



Athens. The Acropolis Museum. An enigmatic object. Shaped like a half moon of paper-thin gold leaf; inscribed upon it the words:

I am parched with thirst and I perish. But give me to drink from the everflowing spring on the right, by the cypress.

“Who are you? Where are you from?”

I am the daughter of Earth and starry Heaven.

I shuddered as I realized that this fragile object was an Orphic lamella, an epistomion that sealed the lips of a woman initiate to the Orphic mysteries. Suddenly, I was in my adolescent room in my family home, leafing through a volume of the encyclopedia my father bought me years ago; I was reading an article by the academic Nikolaos Louvaris on Orphism. That during a time of pantheism, they were monotheists, fanatical vegetarians who would not even touch the honey of bees. They believed in the afterlife, in a cycle of reincarnations that only the grace of a merciful God could bring to an end.

The gold lamellae give specific instructions that the soul of the initiate must follow in the journey to the Afterlife. They describe the topography of Hades, which spring to drink from, what to watch out for, how to an-

swer the questions of guardians, how to address the gods and probably how to answer Persephone's questions. It is a dangerous journey. Parched with thirst, the soul must resist the urge to drink from the first available spring. This is the spring of Lethe and if she drinks, she will forget the important lessons and her initiation. The soul must seek the everflowing spring to the right of the cypress tree, the one with the cold water of Mnemosyne, of Memory. But this spring is guarded, and it is the guards who ask: “Who are you?” “Where are you from?” The soul must give the correct answer, an answer that indicates consciousness of a duality of origins: she is a daughter of the Earth, however, her origin is from the starry Heaven.

What makes this lamella so unique is that of all the lamellae studied so far, this is the only one that declares “I am a daughter of the Earth.” The typical, formulaic expression is “I am a child, or I am a son of Earth...” At that moment I felt that I needed to retrace, to find more about this unknown woman as well as the other women who had been initiated to Orphism. I needed to listen to their voices, their whispers, and bring them back to the light, to give them visual, material form. For the next six months I immersed myself in the world of Orphism and the Bacchic-Orphic mystery

cult. In the library of the Archaeological Society in Athens, I studied rare manuscripts dated to 1850, delved into scholarly studies of archaeologists dating a particular lamella from the shape of a single letter. In the Epigraphical Museum in Athens, I touched a garland of ivy leaves dedicated to Chthonian Dionysus. I had several discussions with research archaeologists who had been involved in the excavations of such lamellae, currently housed in the Museums of Heraklion in Crete, Thessaly, Pella and Amphipolis in Macedonia. I came into contact with Ioannis Tzifopoulos from the University of Thessaloniki, the author of an in-depth study of twelve Bacchic-Orphic lamellae found in Crete. The fragile lamella which deeply touched me in the Acropolis Museum belongs to this group. I studied photographic and visual materials, losing myself in the universe of scholars and scientists who study these mysterious objects.

The number of documented lamellae with incised text is small. Only forty-six have been found so far, dating between the 6th century BC to the 2nd century AD. Gold lamellae have been found in Italy, Macedonia, Thessaly, the Peloponnese and Crete, along the periphery of the Greek civilization. Lamellae are rectangular or resemble the shape of lips or leaves of olive, myrtle or ivy. They are small, measuring 2-8 cm in length

and 1-3 cm in height; of paper-thin gold, a material which indicates a belief and desire for eternal life. The incised texts are composed in dactylic hexameter and some in alternating rhythmic prose; they are of great significance for the study of the Bacchic-Orphic cult. Irrespective of distant geographical locations or variations in the length of text, they all relate to a ritual and mystery cult whose emphasis is on the afterlife.

My personal focus was on sacred texts of gold lamellae which belonged to women initiates. When I finally emerged from the extensive study, I had in my hands the texts of six women initiates and a string of unusual names:

Euxena, Phylomaga, Philemena, Philoxena, Xenaristi, Hegesiska, Palatha, Philotera, Philiste, Archeboule, Caecilia Secundina

Several of these names are rare, indicative of aristocratic origins, of high social status. Phylomaga has a simple rectangular lamella, the lamellae of other initiates take leaflike forms. Philotera from Pella has one in the shape of laurel leaf, while those from Pellina are heart-shaped; or is it that they are shaped like ivy leaves, symbols of the Chthonian Dionysus?

The Pellina lamellae were placed on the chest of the initiate. Folded and as if hidden within the chest was also the gold lamella of Archeboule from Amphipolis, who declares: "Holy Priestess of Dionysus Bacchus am I, Archeboule [daughter] of Antidoros." And then there are the lamellae with greetings addressed to Pluto and Persephone—my Persephone, for this is how I feel her presence as she accompanies me in my own journey.

I gathered the sacred texts, the names, the greetings. And then I faced the challenge of an artistic interpretation. These are sacred writings with a metaphysical character. How can I give visual form to whispers? Whispers are fleeting, hovering on the cusp of perception, of consciousness. I oscillated. White ink on white paper made of flax? Blind stamping, embossing, without ink? Finally, I decided on the rare and demanding technique of watermarks. A watermark allows the sacred text to remain hidden, in a latent state within the fibers of the paper; it comes to life for a moment, as the reader lifts the folio and light illuminates it.

The texts of the six lamellae follow the sequence of the watermarked texts: 1. Petelia, Calabria, Magna Graecia, 4th century BC (45 x 27 mm); 2. Rome, Italy, 2nd century AD (65 x 24 mm); 3. Hipponion, Calabria, Magna Graecia, around 400 BC (56 x 32 mm); 4. Pelinna, Thessaly, around 275 BC

(40 x 31 mm); 5. Pelinna, Thessaly, 275 BC (35 x 30 mm); 6. Eleutherna, Crete, 2nd-1st century BC (45 x 12 mm). The texts are followed by the names and greetings to the Chthonian Pluto and Persephone. Bracketed sections indicate reconstruction of the text. The English translation is from Radcliffe G. Edmonds III's book, *The 'Orphic' Gold Tablets and Greek Religion: Further Along the Path*, Cambridge University Press, 2011. The translations in modern Greek are by Stavros Ghirghenis (2015) and Ioannis Tzifopoulos (2010), used by permission.