

MILK AS A SYMBOL OF IMMORTALITY IN THE “ORPHIC” GOLD TABLETS FROM THURII AND PELINNA ¹

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Introduction

The day I started as a PhD student at the University of Tromsø Synnøve des Bouvrie gave me a copy of a book she had edited called *Myth and Symbol I: Symbolic Phenomena in Ancient Greek culture*. This was on September 15th, 2004, but judging from the personal greeting inside the cover, “Velkommen i snøværet!” winter had already started. Browsing the contents I saw articles by some of the current giants within research on Greek culture. Then it struck me as a bit unlikely, but it soon became clear that here, in the far north where winter came early and where the sun disappears for two months during winter, a formidable researcher in her field was situated.

In the following years, I had the privilege to engage in discussions about myths and symbols in Greek culture with Professor des Bouvrie, discussions which greatly influenced and improved my own work. A recurring theme was the nature of the symbol, and how certain symbols could have a “magnetic” quality within a certain culture. These symbols could be myths, or symbolic tales, defined by des Bouvrie as “culture-creating tales.” The meaning is not inherent in these tales, but is rather “charged with value” by a certain culture and thereby become focal points which are able to “mobilise people into collective action” or mobilise them toward some “core values.”² The symbolic tale is therefore seen as a magnetic center where its meaning is equal to the effect it has on a given culture.³ In the same volume, des Bouvrie examines the warrior in Greek tragedy as an example of such a symbol. Influenced by the theories of Sherry Ortner and Barbara Babcock, des Bouvrie explores the warrior as a key symbol in Greek culture, a symbol which had a specific meaning for the audience but whose meaning was inverted in the tragedies.⁴ This inversion “sent electrical charges of shock and horror through the theatre, revitalizing the audience’s cultural reflexes towards the correct order of warrior existence.”⁵

Myths, symbolic tales and symbols help to define a society. But they may also work on different levels. Cities, smaller societies, clubs, families and even individuals use such symbolic tales, and they may serve as magnetic centers on different scales, from a nation’s celebration of the Constitution to family rituals around the dinner table. The following article will be an exploration of how a symbol may serve as a magnetic center, to use des Bouvrie’s terminology, both in a text and for the group who used this text and thereby charged it with meaning. The texts in question are four “Orphic” gold tablets from Thurii, Italy, and Pelinna, Greece. I will argue that the texts, although found in a burial context, most probably refer to

¹ I would like to thank Arve Omtvedt Berntzen for many fruitful discussions on these texts. Thanks also to Per Pippin Aspaas and the anonymous reviewer for suggestions on how to improve the text, including help to translate OF 488 below.

² des Bouvrie 2002a, quotations from pp. 28, 29, 36, 61.

³ des Bouvrie 2002a, 61ff.

⁴ des Bouvrie 2002b; cf. Ortner 1973 and Babcock 1978.

⁵ des Bouvrie 2002b, 308.

an initiation ritual. The key message in these tablets is that the deceased owners have suffered in life, but that he or she has attained release and immortality through initiation. This immortalization was referred to and summed up in the texts in a very enigmatic formula often referred to as the "kid-in-milk" or "immersion-in-milk" formula, where "milk" was used as a direct reference to immortality. Through analyses of the texts, my main contribution to the study of these texts is that "milk" in this eschatological context was used as a symbol of immortality which served as a "magnetic center" or "point of focus" in both the text and the initiation ritual it refers to.

The "Orphic" Gold Tablets

It is quite challenging to give a short summary of the study of the "Orphic" gold tablets. The first gold tablet was published in 1836.⁶ The precise origin of the tablet is not certain, but according to the private collector who handed the tablet over to the British Museum it had been found in a grave in Petelia, southern Italy. The tablet measures only 4,5 x 2,7 cm, making the letters in the thirteen lines of text inscribed on it very small. The text is a *vademecum* for how the soul should behave in the underworld in order to secure a blissful afterlife; avoid the spring on the left side in Hades, approach the other spring, near Mnemosyne's lake, identify yourself to the guardians of this spring and emphasize your thirst, then drink when permitted and then "you shall be lord amongst heroes."

Since the publication of the Petelia tablet, several other tablets have been found and published. In Edmonds III's collection of the tablets from 2011, a total of 41 tablets with text are included, and the number is still growing.⁷ The tablets have been found in various places around the Mediterranean, ranging from sites in southern Italy, Sicily, Rome, Crete, Peloponnese, Macedonia and Thessaly, all found in graves accompanying the dead. While the oldest, from Hipponion, southern Italy, is dated to 400 BC, most of the tablets date from the middle of the fourth century to the third century BC, with one notable exception from Rome dated to the third century AD. Some of the texts are long, usually *vademecum* texts similar to the Petelia tablet mentioned above, while others are very short, containing only a short greeting and/or a name or title (*mystēs*). There are ongoing important discussions on how to categorize these tablets, whether geographically or thematically, but this is not particularly relevant to our discussion here.⁸

The religious background of the gold tablet texts have been discussed for more than a century.⁹ Currently, the main discussion is whether one should see the tablets as Orphic or if they should be seen as the products of other cults which were not necessarily connected to each other. The first suggestion, which Prümm would have dubbed the maximalist approach, is advocated by several scholars, perhaps most notably Alberto Bernabé, while Radcliffe Edmonds III argues for the latter, minimalist approach.¹⁰ My own approach to this question is far closer to the minimalist, or "Orpheoskeptic," than the maximalist, "PanOrphist."¹¹ I have argued for this elsewhere, but important here is that the minimalist approach allows for a greater emphasis on local contexts and the individual text, rather than seeing the text as part of a larger corpus of texts where one text is used to explain another.¹² In the following, the texts

⁶ Franz 1836.

⁷ Edmonds III 2011a.

⁸ Two recent examples are Edmonds III 2011a (thematically) and Graf & Johnston 2007 (geographically).

⁹ For surveys on the study of Orphism see Prümm 1953, Torjussen 2005, Edmonds III 2011b.

¹⁰ These two great scholars have debated this since the late 1990s. For recent examples see Bernabé & Jiménez San Cristóbal 2011, 101: "[t]he evident conclusion which arises from all these considerations is that the gold leaves can only be Orphic.", and Edmonds III 2004, 108: "the gold tablets provide evidence for the various *chemins de deviance* pursued by the different religious contexts that produced the tablets."

¹¹ Both terms Edmonds III 2011b, 7.

¹² Torjussen 2008.

will be seen as products of religious specialist, itinerant *manteis*, who acted as *bricoleurs* by “drawing upon and adapting myths and rituals that already existed.”¹³ This approach could help explain both the many similarities found in many of the tablets, since the *manteis* in many cases consulted the same texts, but also the differences, which may be explained as local preferences. The various gold tablets, then, are here seen as made up by many different texts, where several ritual texts, rather than one archetypal text, made up the backbone of the texts while local preferences provided unique details.¹⁴ With that in mind, we turn now to the texts from Thurii and Pelinna.

The texts

We turn first to Thurii, near modern-day Sibaris in Calabria, southern Italy. Here, five gold tablets were found in 1879 in two different burial mounds. The first to be considered here was found in the mound dubbed *Timpone grande*, folded and placed inside another gold tablet which functioned as an envelope. The tablet is dated to c. 350 BC.

OF 487¹⁵

Ἴλλ' ὀπὸταν ψυχὴ προλίπη φάος ἀέλιοιο,
δεξιὸν Ε.ΘΙΑΣ δ' ἐξι<έ>ναί πεφυλαγμένον εὐ μάλα πάντα·
χαίρε παθῶν τὸ πάθημα τὸ δ' οὐπω πρόσθ' {ε} ἐπεπόνθεις·
θεὸς ἐγένου ἐξ ἀνθρώπου· ἔριφος ἐς γάλα ἔπετες.
χαίρ<ε> χαίρε· δεξιὰν ὁδοίπόρ<ει>
λειμῶνάς θ' {ε} ἱεροῦς καὶ ἄλσεα Φερσεφονείας

*But when the soul leaves the light of the sun,
To the right ... having kept watch on all things well.
Hail you who have suffered the Suffering, but this you have never suffered
before:
You have become (a) god from human: A kid you fell into milk.
Hail, hail: Travel to the right
The holy meadow and sacred grove of Persephone.*

The other text was found in another mound, the *Timpone piccolo*.¹⁶ The tablet is dated to 360 BC.

OF 488

Ἔρχομαι ἐκ κοθαρώ<ων> κοθαρά, χθονί<ων> βασιλεία,
Εὐκλῆς Εὐβο<ου>λεύς τε καὶ ἀθάνατοι θεοὶ ἄλλοι·
καὶ γὰρ ἐγὼν ὑμῶν γένος ὄλβιον εὐχομαι εἶμεν,

¹³ Graf & Johnston 2007, 94. See also Edmonds III 2004, 4 for more on the *bricolage*-theory: “Each of these texts [about Underworld journeys] employs elements from a pool of traditional motifs, the limited ragbag of the *bricoleur*, in a narrative of the journey to the realm of the dead.”

¹⁴ The search for the original text behind some (or even all) of the tablets also has a long history. Two examples will suffice: an attempt to reconstruct a hypothetical archetypal text, Riedweg 2002; and Herrero de Jáuregui 2010, 272: “I think it probable that the different leaves take their hexameters from one poem or from several poems similar to each other, which described the descent of the soul to the Underworld, and from which each leaf selects those verses which are considered essential to its function as guide in the Afterlife.”

¹⁵ OF 487, and other numbers, refers to the collection of Orphic fragments, *Orphicorum et Orphicis similibus testimonia et fragmenta. Poetae Epici Graeci* edited by Alberto Bernabé and published in three volumes 2004–2007 on which my translations are based. Comparetti 1879, ed. princ.

¹⁶ Comparetti 1880, ed. princ. Here I have written out line 8 because I believe this repetition of line 6 was intentionally made in order to highlight line 7.

ἀλ<λ>ά με Μο<ι>ρ{α} ἐδάμασ<σ>ε {καὶ ἀθάνατοι θεοὶ ἄλλοι} καὶ
 ἄσ{σ}τεροβλήτα κεραυνῶι.
 κύκλο<υ> δ' ἐξέπταν βαρυπενθέος ἀργαλέοιο,
 ἴμερτο<υ> δ' ἐπέβαν στεφάνου ποσὶ καρπαλίμοισι,
 δεσ{σ}ποίνας δ' {ε} ὑπὸ κόλπον ἔδυν χθονίας βασιλείας·
 ἴμερτοῦ δ' ἀπέβαν στεμάνου ποσὶ καρπασίμοισι
 ὄλβιε καὶ μακαριστέ, θεὸς δ' ἔση ἀντὶ βροτοῖο
 ἔριφος ἐς γάλ' ἔπετον.

*Pure I come out of the pure, Queen of the Underworld,
 Eukles and Eubouleus and all the other immortal Gods:
 For I maintain that I too am of your blessed kind,
 But Fate subdued me, and (all the other immortal gods) and by he with the
 star-flung thunderbolt.
 I flew out of the grievous, troublesome circle,
 I passed with swift feet to the desired wreath,
 I entered under the bosom of the lady of the house, the Queen of the
 Underworld,
 I passed with swift feet from the desired wreath
 Happy and Blessed, you shall become god, the opposite of mortal.
 A kid I have fallen into milk.*

The next two texts were excavated in 1985 within a single grave in Pelinna, Greece, and published two years later.¹⁷ The grave belonged to a woman and contained grave goods suggesting that she was interred sometime in the late fourth /early third century B.C. The two texts are nearly identical.

OF 485

νῦν ἔθανες καὶ νῦν ἐγένου, τρισόλβιε, ἅματι τῶιδε
 εἰπεῖν Φερσεφόναί σ' ὅτι Β<άκ>χιος αὐτὸς ἔλυσε
 τα{ι}ῦρος εἰς γάλα ἔθορες.
 αἶψα εἰς γ<ά>λα ἔθορες.
 κριὸς εἰς γάλα ἔπεσ<ες>.
 οἶνον ἔχεις εὐδ<α>ίμονα τιμῆ<ν>
 καὶ σὺ μὲν εἰς ὑπὸ γῆν τελέσας ἅπερ ὄλβιοι ἄλλοι.

*Now you have died and now you have been reborn, thriceblessed, on this day
 Say to Persephone that Bakkhios himself has released you
 A bull you rushed into milk
 Quickly, you rushed into milk
 A ram you fell into milk
 You have wine as your fortunate honor
 And you will go beneath the earth, having performed the rites just as the
 other blessed ones.*

¹⁷ Tsantsanoglou & Parásoglou 1987.

OF 486

νῦν ἔθανε<ς> καὶ νῦν ἐγένου, τρισόλβιε, ἄματι [τῶι]δε.
 <ε>ἰπε[ε]ῖν Φερσεφό<ναι σ’> ὅτι Βά<κ>χιος αὐτὸς ἔλυσε.
 ταῦρος ἐ<ς> γάλα ἔθορ<ε>ς.
 κριὸς ἐς γάλα ἔπεσε<ς>.
 οἶνον ἔχεις εὐδ<αί>μον<α> τιμήν.

*Now you have died and now you have been reborn, thriceblessed, on this day
 Say to Persephone that Bakkhios himself has released you
 A bull you rushed into milk
 A ram you fell into milk
 You have wine as your fortunate honor.*

Interpretation

In the corpus of gold tablets, these four are the only ones where milk is mentioned. The Pelinna tablets were probably produced at the same time based on the same text. The reason that the second tablet contains a shorter version is most probably due to its smaller size, measuring 35 x 30 mm, compared to the longer tablet, 40 x 31 mm.

The Thurii tablets were found in separate grave mounds and have different texts. However, if we examine the texts more closely, we see that the structure in the Thurii tablets is quite similar. We start with the sentence containing milk, from now on referred to as the “immersion-in-milk” formula. First, the phrase itself is quite similar in the two texts, the only difference being the subject in the sentence, “I” and “you” respectively (*epeton / epetes*). Second, the placement of the formula is interesting. In both tablets the formula follows a change in the status of the deceased from mortal to god. This structure was pointed out already by Jane Harrison in the beginning of the twentieth century.¹⁸ The phrase’s connection with status change was further emphasized with the publication of the Pelinna tablets, where we find the same thing: first the subject is dead, then reborn (*ethanes, egenou*) making her thriceblessed. Then her status as released is confirmed, followed by the “immersion-in-milk” formula. As others have argued, it seems probable that this part of the text, or rather the formula itself, refers to some kind of initiation ritual.¹⁹ Initiations often use symbolic death and rebirth in order to emphasize the initiate’s new status, as is seen in the Pelinna tablets.²⁰

If we look at the Thurii texts as a whole a certain structure seems to emerge. In the second tablet (OF 488) there is a reference to purity. The purity is connected to the deceased and to something that the deceased has come from. It is an affirmation of the subject’s favorable status. The text, then, seems to mean: “Hail Persephone and the other gods of the Underworld. I am initiated and have therefore escaped the sorrowful circle of life. Because of this I will become a god in the afterlife.” This is followed by the “immersion-in-milk” formula. The other Thurii tablet has the same meaning: “I have died and wander in the Underworld. I remember the life and suffering I have left. Now that is all behind me since I have become a god through initiation. Because of this I will find my way to the groves of Persephone.” The initiation is signaled by the “immersion-in-milk” formula. The repetition of “pure” in the first line, “Pure I come out of the pure,” also suggests an initiatory context; the proclaimed purity

¹⁸ Harrison 1991 [1st ed. 1903], 594. See also Zuntz 1971, 326; Graf 1993, 246; Bernabé & San Cristóbal Jiménez 2008, 113ff.

¹⁹ Comparetti 1879, 158 saw this as an opportunity. The possibility was further discussed by Harrison 1991, 588ff, who also tried to reconstruct the ritual based on the references to wheels and milk in the Thurii texts. “The formula triggered an immense scholarly literature that now seems quite obsolete” (Graf 1993, 245).

²⁰ Plutarch fragment 168 Sandbach: when dying “the soul suffers an experience similar to those who celebrate great initiations...” tr. Burkert 1987, 91. See also Turner 1979, 236.

of the deceased had most likely been obtained through initiation.²¹ Persephone is thereby reminded of the deceased’s status as initiate.

The other tablets from Thurii, not included here, support this reading. Their contents are similar, but they do not include the “immersion-in-milk” formula. The structure of the texts, however, seems to be the same: the deceased has been initiated – and therefore attained immortality as a god – a status which will lead to a blissful afterlife.²² There is a general emphasis on past suffering in all these texts, e.g. “The Suffering” (*to pathēma*), “Fate subdued me” (*Moirā edamass’*), which seems to be referring to an event like an initiation where the initiate left the old life behind in order to step into a new.²³ The vocabulary in initiation is similar to that used in a funeral since the initiate may experience a symbolic death and rebirth, as in the first line of both Pelinna tablets – *nyn ethanes kai nyn egenou*.²⁴ But the emphasis on purity in the Thurii tablets and the promise of a good afterlife together with the “other blessed ones” (*olbioi alloi*) suggest initiation.²⁵ This initiation is probably referred to and summed up in the “immersion-in-milk” formula, making the formula a *synthēma*, defined by Ralph Porta as “statements or catch-words which in some way attempt to sum up what an initiate into a mystery has undergone.”²⁶ It is especially the placement of this formula in the texts from Thurii and Pelinna, immediately after a change in status to initiate, from man to god and from bound to released, that makes it probable that it worked as a *synthēma* summarizing this transition.

Milk as a symbol

Why was the transition, the initiation, summarized by the “immersion-in-milk” formula? Because of the small space available on the tablets, the text had to be very pointed and compressed. As Herrero de Jáuregui has pointed out, “[t]o evoke a whole myth as understood by the audience with just a meaningful allusion is a common technique in archaic poetry to expand or compress the myth-telling.”²⁷ In order to accomplish this, the formula used had to have a special meaning for the group, in this case the initiates. In des Bouvrie’s terms, it had to have a “magnetic quality” which mobilized the group toward certain core values.

The texts focus on suffering, but also on immortality. In the tablets from Thurii the deceased claims to be of the same race as the immortal gods, they have become gods. In the *synthēmata* that also express this milk seems to have a special function. The phrase varies somewhat, but milk is always present. The reason for this is probably that it symbolizes the immortalization, or the knowledge about his or her true identity, which the deceased attained through initiation.²⁸

The study of the “immersion-in-milk” formula has a long history. Martin Nilsson saw the formula as based on proverbs from a secular tradition where the original meaning was something like “ultimate happiness.”²⁹ More recently, Fritz Graf and Sarah Iles Johnston have argued the same: “To ‘fall into milk,’ or ‘leap into milk’ means to be in the midst of abundance, or to make a new beginning.”³⁰ Since the formula is placed after the transition from man to god, Faraone argues that the initiates identified themselves with a god and expressed this

²¹ Harrison 1991, 588; Graf 1993, 252; Graf & Johnston 2007, 105.

²² The other tablets from Thurii: OF 489, 490; Edmonds III 2011a, 18–19. In this analysis I do not include the fifth tablet from Thurii, the notorious “C-tablet” (OF 492), which is very different and yet to be deciphered.

²³ Burkert 1985, 295. Riedweg 1998, 388 and Dickie 1998, 61 argue that the words refer to a burial rite.

²⁴ Johnston & McNiven 1996, 33.

²⁵ Cf. Plato *The Republic* 364c ff. Graf 1991, 100; Calame 2006, 283.

²⁶ Porta 1999, 87.

²⁷ Herrero de Jáuregui 2010, 280.

²⁸ Calame 2006, 265.

²⁹ Nilsson 1955 II, 225. See also Zuntz 1971, 322 ff.; Burkert 1975, 99 n45; Faraone 2011, 311.

³⁰ Graf & Johnston 2007, 129.

identification with the formula.³¹ Faraone also finds support for this through his analysis of the verbs used in the formula, "rushing" and "leaping:"

the boast, more likely refers to some kind of ritual action or dance in which the worshipper imitated or pantomimed the actions of the god, just as Cretan youths imitated the dance of the divine Kouretes or "rushing" Elean maenads imitated the arrival of their tauromorphic god.
(Faraone 2011, 320)

I will not try to reconstruct the actual ritual, but it seems obvious that the formula refers to an initiation ritual where the initiate became aware of his or her immortal heritage, a heritage which will become fulfilled in death through a final apotheosis. This apotheosis is probably what is referred to with "milk." By "rushing" into milk, the initiate imitates the famed apotheosis of myth, such as that of Herakles' and others.³² In order to conclude we need to look closer at the possible meanings of "milk" in the context of the gold tablets.

From the seventh century BC and onwards we see a connection between "milk" and "stars" in Greece. The obvious connection is the relationship between "milk" – *gala* – and "the Milky Way" variously described as *galaktos kyklos*, *galaxios* or simply *to gala*.³³ The stars, Milky Way, or the galaxy are also connected to the afterlife since this is often seen as the goal of the apotheosis. The idea that some special individuals could escape death or obtain a better afterlife than others is found already in Homer and Hesiod.³⁴ Both make it clear that members of the heroic race die, but that some special individuals, such as Menelaos, escape this fate. Later, the idea is further developed and a better afterlife is also made available to ordinary people, provided that they get access to the secret knowledge about this through various mysteries. Plato refers to this on several occasions, connecting the idea to the books of Musaios and Orpheus and to itinerant *manteis* (religious experts) who, for a fee, initiate people and even cities into their mysteries.³⁵ Alternatives to a dreary afterlife in Hades multiplied during the Classical period. This is reflected in many texts from the period. The souls of the privileged went along the road which Pindar referred to as "Zeus' way."³⁶ A few centuries later, Poseidippos of Pella talks about "the mystic road" leading to the Isle of the Blessed.³⁷ Eventually, some writers located the Isle of the Blessed in heaven and argued that the souls of righteous men would be reunited with their heavenly origin and eventually become stars. Examples of this are many in both literature and inscriptions.³⁸ The idea is present in texts by such diverse authors as Aristophanes and Euripides, but perhaps the most

³¹ Faraone 2011, 314.

³² Herrero de Jáuregui 2010, 285: "[a]fter all, the *katabasis* of the soul depicted in the poem(s) from which the leaves take their lines has its obvious model and precedent in the poems which told the trips to Hades of epic heroes, like for example Heracles."

³³ Aristotle *Meteorologica* 1.8 and a commentary on this passage, Alexander of Aphrodisias on *Meteorologica* 1.8.37, contain all versions.

³⁴ Homer *Odyssey* 4.561–564: Menelaos is destined to escape death and instead go to Elysion. Hesiod *Works and Days* 161–169: Most of the heroes of the heroic age died during the battles of Thebes and Troy, but all the others were transported to the Isle of the Blessed (i.e. they did not die). On the reading and discussions of these two passages see Torjussen 2008, 159.

³⁵ Plato *The Republic* 2.364b–365a; Plato *Timaeus* 41d ff.

³⁶ Pindar *Olympian Odes* 2.57.

³⁷ Poseidippos *SH* 705.22.

³⁸ Burkert 1972, 360: "[t]he notion of divine origin and of return to heaven was widespread, at least in germ, before the time of Pythagoras." The Milky Way as the origin of souls explains why newborn babies are dependent upon milk from their mother in order to survive, Burkert 1972, 367 n94. See also Burkert 1972, 358 ff. for discussion and relevant references.

striking example is found in Plato’s *Timaeus*.³⁹ Here Plato argues that there is one star for each soul and that the demiurge, the divine Craftsman, places each soul inside its designated star. After a while, each star/soul is forced to descend to earth in order to be incarnated there, but after a certain period the soul is allowed to return.⁴⁰

Among the many grave inscriptions from the same period, we find the same connection between souls and stars, or at least heaven, such as the funerary epigram commemorating slain Athenians after the battle of Poteidaia in 432 BC: “Aether received their souls, earth their bodies”.⁴¹ In his collection of Greek and Latin epitaphs Richmond Lattimore presents many examples of a belief in the dualism of body and soul, and that the soul is destined to return to their heavenly origin.⁴² The examples are taken from various sites around the Mediterranean and from different periods, such as the third/fourth century AD inscription from Sakkara: “I, a godlike man, leaving my body to earth, my mother... He has gone to the circle of the sky, to the company of the blessed”⁴³; Athens fourth century BC – “Earth keeps the body and bones of the sweet boy, but his soul has gone to the house of the blessed” (*Epigrammata Graeca* 90); Pergamum – “Your soul has flown away from the limbs to the other divine spirits, and you dwell in the plain of the blessed” (*Epigrammata Graeca* 243.5–6); Arcesine first century BC – “Mother, do not weep for me. What is the use? You ought rather to reverence me, for I have become an evening star, among the gods” (*Inscriptiones Graecae* 12.7.123.5–6).⁴⁴ The same dualism is present in the gold tablets; it is the soul of the deceased who becomes immortal and joins the other blessed ones in the afterlife.

If we consider the “immersion-in-milk” formula, and the change in status immediately in front of it, in light of the above-mentioned texts, it seems that the formula is expressing the moment of apotheosis for the initiate. Albrecht Dieterich suggested in 1893 that the kid in the Thuri tablets was the initiate and that the milk was the Milky Way to which the departed soul was headed.⁴⁵ But this interpretation becomes difficult when we turn to the Pelinna tablets. Here the deceased is said to join the other blessed ones “beneath the earth.”⁴⁶ It would seem, then, that milk, in the tablets, refers to a blissful afterlife regardless of where this was enjoyed. There are several texts from the fifth and fourth centuries BC which supports this reading. Many of the texts connect milk and paradise with Dionysos, the most striking of these being Euripides’ *Bacchae*. In the play, the maenads, female revelers and worshippers of the god, get so close to Dionysos during their rituals that his powers are made manifest through them. By striking the thyrsus, one of the ritual instruments, against a rock one of the maenads produces a fountain of milk.⁴⁷ The image of fountains or rivers of milk (or wine) is also connected to

³⁹ Aristophanes *Peace* 832–7: men are turned into stars after death; Euripides *Supplices* 531–534: when we die, our bodies return to the earth and the breath (πνεῦμα) to the aether; Euripides *Helena* 1014–1016: the mind of the dead falls into eternal aether.

⁴⁰ Plato *Timaeus* 41d ff. For other examples see Homer *Iliad* 6.128–130: the gods come from Heaven; Heraclides Ponticus *Empedotimos*: the Milky Way as a road for the souls leading from Earth to the stars; Cicero *Somnium Scipionis* 1.14: the souls of great leaders and generals were destined to be reunited with the stars after death; Macrobius *Commentarius ex Cicerone in Somnium Scipionis* 1.12.13; Philophon’s commentary on Aristotle’s *Meteorologica* 8.117; Stobaeus *Florilegium* 1.906; Proclus *In Platonis Rempublicam commentarii* 2.129.24: after death the soul travels along the Milky Way and after twelve days tries to enter through the Capricorn where immortality and happiness awaits.

⁴¹ *Inscriptiones Graecae* 1.3.6, tr. Lattimore.

⁴² Lattimore 1962, 31–35.

⁴³ Preisigke & Bilabel 1915, inscription 1.4229, 1, 4.

⁴⁴ All translations by Lattimore.

⁴⁵ Dieterich 1893, 96 f.

⁴⁶ Graf & Johnstone 2007, 129; Bernabé & Jiménez San Cristóbal 2008, 80 dismiss any connection between milk and a future paradise for the initiate. Jakob 2010, 71, 74 argues that the deceased is only temporarily underneath the earth before he was brought up to the stars and immortalized.

⁴⁷ Euripides *Bacchae* 142 f, 696–711; Plato *Ion* 534a.

Elysion, the Isle of the Blessed, and a general idea of paradise and abundance, often located in a past Golden age.⁴⁸

We see a connection, then, between not only milk and the stars, but also to a general idea of paradise and to Dionysos and his worshippers. Seen in the eschatological context of the gold tablets “milk” seems to refer to paradise and immortality.⁴⁹

Conclusion

The “immersion-in-milk” formula refers to the initiation ritual the deceased owner had undertaken. The initiation led to a new life, expressed quite literally in the first line of the Pelinna tablets, which in turn led to a blissful afterlife among the other immortals. It is possibly this “new life” which is referred to in one of the Thuri tablets as well, with its emphasis on purity.⁵⁰ Milk is a potent image associated with death (through libations), new life (mother’s milk), and immortality (the Milky Way, abundance in Elysion, paradise) which is used in the gold tablets to signify the initiates’ attainment of his or her new status as an immortal.⁵¹ This means that the self-identification found in the Thuri tablets is also present in the Pelinna tablets. The same self-identification is even found in the gold tablets from Petelia, Hipponion, Pharsalos, Thessaly and Crete.⁵²

The “immersion-in-milk” formula will continue to draw the attention of scholars studying these texts. Apart from its enigmatic contents, in itself enough to interest us, the use of repetitions in the texts also works as a magnet for the reader. In the Pelinna tablets it is the formula itself which is repeated, with some variations. In the second Thuri tablet (OF 488) considered here the deceased’s claim to be an immortal is encased in repetition. Line 2 ends with the phrase *kai athanatoi theoi alloi* (and all the other immortal Gods), a phrase which is repeated in line 4. In the middle we find the phrase *kai gar egōn hymōn genos olbion euchomai eimen / alla me Moira edamasse* (For I maintain that I too am of your blessed kind, But Fate subdued me). Porta has shown how this technique is used in order to draw attention to the main message of a text.⁵³ The important message of the text is thereafter repeated in the “immersion-in-milk” formula, which itself is encased in another repetition, *chaire* in lines 3 and 5.

Immortality is attained through initiation and helps to ensure a happy afterlife for the deceased. This immortality is referred to explicitly in the Thuri tablets and in the “immersion-in-milk” formula. The formula worked as a magnet in the texts and possibly in the initiation ritual itself. Milk becomes a symbol of many things but most important in this context is its reference to immortality. Milk as a symbol of immortality probably functioned as magnet for the initiates and became a symbol which condensed the main meaning, or core value, of the ritual. Judging from the scholarly interest in the formula and the question of the meaning of milk in it, it seems evident that it has not lost its magnetic quality today.

⁴⁸ Theocritus *Idylls* 5.124; Horace *Epodes* 16; Ovid *Metamorphoses* 1.111 f. See Graf 1980, 214 for further references.

⁴⁹ Burkert 1975, 99 has also suggested this. Porta 1999, 342 has shown a striking parallel to this meaning of milk in the Greek Magical Papyri (*Papyri Graecae Magicae* 1.4–5) where we find instructions on how to drown a falcon in milk. The word used for “drowning” is ἀποθέωσον “deify,” suggesting a close link between milk and immortality.

⁵⁰ Also argued by Watkins 1995, 278.

⁵¹ See also Edmonds III 2004, 90.

⁵² See the texts in Edmonds III 2011a.

⁵³ Porta 1999, 334.

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Latin summary

Lac ut symbola immortalitatis tabulis “Orphicis” Thurii et Pelinnae inventis inscriptae. Haec symbola interpretationem praebet illius formulae aenigmatica, quae est “haedus in lacte” et quae apparet in quattuor ex tabulis aureis “Orphicis” Thurii et Pelinnae inventis. Illae tenues tabulae mortuos in sepulcra comitabantur eisdemque continebantur textūs variae longitudinis, qui putabantur auxilio esse mortuo vel mortuae in eius itinere ad inferos. Multi putant illis tabulis textūs Orphicos contineri, sed de hac quaestione saeculo praeterito plurimum disputabatur. Illae quattuor tabulae, de quibus hic agitur et de quibus duae in Italia meridionali atque in Graecia locum habent, narrant, quantopere mortuus/-a in ipsā vitā passus/-a sit, sed eum eamve immortalitatem adeptum/-am esse initiatione factā. Haec acquisitio statūs immortalis referebatur ad formulam, quae est “haedus in lacte,” et eādem comprehendebatur, cum – ut asseverabatur – *lac* esset relatio directa ad immortalitatem. Itaque *lac* hōc in conexū eschatologico est immortalitatis symbolum, quod est punctum centrale et textūs et hominum initiatorum.

English summary

This article offers an interpretation of the enigmatic “kid-in-milk” formula which appears in four of the “Orphic” gold tablets from Thurii and Pelinna. These tiny tablets accompanied the dead in their graves and contained texts of various lengths which were believed to help the deceased on his or her journey to the otherworld. Many see the tablets as Orphic texts, but this question has been highly debated during the last century. The four tablets in question, from two sites in southern Italy and Greece, tell how the deceased has suffered in life, but that he or she has attained immortality through initiation. The immortalization was referred to and summed up in the “kid-in-milk” formula, where, it is argued, *milk* was a direct reference to immortality. Thus *milk* in this eschatological context is a symbol of immortality which served as a focal point for both the text and the initiates.

Keywords

Orphism, Symbols, Gold tablets, Greek Religion, Thurii, Pelinna.