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Edited by Radcliffe G. Edmonds III

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PART I

The tablet texts

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CHAPTER I

Who are you? A brief history of the scholarship Radcliffe G. Edmonds III

*I am parched with thirst and I perish.
But give me to drink from the ever-flowing spring
on the right, by the cypress.
“Who are you? Where are you from?”
I am the son of Earth and starry Heaven.*

(gold tablet B4 from Crete = OF 479 Bernabé 2004–07)

“Who are you?” ask the unnamed guardians, as the deceased begs for the water of Memory. “Where are you from?” From the discovery of the first gold lamellae in the nineteenth century to the most recent discoveries, scholars have asked much the same questions about the tablets themselves: Who are the people who chose to have these enigmatic scraps of gold foil buried with them in their graves? Where do these texts come from? How can we reconstruct the religious context of these mysterious texts?

Recent discoveries have prompted scholars to examine from new theoretical perspectives both the contexts in which the tablets were produced and the structures of the texts themselves. This collection brings together in English a number of previously published and new studies of the “Orphic” Gold tablets, with the goal of making accessible to a wider audience some of the new methodologies being applied to the study of the tablets. In addition, a survey of the trends in the scholarship and a compilation of the recent bibliography not only provides an introduction to the serious study of the tablets, but also illuminates the place of these tablets within the scholarship of ancient Greek religion.

A brief overview of the texts themselves and of the scholarly attempts to explain where these texts came from may help orient the reader and prepare the ground for the new perspectives offered here. Relative to the mass of material in the canon of classical material, these gold tablets are new discoveries, latecomers to the ongoing study of ancient Greek culture. While much of the other evidence for Orphism and Greek religion came

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through the manuscript tradition, in the works of the Neoplatonists or the authors of the classical period, the gold tablets, like the Derveni Papyrus, were buried for centuries, out of the reckoning of scholars in the reception and transmission of the classical tradition.

The scholarship on the gold tablets really begins only in 1879, even though this date is more than forty years after the first of the tablets was discovered. In 1879, excavations in two tumuli at Thurii in southern Italy uncovered four tombs containing gold lamellae. The three tombs in Timpone Piccolo yielded the tablets subsequently labeled A1, A2, and A3, while the nearby Timpone Grande had a single tomb, in which tablet A4 was found, wrapped up in the peculiar tablet Cr. The text of A1 is the most extensive:

Pure I come from the pure, Queen of those below the earth,
and Eukles and Eubouleus and the other immortal gods;
For I also claim that I am of your blessed race.
But Fate mastered me and the Thunderer, striking with his lightning.
I flew out of the circle of wearying heavy grief;
I came on with swift feet to the desired crown;
I passed beneath the bosom of the Mistress, Queen of the Underworld,
"Happy and most blessed one, a god you shall be instead of a mortal."
A kid I fell into milk.

A2 and A3 have nearly identical texts, similar to A1.

Pure I come from the pure, Queen of those below the earth,
And Eukles and Eubouleus and the other gods and daimons;
For I also claim that I am of your blessed race.
Recompense I have paid on account of deeds not just;
Either Fate mastered me or the lightning bolt thrown by the thunderer.
Now I come, a suppliant, to holy Phersephoneia,
That she, gracious, may send me to the seats of the blessed.

A4, from the other tumulus, seems an entirely different text:

But when the soul leaves the light of the sun,
go straight to the right, having kept watch on all things very well.
Hail, you having experienced the experience you had not experienced
before.
A god you have become from a man. A kid you fell into milk.
Hail, hail; making your way to the right,
the sacred meadows and groves of Phersephoneia.

Lamella Cr, in which A4 was carefully folded, is incomprehensible, a "soup of letters," out of which various editors have picked key words that fit in with their preconceived notions of its meaning – rather like a Rorschach blot.

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To explain these odd texts, the excavators called in the eminent classicist Domenico Comparetti, and Comparetti's explanation set the terms of the debate for the next century and a quarter. In his article in the 1882 *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, Comparetti linked the tablets from Thurii with another tablet, discovered in nearby Petelia nearly forty years earlier, in which the speaker claims to be the "child of Earth and starry Heaven."

You will find in the halls of Hades a spring on the left,
and standing by it, a glowing white cypress tree;
Do not approach this spring at all.
You will find the other, from the lake of Memory,
refreshing water flowing forth. But guardians are nearby.
Say: "I am the child of Earth and starry Heaven;
But my race is heavenly; and this you know yourselves.
But I am parched with thirst and I perish; but give me quickly
refreshing water flowing forth from the lake of Memory."
And then they will give you to drink from the divine spring,
And then you will celebrate? [the rites? with] the heroes.
This [is the ? . . . of Memory, when you are about] to die ..
?write this?].?? shadow covering around

The mention of the water of Memory had led the first editors to associate the tablet with the oracle of Trophonius described by Pausanias.¹ The child of Earth and starry Heaven they naturally read as Mnemosyne, goddess of Memory, since all the deities of the pre-Olympian generation had Gaia and Ouranos as parents. Comparetti, however, proposed a different reading. He understood the "child of Earth and starry Heaven" to refer to the Titans, and he took the references to lightning and unjust deeds in the Thurii tablets to refer to murder by the Titans of the infant Dionysos, for which they were blasted by Zeus' lightning.

Drawing on the account in the Neoplatonist Olympiodorus, Comparetti postulated an Orphic doctrine of original sin, founded on the shared guilt of mankind as descendants of the Titans. The tablets, he argued, provide evidence for "the main principles of the Orphic doctrine on psychogony and metempsychosis", since the Olympiodoran myth of anthropogony from the remains of the Titans furnishes mankind with a Titanic element, mixed in with the pure divinity of the soul. "This Titanic element is the original guilt for which the human soul is excluded from the community of the other gods and from her blessed abode, and is condemned to a succession of births and deaths."² The anthropogony, attested explicitly only in the sixth CE

¹ Goettling 1843: 8. The first publication of the Petelia tablet was in Franz 1836: 149–150.

² Comparetti 1882: 116.

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Olympiodorus, thus provides the basis for all of the doctrines about the soul and reincarnation attested to for Orpheus and his followers.³

In linking these texts to Orphism, Comparetti brought crucial new evidence into a debate over the nature of Orphism that had been raging throughout the nineteenth century. Perhaps the two most important figures in this debate were Friedrich Creuzer and Charles Augustus Lobeck, but each side had its partisans, and the controversies ranged over various issues. Creuzer's Orphism was very much the heir of the Neoplatonic construction of Orphism – that is, as religious doctrines containing the secret wisdom of the ancients, preserved in enigmatic or allegorical form. For Creuzer it was part of the secret tradition that ultimately went back to India, an abstract theology that had to be passed on in the symbolic form of myths. Lobeck, however, rejected Creuzer's symbolic interpretation and scoffed at the idea of a deep wisdom hidden within the texts. While different scholars fell somewhere between the two extremes, uncomfortable with Lobeck's radical scepticism but unwilling to accept all of Creuzer's symbolism, most accepted one basic Neoplatonic premise, that there was a coherent body of Orphic ideas to be found not only in the various texts ascribed to Orpheus but also other texts that contained similar ideas. In none of these scholars, however, does Comparetti's idea of an Orphic doctrine of original guilt appear, even though Olympiodorus' myth is known and discussed. Nevertheless, Comparetti's Orphic Titanic interpretation was picked up by Dieterich in his 1893 *Nekyia*, which postulated a secret Orphic katabasis tradition that contributed to early Christian eschatological imagery, and the idea made its way into some of the most influential studies of Greek religion at the time, such as Rohde's *Psyche* and Harrison's *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*.

In the succeeding years, more tablets were published. Three tablets from Crete were published in 1893 whose texts were similar to the Petelia tablet, but much abbreviated, containing only the essential features of the tree, the water of Memory, and the claim to be the child of Earth and starry Heaven.

In 1903, Comparetti published a tablet from Rome, A5, which resembles the tablets from Thurii, but also mentions Mnemosyne.

Pure she comes from the pure, Queen of those below the earth,
Eukles and Eubouleus, child of Zeus. But receive

³ For the peculiarities of Olympiodorus' account see Brisson 1992, Edmonds 1999, and Edmonds 2009. Olympiodorus is the only source to combine an anthropogony with the story of Dionysos' dismemberment, rather than with the Titanomachy. For a defense of Comparetti's reading, see Bernabé 2002e and 2003a.

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this gift of Memory, famed in song among men.

"Caecilia Secundina, come, having become a goddess by the custom."

This tablet seems to date from the second century CE, nearly five hundred years later than any of the other tablets found. Nevertheless, Comparetti saw this as the link between the two types of tablets, evidence that they shared a common source, a source he imagined as an Orphic sacred text.

Comparetti's interpretation was made canonical by the publication of these tablets in the collections of Diels–Kranz (Orpheus the pre-Socratic!) and Kern, whose 1922 edition of the Orphic fragments has only been replaced by Bernabé's recent edition. The tablets became a standard piece of evidence in the description of Orphism, and Comparetti's explanation of them in terms of the myth of Dionysos Zagreus formed the backbone of the understanding of Orphism for this period.

The nature of Orphism and of other Greek mystery religions was a hot topic among the scholars of religion, and the question of the relation of the Greek mysteries to early Christianity was often debated.⁴ Orphism as reconstructed by Comparetti and elaborated by Macchiore and the like was an important player in this game, since Orphism was easily comparable to Protestantism – a movement protesting against mainstream Greek religion, complete with its own doctrine of original sin coupled with the innate divinity of mankind. Graf has discussed the role that Orphism played in the 'culture wars' of this period over the role of institutional religion in the modern nation state, where the historicization of Christianity by tracing its connections with pagan antiquity had significant repercussions for contemporary society.⁵ It is important, however, to note that the same basic reconstruction of Orphism was used on all sides of these issues, although the details were manipulated back and forth to support different positions. The elaborations of this imagined Orphism became more and more grandiose, prompting a skeptical reaction and critiques. In the wake of these critiques, the scholarship divided into two camps, the PanOrphist and the Orpheoskeptic, reminiscent of the divisions in the previous century between Creuzer and Lobeck. While the latter denied that Orphism ever existed as a coherent religious movement, the former developed the picture of a dogmatic religion

⁴ Comparetti indeed notes the importance and interest of the tablets to the study of Christian origins. "Quindi grande è pure la discrepanza di opinioni emesse su tal soggetto dal dotti moderni, dal Lobeck al Rohde ed alla pleiade di dotti che in questi ultimi tempi hanno scrutato le non numerose notizie pervenute ai misteri antichi, oggi particolarmente e con grande interesse studiati in correlazione colle origini e i precedenti del misticismo cristiano." Comparetti 1910: 51 (emphasis added).

⁵ Graf and Johnston 2007: 58–61. Smith 1990 discusses the long history of the study of Greek mysteries in relation to early Christianity, pointing out many of the uses to which they were put.

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whose sectaries and doctrines influenced Greek religion and culture from the Pisistratids to Plato to Paul. In each generation of scholarship, the gold tablets remained central to the debate. In his superb critical work of 1941, *The Arts of Orpheus*, the skeptic Linforth pointedly omitted the tablets and refused even to discuss them as Orphic, while Guthrie relied on their testimony at crucial points in his *Orpheus and Greek Religion*, a balanced and scholarly restatement of the PanOrphist position.⁶

It is worth noting the balance in types of tablets found at this point. Of the tablets found, four were of the "pure from the pure" A type, and four were of the "child of Earth and starry Heaven" B type. No more tablets resembling the Thurii tablets have been found, however, making them seem a more isolated phenomenon, especially since only the two identical tablets A2 and A3 actually have the "lightning and unjust deeds" central to Comparetti's thesis. By contrast, eight more B tablets have been published in the intervening years, and more are soon to be published by Tzifopoulos. Four of these from Crete (as well as the most recently discovered ones) and one said to be from Thessaly are the abbreviated version (B6–B9 and B12), like the other Cretan tablets, but several longer versions, like the Petelia tablet, have been found (B2, B10, B11). Tablet B10 from Hipponion, published in 1975, remains the most significant of these, not only because it seems to be the earliest in date (end of the 5th century), but because it is the longest and most complete version surviving. Indeed, the discovery of the Hipponion tablet, coming as it did so soon after the discovery of the Derveni Papyrus, heralded the next major phase in the debates over Orphism and the tablets' place within it.⁷

The 1987 discovery of a grave at Pelinna in Thessaly with two nearly identical tablets in the shape of ivy leaves added a new type of text.

Now you have died and now you have been born, thrice blessed one, on this very day.

Say to Persephone that Bacchios himself freed you.

A bull you rushed to milk.

Quickly, you rushed to milk.

A ram you fell into milk.

⁶ Guthrie 1952. The first edition was in 1935, but Guthrie engages directly with Linforth in his second edition almost as little as Linforth had with Guthrie in his work.

⁷ Zuntz 1971 pulled together all the tablets discovered before the Hipponion tablet and provided a new critical edition, whose attention to detail and context has made it the fundamental basis for all subsequent editions. Zuntz, however, saw the tablets not as Orphic but Pythagorean and vehemently rejected any association of them with Orphism under any description or Dionysiac religion of any kind. B11, which is said to have been found somewhere in central Sicily, remains in a private collection, where it has not been seen by scholars, except for its initial editor, Jiri Frel, whose publication remains problematic.

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You have wine as your fortunate honor.

And you go beneath the earth, celebrating rites just like the other blessed ones.

These texts share one salient feature with the tablets from Thurii, the peculiar slogan of an animal going into milk, but they are otherwise different from the other types of tablet. However, the prominent role for Dionysos, under the name of Bacchios, renewed the question of the relation of the tablets, and Orphism in general, to Dionysiac cult, especially since the Hipponion tablet promised that the deceased would walk along the sacred road with the other *mystai* and *bacchoi*.

Two recent publications of tablets from Pherai in Thessaly present something different yet again, raising further questions about the tablets' relations to Bacchic or Metroac mysteries. One tablet contains a mystic password – *Andrikepaidothyrsou*, along with an invocation of the goddess Brimo, a figure often identified with Demeter or Hekate.

Passwords: Male child of the thyrsos, Male child of the thyrsos;
Brimo, Brimo;

Enter the sacred meadow. For the initiate is without penalty.

Another proclaims bearer's connection with the rites of Demeter and the Mountain Mother.

Send me to the thiasos of the initiates. I have [seen] the festivals,
the rites of Demeter Chthonia and of the Mountain Mother.

In recent years, a number of even shorter tablets have been discovered in tombs in Thessaly and Macedonia, many containing simply the name of the deceased or the title, *mystes* – initiate. Clearly, these tablets too were designed for initiates in some mystery, or at least for those claiming the privileges of the initiate. Other tablets convey a greeting to Plouton or Persephone from the deceased, but none of these shorter tablets shares the single uniting feature of all the other gold tablets, a narrative of the soul's journey to the underworld. Such brevity makes drawing the line between “Orphic” gold tablets and, for example, protective amulets on gold lamellae very difficult. While these shorter tablets may come from the same sort of religious context as the other tablets, only the tablets with a narrative lend themselves to the sort of semiotic analysis that has been one of the more fruitful tools for illuminating the enigmatic tablets in recent years.

The discovery of new types of tablets and the continued uncovering of new examples has once again sparked debate over the nature and contexts of these enigmatic documents. Despite the fact that the images of lightning and unjust deeds appear confined to the tablets of Timpone Piccolo at

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Thurii alone, some scholars have nevertheless attempted to fit all the tablets into the model of Orphism first set out by Comparetti. Bernabé's edition (with Jiménez San Cristóbal) of the tablets and his new edition of the Orphic fragments rely on the hypothesis of a unified but secret Orphic tradition that produced the tablets. For others, however, these twenty-odd scraps of gold foil seem to come, not just from a variety of places around the margins of the Greek world (Southern Italy, Thessaly, Crete), but from a number of separate sources. The short and long versions of the B texts are clearly related, but the texts from Thurii, Rome, and Pelinna present a number of significant differences. After surveying this motley lot, the questions still remain: who are you? where are you from?

In light of the new evidence, the debate between the skeptics and the PanOrphists has been renewed, and once again, the tablets are central to the debate. However, scholars have also made use of new literary critical methodologies and interdisciplinary approaches, so that there is not only new material being discussed but also new ways in which the material is analyzed. The essays in the volume represent some of these new approaches.

Bernabé, as part of his monumental new edition of the Orphic fragments, has provided new critical editions of all the texts of the tablets, but more tablets continue to be added to the corpus. This volume includes an updated version of Bernabé's texts, along with a critical apparatus and epigraphic transcription for each of the texts.⁸ In addition, there is an English translation of these difficult and often fragmentary texts. The texts are grouped into six categories, following the typology set up by Zuntz and expanded by Riedweg and Tzifopoulos.

The A group contains the four texts found at Thurii in 1879, three of which begin with the identification of the deceased as coming "pure from the pure." The tablet A5 from Rome that proclaims that Caecilia Secundina comes pure from the pure also belongs in this category. The B group contains all the tablets with the self-presentation formula "I am the child of Earth and starry Heaven," both the short versions (mostly from Crete) and the longer versions from Petelia, Pharsalos, Hipponion, and Entella. The C group contains only the anomalous text from Timpone Grande at Thurii. No translation has been provided, but the reader may compare

⁸ The epigraphic transcriptions are drawn from Pugliese Carratelli 2001, while the critical apparatus is selected from Bernabé 2004–07 fasc. 2, with additions and alterations by Edmonds. The apparatus in Bernabé 2004–07 fasc. 2 is far more comprehensive, but, due to its very size and depth of detail, somewhat unwieldy to work with. Bernabé 2004–07 fasc. 2 should also be consulted for comprehensive bibliographical notes on every detail of the tablet texts. See now Graf and Johnston 2007 for texts that come closer to the epigraphic transcriptions.

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Pugliese Carratelli's transcription with Bernabé's attempt to pick some comprehensible words out of this baffling text.⁹ The Pelinna tablets have been collected with three other texts in the D group, following the classification proposed by Tzifopoulos in his forthcoming study. All of these texts lack the characteristic formulas of self-presentation that distinguish the A and B tablets, but, with their mention of deities such as Dionysos, Brimo, and Demeter, they contain more than a simple identification of the deceased. The E group contains those tablets which proclaim a greeting to Plouton and/or Persephone, while the F group are those with merely a name or the label *mystes*.

Following the texts and translations are several tables by Tzifopoulos, summarizing the archaeological contexts of the gold tablets. While many of the tablets discovered earlier have no reliable archaeological context, some of the more recently discovered tablets were found in a context whose salient features can be described in detail. As Tzifopoulos stresses in his own essay, the archaeological context of these tablets is an often over-looked source of information for trying to reconstruct the religious contexts from which the gold tablets come. The tablets' use as grave goods clearly marks their importance for understanding ideas of life, death, and afterlife, and their particular significance can only be understood in relation to other ancient evidence of this kind.

The first set of essays in the volume looks at a variety of different kinds of contexts to help illuminate the nature of the gold lamellae. Graf's essay opens the volume by placing the tablets within the context of other writings attributed to Orpheus that pertain to eschatology. Graf surveys the ideas about theogony, eschatology, and ritual found in the texts attributed to Orpheus, particularly the early evidence found in Plato and the Derveni Papyrus. This reprinted essay does not analyze the gold tablets themselves in detail, but it provides the background of other contemporary texts concerned with many of the same issues as the tablets, helping modern scholars to grapple with the question of whether and how these tablets may be considered Orphic. Bernabé's essay in this volume, "Are the 'Orphic' Gold Leaves Orphic?" pursues this question in greater detail, comparing the elements of the tablets with other texts and images considered Orphic. Bernabé is the leading exponent of the new PanOrphist position, arguing

⁹ Strictly speaking, tablet A4 really ought to be part of the C group, since it was found wrapped inside tablet C and lacks the characteristic "pure from the pure" formula of the other A tablets. However, it has been grouped with the other A texts since Zuntz, and it shares the "kid in milk" and "god from mortal" elements with tablet A1.