
In 1836 a small inscribed gold tablet dated to the first half of the fourth century B.C.E. was published (Franz 1836). The tablet had been given to the British Museum as a gift, so the exact place of discovery of the tablet is not known, but the museum was told that the tablet had been found in a grave in Petelia, southern Italy. On this tablet, measuring 45 × 27 mm, an astonishing thirteen lines of texts had been inscribed. The miniscule text on the tablet gives a description of the underworld, where certain features are described (a cypress standing by a spring, a fork in the road), and instructions on where to go and what to say when confronted by some unnamed guardians of the underworld are given to the deceased owner.

Since then, an increasing number of similar gold tablets have been published. The tablets, forty-five of which are inscribed with at least one word, as well as others without inscriptions, are mostly dated to the late Classical and Hellenistic periods, and they have been excavated from graves in such various regions as Macedonia, the Peloponnese, southern Italy, Rome, and Crete. There are similarities between many of the texts, sometimes in phrases, meter, and dialect, and one can say that the corpus of texts as a whole has an emphasis on eschatological matters and the promise of a blissful afterlife. One may also identify certain recurring themes in some of the texts, which have led scholars to group the inscribed texts into six main categories: A. long texts with an emphasis on the purity of the deceased (5), B. long texts with descriptions of the underworld journey (12), C. a long unintelligible text (1), D. texts emphasizing the divinity of the deceased (5), E. short texts addressing the underworld deities (5), and F. tablets containing only a name and/or title (13).

In addition, a number of un-inscribed tablets are sometimes included in the corpus as well as similar grave goods inscribed with a name, such as coins.

The gold tablets have been discussed since the late nineteenth century, especially following the discoveries of important gold tablets in the 1970s and 1980s, tablets which renewed the debate concerning the religious background of the whole corpus of texts.1 In the following years, the tablets have also been treated in a number of books and catalogues. Central to the analyses of the tablets is how the gold tablets are related to each other. The placement of the

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1) The Hipponion tablet (Foti and Carratelli 1974) and the Pelinna tablets (Tsantsanoglou & Parassoglou 1987).
Tablets in thematic groups, as outlined above, is natural when there are similarities between texts, but it can also be a hindrance to the analysis of each individual tablet. A tablet interred in Crete in the Hellenistic period quite possibly had a different ritual function than a tablet found in southern Italy in the late Classical period, even though the text is similar. There has been a tendency to downplay the local contexts of each individual tablet. This is, of course, connected to the debate concerning the religious background of the corpus of gold tablets. Some scholars see the gold tablets as evidence of a common religious movement which offered an alternative eschatology alongside the official Greek cults, in which one needed to be initiated and thereby gain access to hidden knowledge about the afterlife. Some deities are named or hinted at in the texts, but the most prominent and perhaps the most important is the reference to Bacchos in the oldest tablet from Hipponion, southern Italy, dated to ca. 400 B.C.E. The religious movement, and therefore the gold tablets, are therefore often referred to as Orphic because of their alternative eschatology, Bacchic because of the reference to Dionysos, or a combination of the two terms. Advocates of this view may be termed pan-Orphics, in that they see the tablets as one set of evidence for a religious sect, which has left its mark throughout antiquity, perhaps most notably in the texts of Plato, in which the mythical singer Orpheus was an authority and where initiation into his cult led to a better afterlife. At the other end of the scale, scholars argue that the tablets have nothing to do with Orpheus (who is never mentioned in the texts) and that the relatively small number of tablets combined with their various textual differences, as well as the gap concerning dates and places, suggest that the tablets should be seen more as eschatological documents which belonged to various religious traditions, and that the local contexts should be emphasized more than a fictive overarching one. Advocates of this view might be termed skeptics. With the current study Tzifopoulos has placed himself somewhat closer to the skeptical end of the scale.

Definitions of terms like Orphic, Bacchic, and Dionysiac play an important role in the analyses of the tablets. By attaching a term like Orphic to the tablets, one is simultaneously calling upon other Orphic material in order to shed light on the enigmatic texts and their meanings. Any treatment of the tablets must therefore address this issue and the methodological problems connected with it. Into what contexts should we place the gold tablets? An Orphic context, which is made up by several texts and sources from all over the Graeco-Roman world over a period of more than a thousand years? Or should we perhaps concentrate on more immediate contexts?

Tzifopoulos’ book is a welcome attempt to answer this question by focusing on a small group of texts from a clearly-defined geographical area and more or