

**Rezension zu: Fritz Graf – Sarah Iles Johnston, *Ritual Texts for the Afterlife. Orpheus and the Bacchic Gold Tablets* (2007)**

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When Domenico Comparetti published the first monograph on these texts in 1910 about 12 gold tablets were known (although one of these was destined to be forgotten).<sup>1</sup> Since then, the number of published gold tablets has steadily increased in various publications up to and including the current book which catalogs 39 tablets.<sup>2</sup>

A central issue of the study of the gold tablets is their religious background, especially the question whether or not the myth of the dismemberment of Dionysos provides the mythical background for the tablets' texts. Graf and Johnston state their position in this debate already in the title of their study, and on the very first page they maintain that: "[t]he tablets belonged to those who had been initiated into the mysteries of Dionysus Bacchius and relied heavily upon myths narrated in poems ascribed to the mythical singer Orpheus." This point is argued further in the six chapters of the book.

The first chapter, "The tablets: An edition and translation" pp. 1-49, presents the tablets and gives a description of the grave and its goods (if any), a bibliography on each text, and a short critical apparatus for some of the tablets. The descriptions reveal how little we actually know about the contexts of some these texts. A few examples will suffice: The Rome tablet (no. 9) is "perhaps from the necropolis at Via Ostiense", the find spot of the tablet from Mylopotamos (no. 16) is "unknown", the Aigion tablets (nos. 20-22), we are told, are from "Hellenistic cist-grave[s]", while one of the Elis tablets (no. 23) was found in "a grave (Hellenistic?)". What we do have in most cases, however, is information on where the tablets have been found, information which has wisely been used as the organizing principle for the presentation of the tablets. This is an important contribution since it allow us to approach the texts from a new perspective. Zuntz's influential A, B, and C categorisation, from 1971, seems in any case rather superficial in wake of the publication of the Pelinna tablets (nos. 26a-b) in 1987 and the many short gold tablets. Other gold tablets, also discovered after Zuntz' study, such as the "proxies" to use Johnston's terminology (p. 95), are difficult to categorize except geographically since

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<sup>1</sup> Comparetti, D. (1910). *Laminette orfiche*. Firenze. The second Pherae tablet (no. 28 in Graf and Johnston) was found in 1904 but not published until 2007, see Parker, R. and M. Stamatopoulou (2004, publ. 2007). "A New Funerary Gold Leaf from Pherai". *Arch. Eph.* 1-32.

<sup>2</sup> Murray in Harrison, J. E. (1903), *Prolegomena to the study of Greek religion*; Diels, H. (1912), *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*; Olivieri, A. (1915), *Lamellae aureae orphicae*; Kern, O. (1922), *Orphicorum fragmenta*; Zuntz, G. (1971), *Persephone: three essays on religion and thought in Magna Graecia*; Colli, G. (1978). *La Sapienza Greca*; Pugliese Carratelli, G. (1993), *Le lamine d'oro 'orfiche'*; Pugliese Carratelli, G. (2001), *Le lamine d'oro orfiche. Istruzioni per il viaggio oltremondano degli iniziati greci*; Bernabé, A. and A. I. Jiménez San Cristóbal (2001). *Instrucciones para el más allá: las laminillas órficas de oro*; see also fragments 474-496 in Bernabé, A. (2005). *Poetae epici Graeci. Testimonia et fragmenta. Pars II, Fasc. 2: Orphicorum et Orphicis similibus testimonia et fragmenta*. Included should also be the surveys by Riedweg, C. (1998), "Initiation - Tod - Unterwelt. Beobachtungen zur Kommunikationssituation und narrativen Technik der orphisch-bakchischen Goldblättchen". In: F. Graf (ed.). *Ansichten griechischer Rituale. Geburtstags-Symposium für Walter Burkert*. Stuttgart & Leipzig, B. G. Teubner: 359-398; and Cole, S. G. (2003), "Landscapes of Dionysos and Elysian Fields". In: M. B. Cosmopoulos (ed.). *Greek Mysteries. The Archaeology and Ritual of Ancient Greek Secret Cults*. London & New York, Routledge: 193-217.

they only contain a name, a title, or both, sometimes combined with a greeting to the chthonic couple Persephone and Hades.

The second chapter, "A history of scholarship on the tablets" (pp. 50-65), written by Graf, provides an excellent overview of previous studies. The chapter aims to demonstrate the enduring importance of Comparetti's groundbreaking work on the gold tablets at the end of the nineteenth century. Comparetti's interpretation of the tablets as snippets of Orphic texts, especially texts which described the dismemberment of Dionysos, were quickly adopted by Dieterich and Rohde, and dominated scholarship on Orphism until the critiques of Wilamowitz and Linforth in the 1930s and 1940s. Graf's emphasis on how and, especially, why Orphism was presented as a predecessor to Christianity during the first decades of the twentieth century is very important and interesting, especially since one of the most ardent opponents to Comparetti's interpretation, Radcliffe Edmonds, focuses on the same issue, but argues that Comparetti's construction of Orphism was "a modern fabrication dependent upon Christian models that reconstruct the fragmentary evidence in terms of a unified "Orphic" church".<sup>3</sup> Graf, by contrast, accepts Comparetti's interpretation (with some modifications), on the grounds that it is "the most economical hypothesis that combines all the facts we have at our disposition" (p. 57). He agrees with Comparetti that the texts of the gold tablet is best explained in light of the myth of the dismemberment of Dionysos. The critical voices of Wilamowitz, Linforth, and most recently Edmonds, who have argued that this myth is of a much later date than the gold tablets, are, according to Graf, expressing the opinions of the minority. The tablets can now safely be attributed to Dionysian cults, Graf argues, especially in view of the discoveries of the Hipponion plate (no. 1) and the Pelinna tablets.<sup>4</sup> Graf nevertheless points out that today "no one would call the Orphic movement a religion or claim that early Christianity depended on Orphism" (p. 65).

The next chapter (pp. 66-93), written by Johnston, aims to demonstrate the antiquity of "The myth of Dionysus" (as the chapter is called). The myth is reconstructed at the beginning of the chapter as a tale where the infant Dionysos, sprung from the incestuous union of Zeus and Persephone, succeeds his father to the throne. Encouraged by Hera, the Titans lure Dionysos away from the throne using a variety of toys and other objects, and subsequently attack, dismember and devour him. Zeus punishes the Titans by burning them to ashes with his thunderbolts. From these ashes the human race is created. Humanity is thus composed of a Titanic and a Dionysian part which are in conflict with each other. The Titanic part remains as a "pre-primal" (as Johnston calls it) stain on our soul. Only if it is erased by performing the correct rituals in honour of Persephone, can human beings hope for a blissful afterlife by the help of a forgiving Persephone and her son Dionysos. Even though this reconstruction is based on Neoplatonic texts from the fifth and sixth centuries AD Johnston, following Bernabé, argues that the myth can be traced back to Pindar's frg. 133, quoted in Plato's *Meno*, which refers to "the grief of Persephone", as well as

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<sup>3</sup> Edmonds, R. G. (1999). "Tearing Apart the Zagreus Myth: A Few Disparaging Remarks On Orphism and Original Sin". *Cl. Ant.* 18(1): 35-73, p. 36.

<sup>4</sup> Hipponion, lines 15-16, tr. Johnston, "And you, too, having drunk, will go along the sacred road on which other | glorious initiates and *bacchoi* travel" italics in original. Pelinna line 2, tr. Johnston, "Tell Persephone that the Bacchic One himself has released you".

several other fragments from the classical period.<sup>5</sup> Johnston then offers a reconstruction of how the myth of the dismemberment as we have it on the gold tablets, came into being; at least four traditions on the death of Dionysos were combined by a *bricoleur* and, at some point, written down under the name of Orpheus, thus giving the religious text (*hieros logos* as it is argued later in the book) the necessary authority. This version of the myth was then spread throughout the Greek world already in the fifth century by *bricoleurs* known as the *orpheotelestai*, who brought with them a "hubbub of books" by Orpheus and Musaeus and offered rites designed to placate Persephone and thereby absolve humans from the guilt inherited from the Titans, and who were criticized by Plato and later authors for this.<sup>6</sup> It was from one of these books that itinerant *manteis* produced the texts on the gold tablets. This not the place for a detailed discussion of Johnston's analyses.<sup>7</sup> I will, however, draw attention to another reading of the Pindar fragment, proposed by Jens Holzhausen. Holzhausen finds it more likely that Pindar referred to the myth known from the Homeric Hymn to Demeter, and that by "Persephone's grief" Pindar means her despair after having been abducted by Hades.<sup>8</sup> In the Homeric Hymn to Demeter Hades says that those who do not "appease your power with offerings, reverently performing rites and paying fit gifts, shall be punished for evermore."<sup>9</sup> Humans, or rather, the initiated, thus know that they have to pay the price for Hades' transgression through the observation of the proper rites. Holzhausen's reading, which is not considered by Johnston, is very important since it demonstrates that the Pindar fragment is open to more than one plausible interpretation, and for this reason it is difficult to use the Pindar fragment as evidence for that the myth of the dismemberment of Dionysos was known already in Pindar's time. Our interpretation of this and other fragments are determined by whether we prefer "the most economical hypothesis that combines all the facts we have at our disposition" or a more fragmented view which acknowledges that this might not be possible due to the state of the textual evidence and that we therefore should focus on the function of the fragments in its immediate, historical context instead. This chapter obviously argues in favour of the former option, but it is important to note that even though, as Graf suggests, most scholars agree with this hypothesis, the debate is still ongoing.

The next chapter, "The eschatology behind the tablets" (pp. 94-136), also by Johnston, explores the relationship of the gold tablets with Greek eschatology, especially the Dionysos myth as reconstructed in the previous chapter, but also with similar ideas discussed in the works of writers such as Plato and Pindar. Johnston divides the tablets into three groups, the "mnemonic tablets," which contain a detailed description of the underworld and advice for the deceased on where to go and what to say, the "purity tablets", where the deceased's ritual purity is emphasized, and the "proxies", which have been described briefly above. Concentrating on differences between these groups and between tablets within each group, and by showing that the texts drew inspiration from several sources, Johnston argues (correctly I believe) that the authors of these tablets were *bricoleurs*, identified as the itinerant *orpheotelestai*, whose eclectic attitude makes it impossible to reconstruct a homogeneous

<sup>5</sup> Bernabé, A. (2002). "La toile de Pénélope: a-t-il existé un mythe orphique sur Dionysos et les Titans?" *Rev. Hist. Rel.* 2002(4): 401-433.

<sup>6</sup> *Pl. Resp.* 364b-365a.

<sup>7</sup> I will explore this more thoroughly in my forthcoming Phd dissertation on Orphism.

<sup>8</sup> Holzhausen, J. (2004). "Pindar und die Orphik zu frg. 133 Snell/Maehler". *Hermes* 132(1): 20-36.

<sup>9</sup> *Hom. Hymn. Dem.* 366-369, tr. Evelyn-White; Holzhausen p. 33.

eschatological background for the whole corpus.<sup>10</sup> A main function of these tablets was nevertheless to ensure for the dead, in whose graves they were found, a better afterlife through the special knowledge gained by initiation. Regarding which mystery cult the dead were initiated into, Johnston maintains that while the Hipponion (no.1) and the Pelinna tablets (26 a and b) suggest a Dionysiac context, the other tablets might have been used in other mysteries as well. This means that we need not see the differences in the plates as mistakes, or deviations from a hypothetical "original" source. Johnston's treatment of the "right/left problem", however, does not seem entirely convincing and in fact undermines, to some extent, the concept of *bricoleurs*. This "problem" concerns the directions (left and right) given on the mnemonic tablets. The longer tablets operate with two springs. The first is to be avoided, while the second, Mnemosyne's spring, is the the deceased's goal. While most of these tablets locate the Mnemosyne's spring on the right side of Hades, others tell the deceased to keep clear of the first spring and "proceed further" until he or she reach Mnemosyne's spring. Furthermore, the unnamed spring (almost certainly Lethe) which is to be avoided is sometimes on the left side, sometimes on the right. The mnemonic tablets from Crete, however, does not mention this spring at all. In order to explain these differences, Johnston turns to Pindar and Plato since she believes the eschatological scheme behind the tablets must also have inspired these authors. Johnston identifies three types of dead souls in the eschatology of Plato's and Pindar's works, and although their characterization varies, Johnston believes that this division reflects that in the eschatology behind the gold tablets. To substantiate her claim, Johnston argues that the deceased has already started down the right-hand path and that it is along this path that he or she first encounters the spring which is to be avoided. At the first crossroads, then, the incurably evil souls take the road to the left, while the souls of the good take right hand path. Then as the souls approach the first spring, the good are further subdivided and the "good", who will drink here, are separated from the "good plus", as Johnston calls them, who proceed to Mnemosyne's spring. These "good plus" are the initiated owners of the gold tablets. Thus by assuming the first crossroads separating the evil from the good and the good plus, Johnston find a tripartite division of souls in the eschatology behind the gold tablets, just as we find it in Plato and Pindar. This shows that (a) the eschatology behind the gold tablets associated right with good and left with evil, and (b) that the gold tablets can be used as evidence for a connection between Orphic texts and the writings of Plato and Pindar. The main problem with this reading is that the initial crossroads imagine by Johnson is not described on any of the tablets. This, argues Johnston, can be explained by the fact that the material on which the texts are written, gold, was so expensive that the information on the tablet should only be the most important. This is an *argumentum ex silentio*.

There are, furthermore, at least two factors that speak against Johnston's interpretation here. First, although Mnemosyne's spring is most often on the right side, it is not always so. In the oldest surviving tablet, from Hipponion, the spring to be avoided is on the right side, while the deceased is told to "proceed to the lake of Mnemosyne". Second, I cannot see any evidence that the eschatology behind the mnemonic tablets distinguished three different destinies for dead souls. The longer

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<sup>10</sup> E. g. at p. 130: "Different *orpheotelestai*, operating in different parts of the Greek world at different times, shared the idea that the soul would have to pronounce something to Persephone or her representatives, but either deliberately or through the accidents of transmission of a tradition that was primarily oral, they diverged with respect to specifics."

tablets focus on a choice between two springs. This conforms to what Plato ascribes to the *orpheotelestai* in his criticism of them,<sup>11</sup> and the same distinction is found in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*. It is this distinction we are dealing with in the gold tablets; between initiate and non-initiate. I thus see no need to introduce a hypothetical third alternative here.

Chapter 5, "Dionysiac mystery cults and the Gold Tablets" (pp. 137-164), written by Graf, attempts to link the corpus of gold tablets with the Dionysiac mysteries and their rites. Graf shows, convincingly, that the tablets contain texts taken from initiation rituals by pointing to the curious mixture of hexameter and unmetrical passages such as the intentional insertion of *trisólbie* in the first line of the Pelinna tablets (which ruins the meter) instead of e.g. *mákar* (which would have preserved the meter).<sup>12</sup> Since Graf and Johnston see the tablets as Bacchic, Graf continues with a short survey on Dionysiac rituals in order to find similarities. The result is negative and forces Graf to conclude that the gold tablets' "place in the scenario of Bacchic mystery rites still eludes us." (p. 150, see also p. 157). The archaeological contexts of the tablets is not very helpful either since most of the finds are either not described properly by the initial excavator(s) or because they simply do not contain any evidence suggesting a special Dionysiac rite. There are, however, some traces of Dionysiac cult among the grave goods, such as the maenad statuette found in the Pelinna grave, and in some of the texts, for example the Hipponion and Pelinna tablets, and also in the tablets from Pherae (no. 27), where a thyrsos is mentioned twice, and Amphipolis (no. 30), where the deceased is described as "pure and sacred to Dionysus" (tr. Johnston). Whether the Dionysiac references in the tablets are sufficient to conclude that all tablets belonged to such cults is, as Graf maintains, uncertain, especially in light of the *bricoleur* theory convincingly argued by Johnston in the previous chapter. Yet, Graf argues that there is a connection between the tablets and Dionysiac cults and that the differences between Bacchic rites and the rites referred to in the gold tablets are reconciled by the Orphic anthropogony known from the myth of the dismemberment of Dionysos Zagreus. Thus, his conclusion depends on the dating of this myth, a matter which, in my opinion, is not settled.<sup>13</sup>

The last chapter, "Orpheus, his poetry, and sacred texts" (pp. 165-184), is a joint effort by Graf and Johnston. The chapter's scope is to show, through a survey of Archaic, Classical, and Hellenistic sources describing Orpheus as an Argonaut, singer, magician, and initiator, why Orpheus was so well suited to be used as an authority in eschatological texts. Especially Orpheus' reputation as the originator of *teletae* in general and his visits to Hades must have played an important role here. For these and other reasons authors ascribed their work to him in order to give their texts an outlook of great antiquity (since Orpheus according to tradition was older than Homer and Hesiod) and truth. These hieroi logoi were especially important for the small mystery cults. Graf and Johnston believe that the gold tablet permit us glimpses into their cult

<sup>11</sup> Pl. *Resp.* 365a.

<sup>12</sup> For Graf's previous thoughts on the ritual references in the Pelinna tablets, see Graf, F. (1991). "Textes orphiques et rituel bacchique. A propos des lamelles de Pélinna". In: P. Borgeaud (ed.). *Orphisme et Orphée. En l'honneur de Jean Rudhardt*. Genève, Librairie Droz S. A.: 87-102, where he argued that the ritual referred to was an initiation (p. 98 f.), and Graf, F. (1993). "Dionysian and Orphic Eschatology: New Texts and Old Questions". In: T. H. Carpenter and C. A. Faraone (ed.). *Masks of Dionysus*. Ithaca & London, Cornell University Press: 239-258, for the opposite conclusion (esp. pp. 248-250).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Edmonds, and on chapter 3 above.

practices, although, as they point out, the gold tablets themselves are not to be considered hieroi logoi. This leads up to their conclusion regarding the authors of the gold tablets which sums up the main argument of the book: "We assume that the wandering *manteis* and *agyrtai*, whom Plato credits both with the performance of individual mystery initiations and with the creation of curse tablets, and whom we typically identify with *orpheotelestai*, given that they validate their practices through the books of Orpheus and Musaeus, were responsible for creating most of the physical tablets – that is, for inscribing upon the sheet of gold the words the initiate would need after death." (p. 184).

At the end of the book Graf and Johnston provide a short appendix (pp. 185-190) with "Additional Bacchic texts" translated by Graf. These include the bone plaques of Olbia; the drawings which are said to be after Rusjaeva's drawings, however, are identical with West's drawings.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the appendix presents two inscriptions from Olbia; one containing the first instance of the Bacchic ritual cry "euai" inscribed on a mirror, the other a mysterious inscription found on a fifth century BC Attic black-figure vase. Also included are the Gurôb papyrus and the edict of Ptolemy IV Philopator. The Appendix is followed by the endnotes, bibliography, a concordance comparing Bernabé's, Bernabé and Jiménez', Pugliese Carratelli's, and Zuntz' organization of the gold tablets, a subject index, and an index of ancient texts.

Despite the critiques given above on some of the author's interpretations, especially regarding the myth of the dismemberment of Dionysos, this book is important for the study of the gold tablets in more than one way. Especially the *bricoleur* theory regarding the authorship of the tablets and their usage seems to be a useful starting point in the study of these intriguing texts. I also found the suggestion that itinerant and local religious experts were the authors of the individual texts convincing. Instead of trying to reduce the gold tablet texts to a single, coherent eschatology, this view allows for local and personal preferences; this in turn helps us understand both the minor and major differences between the texts of the individual tablets. Graf and Johnston's book confronts many of the central questions these tablets pose. It is sure to become the starting point for many future studies on the gold tablets.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> See Rusjaeva, A. S. (1978). "Orfizn i kul't Dionisa v Ol'vii". *Vestnik Drevnej Istorii*: 87-104, p. 89 fig. 6, where Rusjaeva reads *orfikoi* on the first plate and West reads *orfikôn*, West, M. L. (1982). "The Orphics of Olbia". *ZPE* 45: 17-29, p. 18, and West, M. L. (1983). *The Orphic poems*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, p. 19.

<sup>15</sup> This review has benefitted from individual comments made by Helène Whittaker von Hofsten, and the anonymous review advisors for FeRA. Remaining errors are of course mine.