CHAPTER TWO

A RITUAL FOR THE DEAD:
THE TABLETS FROM PELINNA (L 7AB)

TRANSLATION OF TABLETS L 7AB FROM PELINNA

The two tablets from Pelinna (L 7a and 7b) were found in Thessaly in 1985, on the site of ancient Pelinna or Pelinnaion. They were placed on the breast of a dead female, in a tomb where a small statue of a maenad was also found (cf. a similar figure in App. II n. 7). Published in 1987, they revolutionized what had been known and said until then about these texts, and contributed new and extremely important viewpoints.¹ They are in the shape of an ivy leaf, as they are represented on vase paintings,² although it cannot be ruled out that they may represent a heart, in the light of a text by Pausanias that speaks of a “heart of orichalcum” in relation to the mysteries of Lerna.³ Everything in the grave, then, including the very form of the text’s support, suggests a clearly Dionysiac atmosphere, since both the ivy and the heart evoke the presence of the power of Dionysus. The text of one of the tablets is longer than that of the other. It has been suggested⁴ that the text of the shorter tablet was written first, and since the entire text did not fit, the longer one was written. We present the text of the latter:⁵

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³ Paus. 2, 37, 2–3. Let us not forget that the heart was the part of Dionysus that was not ingested, and from which he was reborn, according to the Orphic myth (OF 314 ff. and 327). We owe this suggestion to David Jordan. The possible form of heart has been also proposed by Theodossiev (1996) 224 and Martín Hernández (2006) 448 ff.
⁴ Ricciardelli (1992) 27.
⁵ The shorter one exhibits the same text, without lines 4 and 7.

You have just died and have just been born, thrice happy, on this day. Tell Persephone that Bacchus himself has liberated you.

A bull, you leapt into the milk.
Swift, you leapt into the milk.
A ram, you fell into the milk.
You have wine, a happy privilege
and you will go under the earth, once you have accomplished the same rites as the other happy ones.

Commentaries

2.1. Structure of the text

An unnamed person addresses the deceased in the second person. He refers to the present (“you have wine”), to the past, both immediate (“you have just died and have just been born”) and distant (“Bacchus himself has liberated you”), and to the future (“you will go under the earth”), and he urges the soul to say something in the presence of the goddess of the underworld (which implies a reference to the immediate future). The possibilities for the speaker’s identity are set forth by Riedweg: it is either someone talking in the underworld, or the tablet itself, or the initiating priest, or someone taking part in the funerary rites.

The reference to a concrete day (“on this day”) on which the deceased has just died probably situates us at the funeral. It is therefore most likely that the person speaking is the one officiating over the funerary rites. And the expressions that are pronounced are probably part of this rite. Milk and wine are mentioned, which, in the form of offerings

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6 We have opted for the reading of Luppe (1989) 14 καὶ σῷ μὲν εἶς. The first editors Tsantsanoglou-Parássoglou (1987) 15, read καὶ πηγαδίνει σῷ (so also Pugliese Carratelli [1993] 62), for other variants, cf. § 2.6 and the Greek text in Appendix I.

7 Riedweg (1996) 478, (1998) 369, to whom the observation on the references to time is also due.

8 Guarducci (1990) 14 already understood that the speaker was a μόστης.