The golden tablets, which have been found all over the Greek world, have been identified as a kind of passport put in the mouth or upon the chest of an initiate to enable his/her successful transition to the afterlife. They have been studied at length and have been ranked and published by the editors according to varying criteria (thematic similarity, alleged time of composition, geographical spread). In this paper, I would like to address two related questions, which have divided scholarly opinion: first, whether and to what extent we should keep and respect the epichoric textual variants or reconstruct an original model, of which the individual documents would be more or less corrupted accounts; and, second, whether and to what extent we can (or must) try to reconstruct special cultural and religious contexts that could explain the different attitudes of the poetic I and the relationship between actors and spectators involved in rituals of which we otherwise have scant evidence.

**Oral Bricolage**

As regards the first issue, I will discuss those tables that refer to underworld routes which the soul of the dead person had to cover with the aid of more or less detailed instructions. One group of leaves (the first section of the first group in Pugliese Carratelli’s 2001 edition: I A) points out to the initiate first a spring near a white cypress, which is to be avoided, and then a second stream running from the lake of Mnemosyne, where the dead person can refresh himself/herself after answering the question “What are you seeking in the darkness of murky Hades?”, which is put to him/her by the guardians of the stream. In another group (II Pugliese Carratelli) we find no mention of either spring or lake, but the dead person is given instructions about what he/she ought to say in front of
Persephone and other gods of the underworld in order to enter the goddess’ meadows and groves.

The question of the origin of the first group has been approached in two different ways: some scholars have emphasized the local and temporal specificity of the individual texts,¹ others have tried to reconstruct a common pattern which should explain every single variant, as peculiar it may be.² Richard Janko has made the most coherent attempt at reconstructing a lost archetype for the group I A (and I B),³ and some of his remarks about the tablets are highly valuable and should be accepted. The nature of the evidence at our disposal allows one to postulate as an origin the existence of a thematic pattern in hexameters whose diction is clearly reminiscent of the epic tradition. Indeed, many local variants seem to be due to the process of oral transmission and memorization, as shown by the presence of anticipations, repetitions, meaningless sounds, and formulaic clauses, which are replaced by others having the same or a similar sense.

This does not prove, however, that in a given place and at a given time someone compiled a standard model on which all the versions of group I A known to us would depend. Instead one can assume a process by which a certain type of text (a fluid ‘palaeotype’ rather than a fixed ‘archetype’) came gradually into existence thanks to the unbroken interaction between oral memorization and written recording. In this connection I would like to focus on the introduction or preamble of the leaves of group I A, where the dead person is talked about in the third person and where there is, at the very beginning, the well known epitaphic formula: “This is the grave of . . .”

Until 1974, when the Hipponion leaf was made known, the only example of a preamble was that of the tablet from Petelia (today Stromboli, Calabria), first published in 1836. The preamble, fragmentary as it is and placed only after the main text, is the following (F 476.12–14 Bernabé):

Μνημοσύνη τόδε δ[ῶρον ἔπει ἄν μέλλῃσι] θανεῖσθαι[α]
.....τοδέγραψ[...
.....τούλωσενα σκότος ἀμψίκαλύψας.

This is the gift of Memory, when [...] is about to die
... wrote(? this . . .
... after having wrapped up in darkness.