may have some relevance to the combination of the immortalizing gold, the funerary function of the vase, and the ritual lamentation over Achilles by Thetis and the nine Muses. We may also wonder more seriously about Stesichorus’ poem (fr. 234 *PMG*) on this episode, in which Dionysus gave the amphora to Thetis when she received him under the sea, and she give it to Achilles “so that his bones might be placed in it after his death.” Even if one rejects Andrew Stewart’s linking of Stesichorus’ poem to the depiction of Dionysus carrying an amphora on the François vase,<sup>24</sup> and even if Stesichorus is inventing the story of how Thetis got Dionysus’ amphora, he may still be drawing on contemporary associations of Dionysus with passage to the other world, possible precursors of the rôle of Dionysus in the Olbia, Pelinna, and Hipponion texts.

These new texts from Thessaly make us aware again how much the figure of Dionysus qualifies, in still another area, what we have tended to think of as the norm of Greek conceptions of men and gods. Not only does Dionysus permit the crossing of boundaries between man and nature, human and animal, male and female, old and young, individual and group;<sup>25</sup> he also aids in the crossing of what for the classical Greeks was the greatest of all divisions, the barrier of life and death and between human and divine.<sup>26</sup> We seem very far from the literary renderings of the Olympian religion in epic or tragedy, as we see it, for example, in the last choral ode of the *Alcestis* (965ff), where “men have found nothing that can defeat the necessity (of death),” not even “in the Thracian tablets” on which are written the songs of Orpheus’ voice. The Pelinna tablets, like the South Italian texts, do soften the inexorable *ananke* of death that for

<sup>24</sup> A. Stewart, “Stesichorus and the François Vase,” in W. G. Moon, ed., *Ancient Greek Art and Iconography* (Madison 1983) 55f; further discussion and bibliography in Burkert, *Cults* 21 with n.47.

<sup>25</sup> See C. Segal, *Dionysiac Poetics and Euripides’ Bacchae* (Princeton 1982) 8ff; Henrichs (*supra* n.4) 158f.

<sup>26</sup> See Henrichs (*supra* n.4) 160 and “Loss of Self, Suffering, Violence: The Modern View of Dionysus from Nietzsche to Girard,” *HSCP* 88 (1984) 210, who points out the tendency of scholars to stress the fertility aspects of Dionysus and neglect his associations with death.

most of archaic and classical Greek thought defines the human condition: "Now you died, and now you were born, thrice blessed one, on this day" (line 1).<sup>27</sup>

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