THE GOLD LEAF FROM HIPPONION REVISITED

In 1974, Giuseppe Foti published a small gold leaf found folded (14 x 16 mm) on the breast of a skeleton (probably of a young woman) from a tomb excavated in the ancient cemetery of Hipponion (today Vibo Valentia in Calabria). The tomb belongs to the end of the fifth century B.C. The gold leaf, when unfolded, measures only 49–59 x 32 mm. And nevertheless it contains a Greek inscription of no less than sixteen hexameters. This is the oldest Orphic lamella aurea among fifteen of them found so far. At the same time, it is the longest and the best one. There is a close correspondence between the contents of the gold leaf from Hipponion (= H) and those from Petelia (= P, ca. 350 B.C.) and Pharsalos (= Ph, ca. 330 B.C.).


In my opinion, the text of the inscription is both lacunose and corrupt, presenting difficulties of interpretation. After fifteen years, I am offering here a slightly revised edition along with a few remarks.

**Text**

Μναμοσύνας τόδε σφίον, ἐπεὶ ἀμ μέλλησι ψανείσθαι.

Εἰς ὧν ἄδαι δόμους εὐήρεας < e.g. ὡς ἀρκάνεις, 

ηὑρήσεις μελάνυδρον ἕκειθ > {ἐστ’} ἐπὶ δ<ε><ε> ἕξα 

κρῆνα<ν>, πάρ δ’ αὐτάι λευκὰ <ν> ἐστακι <ν> α < ν> κυπάρισον<σ>ον. 

ἔνθα κατερχόμεναι ψυχ{κ}αί νεκύων ψύχονται.

Ταύτας τὰς κράνας μιὴδ σχεδὸν ἐγνύθην ἐλθης.

Πρόσθεν δ(ἐ) ηὑρήσεις τὰς Μναμοσύνας ἀπό λίμνας 

ψυχρὸν ὄδωρ προφέρον· φύλακες δ(ἐ) ἐπύπερθθην ἔαςι<ν>. 

[θ]οί δ’ σε εἰρήσσονται ἐν<ι> φρασὶ πευκαλίμαυσ.

[θ]ότ<τ>ι δή ἐξερείεις Ἄδων σκότως υὐλοεντος.

Εἶπον. “Ὑὸς Βαρέας καὶ Οὔρανοῦ ἀστερόεντος,

δίψαι δ’ άπασι καὶ ἀπόλλυμαι. ἀλ<λ>α δότ’ ω[κα] 

ψυχρὸν ὄδωρ π[ρο]ρέον τῆς Μνημοσύνης ἀπό λίμ[νη].”

Καὶ δή τοι ἔλεούσιν <Χ> υποχύσσωι βασιλῆι,

καὶ δή τοι δώσουσι πιειν {ταύτας ἀπό} {τὰς Μναμοσύνας} λίμνας.

καὶ δή καὶ οὐ πιῶν λιθόν ἔρχεαι<ν>, ήν τε καὶ ἄλλοι 

μῦσται καὶ βάχξαι λευκὸν στείχουσι κλ<ε>εῖνοι.

1 σφίον scripsi post M. West (<θ>ξιόν): ΦΠΙΟΝ (i.e. ἤξιον) H □ 2 ΕΙΣ H; εἰς 

Pugliese: εἶσ’ Zuntz □ 2–3 supplevi e.g. conlatis P et Ph □ 3 ΕΣΤ ’delevi ut 

dissographiam / κρήναν scripsi post M. West: ΚΡΕΝΑ H □ 4 ΠΑΡΔΑΥΤΑΝΕΣΤΑ- 

ΚΥΑΛΕΥΚΑΣΚΥΠΑΡΙΣΟΣ Η, ex P et Ph corr. Merkelbach et West □ 9 ἐν<ι> 

Merkelbach □ 12 ὧνκα Pugliese (δότ’ αὖφαρ’ Π) □ 15 ταύτας (possis et Μνάμας et 

Μνείας) ἀπὸ addidi et τὰς Μναμοσύνας dej. ut glossema : καθαρὰς ἀπὸ cont. 

Merkelbach : θείης ἀπὸ κρῆνης Π □ 16 ΣΥΠΙΟΝ Η, ut vidit Luppe : συχνόν 

Pugliese : συχνών Merkelbach.

Translation

“This is the leaf of Remembrance for the time when one shall die.

<When you reach> the well-fitted house of Hades, <you will find there> on the right hand a spring <with black water> and close to it a tall shining cypress. This is the place where the descending souls cool themselves. Take good care not to come close to this spring.

Further on you will find a cold stream flowing out of the lake of Remembrance. And there are guardians standing by the stream.
They will ask you with shrewd mind, what for are you searching through the darkness of the deadly Hades.

Answer to them: “I am a son of the Heavy (Earth) and the starry Sky. But I am drained dry with thirst and I am perishing. So give me quickly cold water flowing out of the lake of Remembrance.”

And they will show mercy to you, a king of the Netherworld, and will give you to drink from that lake. And after drinking you will tread the holy path on which walk also other renowned initiates and worshippers.”

**Brief Commentary**

It seems appropriate to bring here a combined text of the gold leaves from Petelia (in British Museum) and Pharsalos (at Athens). It reads as follows:

Εὐρήσεις ΆΪδαο δόμοις ἐνδέξια κρήνην,
pάρ δ' αὐτή λευκὴν ἐστηκυϊαν κυπάρισσον·
ταύτης τῆς κρήνης µηδὲ σχεδὸν ἐμπέλασεις.
Πρόσσω δ' εὐρήσεις τῆς Μνηµοσύνης ἀπὸ λίµνης
ψυχρὸν ὄδωρ προφεύον· φύλαξες δ' ἐπίπερθεν ἔσων.
ΟÏ δὲ σ<ε> εὑρήσονται β' τι χρέος εἰςαιφικάνεις.
Τοῖς δὲ οὐ εὖ µᾶλα πᾶσαν ἀλήθειαν καταλέξαι·

Εἰπεῖν· "Τῆς παῖς εἰµι καὶ οὐρανοῦ ἀστερόεντος·
αὐτὰρ ἐµοί γένος οὐράνιον· τόδε δ' ἵστε καὶ αὐτοὶ·
δίψηι δ' εἰµ' ι αὕτη καὶ ἀπόλλυμαι· ἄλλα δότ' άιφα
ψυχρὸν ὄδωρ προφεύον τῆς Μνηµοσύνης ἀπὸ λίµνης."

Καυτ[ι]ο(μήν<ού> δύωσαι πιείν θείης ἀπὸ ιοχρητηνθ',
καὶ τὸν ἐπετι' α[λλοις µεθ'] ἥρωςσαν ἄνάξει[σ].

[Mνηµοσύνης] τόδε δ[ῶρον, εὔην µέλληισι] θανείσναι[α].


**Line 1.** Pugliese Carratelli, Zuntz, Guarducci, and S.E.G. 26, Nr. 1139, print a full stop after the word ἡγίον. I think, however, that line 1 is a complete sentence and the title of the inscription. This seems to be supported by Petelia, line 14.

**Lines 2-3.** That one line is missing, I think is confirmed by the abridged version of the inscription, present in Petelia and Pharsalos,
line 1. With this line added the lamella aurea would have the magic number of seventeen lines.

Line 4. The text of Η -- πὰρ δ' αὐτὰν ἐστακύ <τι> ἀ λευκᾶ κυπάρισ<σ>ος -- is indefensible on metrical grounds. The correct text is indicated by Petelia and Pharsalos, line 2. There is no use of referring to the text of the gold leaf from Malibu (as, e.g., Luppe 23 n. 2, does), for there the phrase ἐπὶ δεξιὰ λευκὴ κυπάρισσος forms a complete sentence (an ἔστιν is understood), and besides Malibu belongs to the group of the gold leaves from Eleutherna (ἐπὶ δεξιὰ, τῇ κυψάρισσος), as R. Janko had demonstrated (CQ N.S. 34 [1984] 93 and 100).

Line 5. The figura etymologica ψυχαι νεκύων ψύχονται clearly hints at the Refrigerium and la soif des morts (on which see Zuntz, Persephone 370–76).

Line 11. We have to live with Βαρέας implying Γῆς. For, first, ΓΑΙΑΣ is not visible in the inscription (contra Zuntz, WS 89 [1976] 142 f.). Second, βαρέα is employed as an attribute of γῆ by Cleidemos ap. Theophrast. De causis plant. 3.23.1, as Pugliese Carra
telli (PP 29 [1974] 112) had pointed out (compare M. Gigante, PP 30 [1975] 224). Finally, against the reading of Zuntz (and Luppe 23 and 25) -- ὅς Γαίας <τε> -- it suffices to say that Petelia, line 6, and Pharsalos, line 8, have Γῆς παις είμι instead, and the group from Eleutherna and Malibu, Γας υίος είμι.

Line 15. The text in Η is due to a mechanical repetition of the formula in lines 7 and 13 -- τὰς Μναμοσύνας ἀπὸ λίμνας -- on the part of the scribe (so also Janko 96 f.). My guess is that the original reading was τῶτας ἀπὸ λίμνας (compare line 6, τῶτας τὰς κρήνας). I think Η makes a clear distinction between the destructive spring (κρήνα in lines 3 and 6) and the salvific lake of Remembrance (λίμνα in lines 7, 13 and 15). If so, then κρήνας in Petelia, line 10, Pharsalos, line 10, Malibu, line 2, and the group from Eleutherna is a later change (contra Janko 97 and 99).

Line 19. Μύσται καὶ βάχχοι: A link between the Dionysiac mysteries and Orphics is provided by the recently published graffiti on bone tablets from Olbia (contemporary to our gold leaf), e.g., by the inscription S.E.G. 28 (1978) [1982] Nr. 659: Διόνυσος or Διονύσων Ὀρφικοί. On the relationship between Dionysos and the Orphics compare Susan Guettel Cole (1980) and Reinhold Merkelbach (1988).
We now come to the keyword of the inscription — to the towering presence of the goddess Mnemosyne (mentioned three times, in lines 1, 7 and 13, and referred to in line 15). What is her role?

(1) It is common knowledge that the assistance of Memory is necessary for the initiates in mysteries enabling them to remember the mystic secrets and instructions. Hence the presence of the water of Lethe and of the water of Mnemosyne (and even a chair of Mnemosyne) in the mystic shrine of Trophonius in Boetia (Pausanias 9.39.8 and 13). Hence also this prayer to Mnemosyne in a late Orphic hymn (77.9–10 Quandt):

άλλα, μάκαιρα θεά, μύσταις μνήμην ἐπέγειρε εὐιέρου τελετής, λήθην δ' ἀπὸ τῶν<δ'>' ἀπόσπημε.

(2) But the role of Mnemosyne in our inscription goes beyond the traditional “water of Memory”. The gold leaf itself is a gift of the goddess Mnemosyne to the initiate (Μναμοσύνας τόδε σφιον, in H, line 1; Μνημοσύνης τόδε δώδον, in the gold leaf from Rome, line 3, and maybe in that from Petelia, line 14). The gold leaf is a golden passport to Paradise, for it comprises the secret pass-word (line 11): “I am a child of the Heavy Earth and the Starry Sky”.

Now, it is not a coincidence that the Greek goddess Mnemosyne herself was a daughter of Earth (Gaia) and Sky (Ouranos): Hesiod Theogony 135. Every learned Greek knew Hesiod's Theogony, including the educated Orphics. If so, then the goddess Mnemosyne and her devotee from H are two sisters. Thus, it is a sacred duty for Mnemosyne to assist her sisters and brothers in achieving life everlasting in Elysium. Hence the presence of Mnemosyne, along with the secret formula, “I am a child of Earth and Sky”, in the Orphic gold leaves.

To conclude, unless a departing soul remembers its heavenly origin, it will not achieve life everlasting. Mutatis mutandis, compare the later Naassenerpredigt in Hippolytus’ Refutatio 5.7. 30 (ed. Marcovich, Berlin 1986): “Ερμής δὲ πυρχάς Κυλλήνιος ἐξεκαλέτῳ / ἀνδρῶν μνηστήρων (Odyssey 24.1–2)· οὐ τῶν <δὲ> Πηνελόπης.

7 Or, as Miss Cole put it (o.c., 238): “The point of the appeal to Mnemosyne is to guarantee that the initiate remember to seek the benefits that initiation promised”.

ψησίν, ὡ κακοδαίμονες, μνηστήρων, ἀλλὰ τῶν ἐξυπνισμένων καὶ ἀνεμνησμένων "ἐξ ὀιχής τιμῆς <τε> καὶ ὅσ<σ>οι μήκεος ὀλβοῦ" (Empedocles Β 119 Diels-Kranz). In other words, the true etymology of the word μνηστήρ is not from μνάομαι, "to woo", but from μνάο-μαι, "to remember", says the anonymous Gnostic sage.

One final remark. The right margin of Η, facing lines 2 and 3, shows a clear A Ω. The meaning of these letters is puzzling. Back in 1976, I suggested that Α Ω may be a formula for the universe (τὸ πᾶν); compare, e.g., Franz Dornseif, Das Alphabet in Mystik und Magie (Leipzig, 2nd ed., 1925) 122-25; E. Lohmeyer, in RLAC 1 (1941) 1. But 400 B.C. seems to be too early a date for such a formula. As for the letters TN, I suggested that they may well be the number 350 (i.e., 5 x 70), a cosmic cycle of the soul. Seventy years is an ideal lifespan for man (to judge by Solon Fr. 27 West), and Pythagoras claimed to belong to a fifth generation of his soul —- Aethaliades, Euphorbus, Hermotimus, Pyrrhus, Pythagoras (Diog. Laert. 8.4-5).