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# Festivals in the Afterlife: A New Reading of the Petelia Tablet (OF 476.11)

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### 30. Festivals in the Afterlife: A New Reading of the Petelia Tablet (*OF* 476.11)

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καὶ τότ' ἔπειτα [τέλη σὺ μεθ'] ἠρώεσιν ἀνάξει[ς]<sup>1</sup>

The Petelia tablet was the first of the so-called 'Orphic' gold tablets to be discovered by modern scholarship, yet it continues to present us with enigmas that have not been resolved by the uncovering of further tablets of its type. This gold lamella, dating to the fourth century BC by its letter forms, was found in an undetermined location, stuffed inside an amulet case dating to the second century CE.<sup>2</sup> It is unlikely that the lamella was handed down for over 500 years as a family heirloom. More probably the lamella was put into the amulet case by someone in the second century who had discovered this 'magic' talisman in a grave and wanted to keep it close at all times.<sup>3</sup> However, to make it fit within the amulet case, this unknown person rolled up the thin gold foil and then, since the end of this roll stuck out of the case, snipped off the the tip. Unfortunately, this destroyed the text at the end of the lamella, and none of the other tablets of the long B type, which parallel the Petelia tablet in most respects, has the missing lines. I hereby offer a new restoration of line 11, one of the lacunae caused by that inconsiderate citizen of the second century.

The missing section seems to concern the result obtained by the deceased when she successfully passes the guardians with her claim to be the child of Earth and starry Heaven. None of the gold tablets elaborate much on the results of the successful journey; the bulk of lines in any text is always

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- 1 This new reading appears in the edition of the gold tablets in ch. 2 of Edmonds (2011). I would like to thank Franco Ferrari for his helpful suggestions on this problematic line. I would also like to thank Miguel Herrero, Ana Jiménez San Cristóbal, Eugenio R. Luján, Raquel Martín, Marco Antonio Santamaría, and Sofía Torallas Tovar, for putting together this tribute, and, above all, Alberto Bernabé himself, for being such a friendly, courteous, erudite, and stimulating opponent in all matters Orphic.
  - 2 The discovery was published in Franz (1836) and treated in the dissertation of Goettling (1843), although it was not classified as 'Orphic' until Comparetti (1882).
  - 3 *Pace* Faraone (2009). See further Bernabé – Jiménez San Cristóbal (2008: 324–326) including illustration of tablet and case on p. 325.

on the solution to the obstacle posed.<sup>4</sup> The Petelia tablet does indicate that the result will be that the guardians give the deceased a drink from the water of Memory, but then what? Only one hexameter in the Petelia tablet seems to treat the fate of the deceased in the afterlife.<sup>5</sup>

This hexameter is introduced by the transitional ‘and then’ (καὶ τότε ἔπειτα), and concludes with something to do with the heroes (ἡρώεσσιν ἀνάξει[ς]). The final letter of the line falls in another snipped out gap, but, given the second person addresses throughout the text, the restoration of a sigma has seemed reasonable to every editor since the tablet’s discovery. Most editors in the 20th century have taken ἀνάξει[ς] to come from ἀνάσσω, and they interpret the line to signify that the deceased will become the king of the underworld or at least rule like a king over the heroes. However, ἀνάξει[ς] could be the second person singular of the future, not just of ἀνάσσω but also of ἀνάγω. Cougny, in his 1890 collection, renders the line as *et tunc inde amicos inter heroas reduces*, restoring a Greek text of καὶ τότε ἔπειτα [φίλοισι μεθ’] ἡρώεσσιν ἀνάξει[ς].<sup>6</sup>

The verbs ἄγω and ἀνάγω can not only mean ‘to lead’ or ‘to lead back’ as Cougny seems to want, but also to conduct, as in ceremonies, festivals, or sacrifices. Herodotus uses ἀνάγω to refer to the rites that the Egyptians practice that resemble those the Greek do for Dionysos, while Aristophanes uses ἄγω for all the important festivals of Athens – the Panathenaia, the Mysteries, the Dipoleia, and the Adonia.<sup>7</sup> If we restore in the lacuna an object for the verb that indicates some sort of ritual, then ἀνάξει[ς] can predict that the deceased will celebrate a festival in the afterlife. While ἑορτὰς would scan, it would provide only six characters to fill the gap (EOPTΑΣ). Using τέλη instead, with the addition of σὺ to specify the subject, permits the preposition μεθ’ to go before the heroes (ἡρώεσσιν), yielding a restoration of nine characters (TEΛΗΣΥΜΕΘ) that fits the lacuna better. The monosyllable σὺ is perhaps clunky, but it appears elsewhere in the tablet hexameters.<sup>8</sup>

4 Edmonds (2004: 99–101).

5 The remains of the tablet beyond line 11 resemble the verses from the beginning of the Hipponion tablet that introduce the whole situation – when you are about to die. Fontenrose (1978) might refer to this specification of approaching death as the ‘condition precedent’ in his classification of the parts of the traditional hexameter verse oracle. Cf. Edmonds (2011: 255–258) for an application of Fontenrose’s analysis to the tablets, suggesting that they may derive not from a canonical *hieros logos* but from short hexameter oracles.

6 Cougny (1890: 484), following the reading of Franz (1836).

7 Hdt. 2.48.2 τὴν δὲ ἄλλην ἀνάγουσι ὀρτὴν τῷ Διονύσῳ οἱ Αἰγύπτιοι πλὴν χορῶν κατὰ ταῦτα σχεδὸν πάντα Ἑλλήσι. Ar. Pax 418–420 Καὶ σοὶ τὰ μεγάλ’ ἡμεῖς Παναθῆναι’ ἄξομεν πάσας τε τὰς ἄλλας τελετὰς τὰς τῶν θεῶν, Μυστήρι’ Ἑρμῆ, Διπολιεῖ, Ἀδώνια.

8 Cf. OF 477.7 τοῖς δὲ σὺ εὖ μάλα πᾶσαν ἀληθειὴν καταλέξαι; OF 474.15 καὶ δὴ καὶ σὺ πῶν ὁδὸν ἔρχεαι; OF 485.7 καὶ σὺ μὲν εἰς ὑπὸ γῆν τελέσας ἄπερ ὄλβιοι ἄλλοι.

The choice is then between the two possible results for the deceased – will you ἀνάξει[ς] from ἀνάγω or ἀνάσω? The problem with the latter is that an afterlife of kingship in the underworld does not appear in any other sources. Hades is king in the underworld, at the side of dread Persephone, and Kronos' rule in the Isles of the Blessed is the only alternate kingship that could fit. Previous scholars have at times imagined ἀνάσω on the model of Achilles in the *Odyssey*, since Odysseus tells him that he is mighty among the dead (μέγα κρατέεις – *Od.* 11.485), and Achilles responds that he would rather be a portionless slave in life than to rule over the perished dead (πᾶσιν νεκύεσσι καταφθιμένοισιν ἀνάσσειν – *Od.* 11.491). Not even Achilles is king, however; his claim is a characteristic impossible wish, illustrating the wretched condition to which even the greatest of mortal heroes is reduced in Homer's vision of the afterlife.

Some scholars have read a line from the Hipponion tablet (*OF* 474.13) as ἐλεοῦσιν ὑποχθονίῳ βασιλῆϊ, implying a similar rulership for the deceased, now made a king.<sup>9</sup> However, this suggestion ignores the gender of the deceased, since the woman at Hipponion would have to supplant Persephone as Queen of the Dead. Moreover, the verb should take an accusative, not dative, object, and no really satisfactory reading of this line has yet been proposed. In the absence of credible parallels, Bernabé – Jiménez San Cristóbal take line 11 in the Petelia tablet very loosely to mean simply being freed from others' control. "Since it is a reign that is shared with a group ("you will reign with the other heroes"), we suppose that nothing is meant other than that the soul has freed itself from all subjugation".<sup>10</sup> Graf and Johnston render it even more weakly, "to live among the heroes, *as* a hero".<sup>11</sup> These loose interpretations seem implausible as meanings for ἀνάσσειν, which should imply a positive primacy, not simply a negative lack of constraint.

Celebrating festivals in the afterlife, on the other hand, appears in a variety of sources as the ideal result of the passage into the underworld. The most elaborate description, of course, comes with the chorus in Aristophanes' *Frogs*, who celebrate mystic rites in the Underworld that seem to include a lot of eating, drinking, and sexual dalliance.<sup>12</sup> Plutarch provides a less comic view of such afterlife rituals, emphasizing the company of the pure and holy,<sup>13</sup> but they share the idea that the best afterlife imaginable is the participation, after death, in the festivals that were the most enjoyable experiences of life. This kind of afterlife appears even in the limited evidence for the result of the journey in the gold tablets. In the Hipponion tab-

9 Merkelbach (1975: 9).

10 Bernabé – Jiménez San Cristóbal (2008: 178).

11 Graf – Johnston (2007: 116).

12 *Ar. Ra.* 323–459; cf. Edmonds (2004: 138–141).

13 *Plu. fr.* 178 Sandbach περιμῶν ἐστεφανωμένος ὀργιάζει καὶ σύνεστιν ὀσίοις καὶ καθαροῖς ἀνδράσι.

let, the deceased is told she will travel along the sacred road that the μύσται καὶ βάρχοι travel, like the sacred procession that was such an important part of the Eleusinian Mysteries (and no doubt other festivals as well).<sup>14</sup> In one of the tablets from Pelinna, the importance of *teletai* for the blessed dead is stressed, and the deceased is promised wine for the celebrations.<sup>15</sup> That the deceased in the Petelia tablet should look forward to celebrating rites in the underworld is thus a plausible conjecture, with far more parallel evidence than the idea of the deceased becoming Queen of the Dead.

The text καὶ τότ' ἔπειτα [τέλη σὺ μεθ'] ἠρώεσιν ἀνάξει[ς] thus provides a better restoration of the unfortunate lacuna in the Petelia text than the other restorations that were first proposed in the end of the nineteenth century. We may never know the rest of the lines that were lost when that person in the second century CE snipped off the end of the lamella to make it fit into the amulet case, but we can at least restore this particular lacuna in such a way as to remove the anomaly of the deceased hailed as the Queen of the Dead, substituting the more familiar and traditional reward of perpetual celebrations with the heroes and other blessed dead.

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14 *OF* 474.15–16 καὶ δὴ καὶ σὺ πῶν ὁδὸν ἔρχεαι ἄν τε καὶ ἄλλοι | μύσται καὶ βάρχοι ἱερὰν στείχουσι κλειεῖνοι. Cf. Bernabé – Jiménez San Cristóbal (2008: 50–52).

15 *OF* 485.7 καὶ σὺ μὲν εἰς ὑπὸ γῆν τελέσας ἄπερ ἄλβιοι ἄλλοι. Cf. Bernabé – Jiménez San Cristóbal (2008: 84–91).