

BERNABÉ, A.- A. I. JIMÉNEZ SAN CRISTÓBAL, *Instructions for the netherworld: the Orphic gold tablets. Religions in the Graeco-Roman world*, v. 162, Leiden - Boston: Brill, 2008, xii, 379 pp., ISBN 9789004163713.

The authors of this volume (hereafter BJ) provide us with the fullest and most up to date publication available of 'The Orphic Gold Tablets.' They give texts, translation into English and commentary, and offer an interpretation of the tablets as a phenomenon. The work is to be welcomed, although there are significant aspects of their interpretation that are open to question.

The text is provided as Appendix I of the volume (pp. 245-69), and reproduces the relevant part of Bernabé's Teubner edition of *Orphicorum et Orphicis similium testimonia et fragmenta* (2005). It has a very full critical apparatus, which is vital for the study of these texts, where there are problems first with reading the existing letters, then with interpreting the corruptions to the text, and finally in supplying restorations where parts are missing: all three can be contentious. The ordering of the texts is the same as that in the Teubner edition (although BJ use a different numbering system), following what is taken to be the soul's journey through the underworld as it is visible in the texts. While the assumption lying behind this decision (i.e. that all the texts have a common origin and function) has the advantage of placing together similar texts, it ignores both the dating of the tablets, and their geographical origins; the other recent English edition of the tablets, F. Graf - S.I. Johnston, *Ritual Texts for the Afterlife*, London 2007 (hereafter *RTA*) chooses to organize the texts geographically.

The translations are introduced at the start of the chapters (1-8) in which they are discussed, and are followed by commentaries which focus more on the meaning of the texts, and their relationship with other literary texts, than on the reading of the

texts themselves. This means that it is not immediately obvious which parts of the translation are based on secure readings of the Greek, and which on emendations and restorations. To take one example, the most recently published text, from Pherae (L13A), reads:

πέμπε με πρὸς μυστῶν θιάσους· ἔχω ὄργια [   
 Δήμητρος Χθονίας <τε> τέλη καὶ Μητρος ὀρεῖ[

The original editors proposed restoring ἰδοῦσα at the end of the first line. Bernabé prefers Βάκχου, and translates the text, ‘Send me to the thiasoi of the initiates; I have the sacred symbola of Bacchus | and the rites of Demeter Chthonia and the Mountain Mother’ (p. 151). The rest of the chapter, which discusses this and another text from Pherae (L13) discusses Dionysiac cult, and it is only at the end that we are told ‘The name of Bacchos is not sure, because it has been restored in a lost part of the tablet’ (p. 159). And yet it is only that restored word that links this tablet to the other Pherae tablet, and indeed to BJ’s interpretation of all the other tablets. A similar issue is raised by one of the tablets from Pelinna (7A). Bernabé reads the seventh line καὶ σὺ μὲν εἷς ὑπὸ γῆν τελέσας ἅπερ ὄλβιοι ἄλλοι, which he translates ‘and you will go under the earth, once you have accomplished the same rites as the other happy ones’ (p. 62). In contrast the reading of the original editors, followed in *RTA* (26a, pp. 36-7) is κάπιμένει σ’ ὑπὸ γῆν τελέα ἄσσαπερ ὄλβιοι ἄλλοι, translated as ‘and below the earth there are ready for you the same prizes [or rites] as for the other blessed ones.’ The lettering on the lamella is problematic, and BJ discuss and justify their reading (pp. 90-1), but it remains a hypothesis. However, when they return to the tablet later the reading has become certain. They state ‘Participation in specific rites also seems to have been a necessary prerequisite (cf. L7a, 8 (sic) “once you have accomplished the same rites as the other happy ones”). It is never made explicit in what such rites consisted...’ (p. 171). The problems with the text are here forgotten.

Chapter Nine, ‘The soul’s final destiny: results and conclusions,’ draws together the proposals made in the commentary sections of the previous chapters. It is followed by a chapter entitled ‘The

central question: are the gold leaves Orphic?' Since BJ take it as proved that they are indeed Orphic, this chapter serves mainly to draw attention to connections between the texts of the tablets and other texts and images associated with Orpheus. It is followed a chapter entitled 'Parallels to the tablets in other cultures,' where Egyptian, Hittite, Indian, Iranian, Italian, Gallic and Punic texts are compared to the tablets. It must be said that the 'parallels' are not very illuminating, and same can be said for Appendix II, 'Iconographical notes on the Orphic tablets,' written by Richard Olmos, which aims to compare the texts with a variety of images. Such comparative studies need far more rigour than is provided here, if they are to provide significant information. The final chapter, 'Literary questions: characteristics, models and archetypes' is actually more concerned with the relationship between the tablets and ritual activity, and it makes some sound points, although these are not always followed up (see below).

All in all there is a lot of information provided here. The question remains of how convincing the argument is as a whole. According to BJ (p. 5), 'the substantive question most debated with regard to the tablets is the religious movement that sustained them, the ensemble of beliefs shared by those who bore them, and above all the question of whether or not we can consider it certain that this religious movement was identical with that which we know as Orphism.' Their answer, presented in chapter 10, is that the tablets are indeed the products of Orphism, and indeed that assumption lies behind much of the analysis in the first nine chapters. But the way they pose the question is not unproblematic: what is meant by a 'religious movement' in the context of the pre-Christian ancient world is not clear; the idea of an 'ensemble of beliefs' is also not straightforward; and finally there is far less scholarly agreement than BJ imply about the nature of 'that which we know as Orphism.'

What is a 'religious movement'? If it is a group sharing a particular understanding of the divine, then it is philosophical schools that can best be described as 'religious movements'; if on the other hand what is meant is groups with their own ritual practices, then we have to consider bacchic *thiasoi* as religious movements, even though these are usually integrated into the framework of *polis* religion; modern uses of the term tend to

refer to groups that separate themselves off from the religious 'mainstream', but this would not appear to apply to the possessors of gold tablets, who are buried alongside those who do not possess them. About 'that which we know as Orphism' there is a wide range of scholarly views: at one end of the scale is the 'strong' idea that there survived, over a period of many centuries, groups whose members had undergone initiation and who described themselves as 'Orphics'; a 'weaker' idea of Orphism emphasizes the existence of individual initiators using books attributed to Orpheus (usually referred to as orpheotelests, although the word is rare in surviving Greek literature), who performed rites for individuals, but with no suggestion that these individuals as a result became part of any community or association; finally at the end of the scale is the view that while texts circulated attributed to Orpheus, there was no associated religious movement of any kind. BJ adopt a very strong version of 'Orphism': they treat the gold tablets as a single corpus reflecting a single point-of-view, rejecting out-of-hand the possibility that gold tablets might have been used by more than one group (cf. p. 159), and reading the differences between the text of the tablet from Rome (L11) and those from Thurii (L9-10) as evidence for subtle changes in Orphic doctrine over the intervening six centuries. In this regard BJ go considerably further than Graf & Johnston, who leave open the question of whether the tablets might be evidence for the existence of 'Orphic communities' or for the work of orpheotelests (*RTA* p. 163-4). Other scholars however have remained less convinced: Walter Burkert for example has argued for a position much closer to the 'weaker' idea I outlined above.<sup>1</sup> BJ characterize as 'hypercritical' (pp. 6, 179) arguments which cast doubt on the existence of 'Orphism' and refer dismissively to 'the traditional British tendency to doubt the Orphic character of

<sup>1</sup> See in particular 'Craft versus sect: the problem of Orphics and Pythagoreans,' B.F. Meyer - E.P. Sanders (eds.) *Jewish and Christian self-definition in the Greco-Roman world*, Philadelphia 1982, 1-22.

the gold tablets' (p. 159); but even if these criticisms are accepted, it does not follow that BJ's idea of the nature of Orphism must be the correct one.

Here we may consider the 'ensemble of beliefs' which BJ identify as part of Orphism. Reflections of these they find, as earlier scholars have, in the poetry of Pindar, in Empedocles and Heraclitus, in Plato, and in various iconographical contexts. But it is not clear what they are identifying. The ideas reflected in the tablets might be secret 'Orphic doctrines' peculiar to a particular group, or they might be drawn from widely circulating texts attributed to Orpheus, or they might simply be part of the widely accepted understanding of the nature of death and the underworld. Some motifs will have been familiar to most people, as BJ are well aware, for example the cypress as a funerary tree (p. 25) or the image of the dead being thirsty (p. 29). This does not discourage them from looking for additional esoteric meanings in references to them in the tablets. This is sometimes taken to improbable extremes. In their discussion of the claim of the dead soul in several tablets (L1-6) to be of heavenly descent, BJ claim to have identified two iconographical examples 'that exhibit striking coincidences with the phraseology of the tablets' (p. 45). One is a fifth century BC Lucanian vase with the image of 'a human personage with one foot resting on a sphere, which seems to be traversed by a lightning bolt. Seven stars are drawn around the sphere.' The other is a coin minted for a dead daughter of Domitian 'on which a child is represented sitting on a globe surrounded by seven stars' (pp. 45-6). According to BJ, 'The similarity between these two pieces ... indicates the survival of a consistent model, perhaps transmitted in an "esoteric" environment' (p. 46). But a representation of the earth/cosmos as a globe, with seven stars to represent the seven planets, is hardly unusual in antiquity, so it is difficult to see what is esoteric here. It seems likely that much of what BJ would like to see as 'Orphic' doctrine, was not restricted to a select few, but circulated widely, at least amongst literate Greeks. This would include the stories that Dionysus was the son of Persephone, and that he was killed by the Titans ('the central myth of Orphism' p. 41).

In fact BJ themselves have a very persuasive explanation of how the tablets were composed: ‘each poet strings together ... well-known, formulaic utterances that derive from tradition, mixed with varied mortar of other verses from the Orphic corpus, Homeric formulas, etc., according to the greater or lesser competence of their authors’ (p. 231). But this of course transfers the exercise away from individual initiates, or groups, to ‘poets’: we do not need to postulate the existence of Orphic communities for this explanation of the tablets to work, we need only traditional utterances and Orphic (and other) texts. We also need ‘poets’, a group not discussed by BJ here or earlier: their discussion never really comes to grips with the issue of who produced the tablets.

Here the material aspects of the tablets are important. BJ themselves note (p. 2): ‘The people who wrote, or rather scribbled these tablets were obviously not highly literate.’ However, they say nothing explicitly about who these scribblers might be: were they written by the individual initiates? If so, where did they get the gold leaf and the writing tools? Or by orpheotelests (briefly discussed at pp. 91-4)? But it would seem that the orpheotelests, if they were transmitters of Orphic doctrines, must have been fully literate. To discuss the theology of the texts in great detail, and with great quantities of comparanda, while leaving untouched the question of how these doctrines were transformed into the actual objects found in tombs seems to me problematic.

Further problems come with the suggestion that ‘it might be argued that the faithful came to the ritual with their own tablets, in order to use them as a reminder of what they were to do and say’ (p. 235). How easy would it be to read such tiny writing, especially if meetings happened indoors or at night (which might be considered a precondition for secrecy)? Such practical questions need not be asked on behalf of the dead souls, but they must be asked of the living. And here something must be said too about the cost of the gold tablets. BJ describe the tablets at one point as ‘highly expensive’ (p. 202), but nowhere do they discuss what their actual value might have been. In their publication of the tablet from Sfakaki (L14), Gavrilaki and Tzifopoulos give its dimensions as 1.2-1.8 cm in length and 7.5

cm in width, and its weight as 0.4g.<sup>2</sup> The weight is equivalent in value to just over 1 Attic drachma of silver: the area of the tablet, just over 11 cm<sup>2</sup>, is about a third the size of the largest tablet. In other words, the tablets cost no more than a handful of drachmas: that would represent a few days' labour for a poor person, but to characterize them as expensive is questionable. Therefore it can be suggested that both the tablets themselves and their creators might have been relatively low in status. It is clear from the circumstances of the burials where they were found that the ultimate owners of the tablets came from a range of backgrounds: some are buried with rich grave goods, some with more or less nothing. Under these circumstances it seems unwise to assume that the owners all had the same understanding of what the tablets were, or were for: in some cases the tablets may have been placed in the graves by relatives or others, without the prior knowledge of the dead person.

There are therefore problems not addressed by BJ in treating the tablets as evidence for the continuing existence of an Orphic 'religious movement.' That does not however render their work useless. They are certainly right to emphasize that the tablets are 'functional texts' (pp. 230-1), and probably right to see behind them a particular distinctive understanding of the process of dying and the nature of the underworld, although this understanding belongs to the texts of the tablets themselves and the texts from which their components come. And if it is right that the tablets were produced by, and owned by, lower status individuals, we are given a fascinating insight into the realm where literary texts interact with the reality of religious practice.

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<sup>2</sup> I. Gavrilaki - Y.Z. Tzifopoulos, 'An "Orphic-Dionysiac" gold epistomion from Sfakaki near Rethymno,' *BCH* 122, 1998, 343-55.

