

**THE GOLD LEAF FROM PETELIA**

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*Acknowledgements are due to the British Museum for the photograph (much enlarged) of the Petelia leaf. As the engraver was running out of space, the last and fourteenth line of text actually appears vertically in the right-hand margin.*

### Translation:

You will find a spring on your left in Hades' halls  
and by it the cypress with its luminous sheen.  
Do not go near this spring or drink its water.  
You will find another, cold water flowing from  
Memory's lake; its guardians stand before it.  
Say: "I am a child of Earth and starry Heaven,  
But descended from Heaven; you yourselves know this.  
I am parched with thirst and dying: quickly, give me  
the cool water flowing from Memory's lake."  
And they will give you water from the sacred spring  
and then you will join the heroes at their rites.  
This [ . . . of Memo]ry's: [on the point of  
death [            ] write this [            ]  
          ] the darkness folding [you] within it.

### Introduction:

The so-called Gold Leaves are both text and artefact. They bear lines of epic / Homeric verse (up to twenty in two columns in one case) or combinations of prose and poetry engraved on thin gold foil, are diminutive in size (the leaf from Petelia being a mere 45 x 27 mm.), and rectangular in shape except for a small number which have been cut to resemble ivy or myrtle leaves and a group in elliptical or half-moon shapes which acted as lip-bands. Most of these small gold lamellae (to give them their technical term) were found throughout the Greek world in tombs where they had been placed on the mouths, hands or chests of the dead. Among the exceptions is the Petelia leaf which has an unusual history. It was said to have come from a tomb in Strongoli, i.e. the ancient Petelia in the deep south of Italy. After it had been removed from the tomb, it seems to have been unfolded then refolded four times over, a corner was clipped off (which explains why the last few lines of the text are unfortunately so fragmentary)<sup>1</sup>, and it was then inserted into a small gold cylindrical case which was suspended from the neck on a gold chain and worn as an amulet. In the period of the later Roman Empire, objects removed from ancient tombs (the Petelia leaf is dated at c. fourth century B.C.) were often used as amulets. If, as seems likely, the necklace can be dated to the second century A.D., the robbery and re-use of the leaf as a magic charm will have taken place six hundred years after the leaf was cut and engraved.

The purpose of these Leaves is not in doubt. Many, like Petelia, instruct the soul of the dead how to direct its journey in the afterlife towards Elysium; others, what to say to Persephone, the Queen of the Dead when confronting her as a suppliant; another has basically the same message but emphasizes the role of Dionysos as the saviour and redeemer of souls. The Leaves, then, are mortuary texts intended to help the souls of dead initiates reach an afterlife of bliss in Elysium. As such they are the only Greek examples we have of a

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<sup>1</sup> Brackets in the translation indicate gaps in the text. These gaps can occasionally be repaired with educated guesses based on lines in very similar texts, as above.

*vademecum* for the dead, a sort of Greek equivalent of the Egyptian Book of the Dead, with which they share a number of very interesting features.

What is not quite so obvious, however, is the cult or ritual to which these Leaves belong. Recently, several cogent arguments have been advanced in favour of a Bacchic cult honouring Orpheus as its founding father, and certainly Dionysos as Bakkhios (the “ecstatic one”) or Eubouleus (“good counsellor”) or Lusios (the “redeemer”) is a recurring figure throughout the leaves. Furthermore, the initiates are referred to as “Bacchic” in one text, while certain sacred emblems of Dionysos such as ivy and the thyrsus (the wand used in Dionysiac ritual) appear, respectively, in the shape of the lamellae from Pelinna in Thessaly (Central Greece) and in a text from Pherai in Thessaly. The sarcophagus at Pelinna contained the skeleton of a woman; outside it lay the statuette of a maenad, i.e. one of the female votaries of Dionysos who, with the aid of wine and frenzied dancing, achieved a state of ecstasy.

If the Dionysian evidence is almost overwhelming, it has to be admitted that the Orphic element is much harder to establish. It can be inferred from the doctrines of reincarnation and judgement after death that we find in the leaves from Thourioi in the deep south of Italy. Again, the emphasis on memory as a means of recalling one’s former lives and the practice of ritual purification through initiation are said to be “Orphic”, but they can also be described as Pythagorean. It must be emphasized, though, that Orphism and Pythagoreanism are fluid concepts; the movements appear to have borrowed much from each other, and they consisted of followers who might practise their “faith” in various ways. The word “Orphic”, for instance, can be applied to oracle-mongers and pedlars of dispensation offering salvation from sin and death, the very people that Aristophanes scoffed at and Plato despised. It seems, however, that the word can also refer to those who celebrated the rites of “Our Lord of Frenzy”, Dionysos Bakkhios, and such an Orphic-Bacchic cult seems to be implied if not confirmed by literary references in, for example, Euripides and Herodotus, and by archaeology, the most graphic instance of the latter being the bone tablets (fifth century B.C.) found at Olbia, a Greek colony in the Crimea. The tablets carry brief inscriptions, e.g. “Life. Death. Truth. Dio(nysos). Orphics”, and are thought to be tokens of membership in a Bacchic-Orphic cult.

Equally difficult to determine is the occasion for which these Leaves were produced—the funeral of an initiate or his / her initiation? The words “on the point of death” at the beginning of two other leaves found in southern Italy (encouraging the conjectural reading in line 12 of the translation above), would suggest that some of these Leaves were engraved at the impending death of the initiate. If, however, we remember that ceremonies of initiation in Greek mystery cults were often preparations for death and the afterlife and might even involve a mimetic journey to the Underworld, the occasion for the engraving remains controversial. There is a strong possibility that the texts are extracts from some sort of sacred discourse or *hieros logos* describing an Underworld journey in verse or book form. The extracts may have been read by priests at the initiation ceremony; the essence of such passages may have been transcribed to gold foil as an imperishable material. What we know for a fact is that the gold leaf texts were themselves excerpted. A good example of this is the leaf found in Thessaly inside a vase which had been used as a cinerary urn. It bears the following text which is obviously an abbreviated version of something very similar to the Petelian text:

I am parched with thirst and dying: let me drink  
from the ever-flowing spring. On the right is a  
luminous cypress tree.  
“Who are you? And where are you from?”

I am a son of Earth and starry Heaven  
but my descent is from Heaven.

The initiate in this case has stressed what seemed to him or her to be the vital passage in the longer texts, i.e. the challenge by the guardians and the proudly kept knowledge of one's true lineage. This shorter text, and the many later versions of it found in Crete, may reflect a brief performance acted out in the initiation ritual. In Plato's terms, *diēgēsis* (narrative) has become *mimesis*.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Petelia Leaf:**

A voice, unknown (some would say Orpheus', but that is mere supposition), gives advice to the soul of the dead initiate on the path it should take in the realm of the dead ("Hades' halls"). It is to avoid the spring on the left marked by the "luminous" cypress and request water from the spring of Memory, presumably on the right. The left-hand spring is fed by the waters of Lēthē ("forgetfulness") which will obliterate the soul's recollection of its former lives, its cycles of reincarnation, and its divine origin as an offspring of Heaven. The recollection of one's past life is familiar from Plato, but here we are a world away from the "Myth of Er" (*Republic* 620d ff.) in which the souls pass over the plain of Lēthē and camp beside the river Amelēs ("unmindfulness"), a certain amount of which they are required to drink to forget the cares and anxieties of their past lives, before being carried up into an opening in the sky to their new birth. The Leaves represent an entirely different doctrine, Orphic or Pythagorean we cannot say, any more than we can identify the source of Plato's "Myth of Er", which may well be his own invention.

The location of the tree and the two springs in the Gold Leaves is both intriguing and fraught with problems. The text of "Petelia" merely implies that the spring of Memory is to the right of "Hades' halls". In texts similar to "Petelia", however, both springs are on the right, Memory's being situated just beyond the cypress tree which marks Lēthē's spring. The shorter texts from Crete and Thessaly, on the other hand, situate Memory's spring on the right *by the cypress*, which is "luminous" only on the Thessalian leaf (translated above). All this variation indicates that like the Homeric epics, the verse on these leaves has been "patched up" and modified from time to time and from place to place by itinerant, independent priests who either possessed archetypes or retained a more or less accurate memory of them. In the case of "Petelia", it seems that some priest or initiate decided to follow the ancient Greek superstition that the left-hand side was inauspicious (cf. L. *sinister*).<sup>3</sup>

Cypresses are not white or "shining" or "luminous", which are all meanings of Greek *leukē* (cognate with L. *lux*: "light") in the text. It would certainly be to the initiate's benefit if cypresses glowed like neon beside either the waters of Memory or the waters of Forgetfulness in the murky gloom of the Underworld, and it is tempting to leave it at that, comparing it to the White (*Leukas*) Rock that marks the entrance to the Underworld at *Odyssey* 24.11. The luminous Tree Of Life, however, has an ancient pedigree stretching back as far as Mesopotamia. The Kishkanu tree in a Sumerian text is dark but bears fruit of lapis lazuli, and it stands over the Apsu, the subterranean waters which sustain all life. In Zoroastrianism, the

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<sup>2</sup> On the subject of ritual performance and the Gold Leaves, see my article in *Percutio* 3 (2009) 10-15.

<sup>3</sup> In augury, for the priest looking north, the west, realm of the setting sun and encroaching darkness, would be on his left. Greek augurs looked north; Roman, to begin with, looked south.

Tree of Life is called the “white Hom”; it grows by a spring which gives rise to “all the waters on earth.”

There may not be a luminous tree in Egyptian mortuary texts, but the parallels here are even more striking. On funerary papyri and tomb paintings of the New Kingdom, tree (palm or sycamore), pool, guardians, and the theme of the thirst of the dead all occur, matching a remark by Herodotus (2.81) that the Orphic-Bacchic rites were really Egyptian and Pythagorean (i.e. introduced into Greece by Pythagoras), and encouraging speculation that the Gold Leaves show the influence of Egyptian mortuary texts, perhaps transmitted by Greek priests in Egypt. If this is the case, and we have no way of proving it, the Greeks have substantially modified the Egyptian motifs. Take the guardians, for example. In the Book of the Dead, they prevent the dead from reaching Osiris, the “Lord of Life”, yielding only to those who can both recite the names of the guards and their portals and convince them that they (the dead) are ritually pure. The guardians in the Gold Leaves are mysterious beings who were apparently depicted on an Etruscan amphora (now lost) as oriental archers guarding Memory’s spring by standing behind two trees which separate the realm of the blest from that of the damned. Two young men, who have passed the challenge, sit on a grassy hillock. They are crowned with ivy, bear the thyrsus, and, like all heroes in Greek art (cf. line 11 of our translation) are naked.

The thirst of the dead is a widespread theme that occurs in many world cultures--European, Indian, Chinese, even Inuit, and, of course, ancient Egyptian. If, however, the Greeks--priests or Pythagoras or the legendary Orpheus (see Diodorus Siculus 1.96)--were influenced by Egyptian mortuary texts and customs, they certainly adapted rather than imitated them. The “cool water” in the Egyptian texts is intended to keep the dead alive in a very dry climate, whereas the waters of Memory in the Leaves are the means by which the soul recalls its former life or lives so that it can select a less morally reprehensible one in the next incarnation.

Perhaps the most interesting parallels between the Leaves and Egyptian mortuary texts concern the initiate’s identification with a god and the terms in which his/her soul must identify itself: as “a child of Earth and starry Heaven”. In a number of Egyptian mortuary spells, the deceased identify themselves not only as the god Osiris but as the offspring of Geb, the earth-god and Nut, the sky-goddess. The initiates in the Leaves from Thourioi likewise claim divine status, identifying themselves with Dionysos via the image of the kid, the young of the god’s emblematic animal,<sup>4</sup> while the descent from Gē (Earth) and Ouranos (Sky) appears in the Leaves like “Petelia” that direct the soul to the spring of Memory. The parallels do not prove the influence of Egyptian mortuary texts on the Gold Leaves, but together they constitute a strong indication of such an influence.

As always in scholarship on the Leaves, however, there is an alternative explanation for the phrase “child of Earth and starry Heaven”, which doesn’t so much negate the Egyptian influence as complement it with Greek conceptions of the mortals who are blest by the gods. Hesiod’s line in *Theogony* 106, “the gods who were born of Earth and starry Heaven” is obviously the verbal model for the phrase in “Petelia” and the like. This line together with the same poet’s description of the people of the “Golden Race” as being the kin of the gods (*Works and Days* 108) gives some substance to the view that a Greek poet, who was ancient and venerable by the time this leaf was engraved, is the source of the link between the Orphic-Bacchic initiates who eventually lead idyllic lives in the meadows of Elysium and the “Golden Race”, the first humans on earth, who lived carefree lives on fertile land which never failed them. The offspring of Earth and Heaven are now not just all the other

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<sup>4</sup> See Graf & Johnston, p.12, final line of ‘Thurii 3’: ‘A kid I fell into milk’.

immortals, as in *Theogony* 106, but those mortals who, having passed through rites of initiation and purification in a mystery cult, have become immortal. And perhaps so purified by an ascetic life that they have shaken off the earthly element of their being and retained only the heavenly—"a child of Earth and starry Heaven / but descended from Heaven"?

Having been granted water from Memory's spring, the soul will "join the heroes at their rites" in Elysium. On a fragmentary leaf found inside a terracotta lamp in Sicily, the initiate appears to be called "a remembering hero". In what way are these initiates heroes? The authors of a sacred book or of the first archetypal leaves have turned to Hesiod once again and borrowed his depiction of the heroes (mythical, such as Achilles) who live at the ends of the earth in the Isles of the Blest. They are often the children of a god and lead the carefree lives of the people of the "Golden Race", but there is one essential difference. Hesiod's heroes have been rewarded with this existence *after death*:

blessed heroes, for whom thrice yearly the fertile  
earth bears its honey-sweet fruit in abundance. (172-3)

That is the kind of paradise the souls of our dead initiates are striving to reach, buried with gold foil on their lips or chests or in the palms of their hands.

### **The Approach:**

My aim was to create something very close to the tone of the original, an essentially neutral, deictic text with its address to an anonymous second person singular, its imperatives and future tenses, its instructions and prohibitions. I chose a "semi-Biblical" cadence and a twelve syllable line as an approximation (rather distant, I'm afraid) of the hexameter and the epic / Homeric diction, which was archaically poetic even in the fourth century B.C. when our leaf was engraved. The verse is liturgical rather than literary, and this meant that it was reasonably straightforward to translate in comparison with the "supercharged", emotive diction and metres of a Greek lyric poet like Ibykos.

The most difficult line was line 11, which involved me in a choice between reading the currently preferred *anaxeis*: "you will rule" (i.e. among the heroes) and the very same word but this time the second person singular future tense of a completely different verb, *anagō*: "I celebrate'/'conduct" (i.e. rites and festivals, in this case). The former seemed to me to be too extravagant a claim even for someone who believed that s/he was "descended from Heaven"!

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