35. The "Great Tablet" from Thurii (OF 492)

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Recent archaeological discoveries combined with splendid scholarly work from historians of religion and philologists have resulted in a dramatically enhanced understanding of the religious content and sociological context of the so-called Orphic gold tablets.¹ Yet, despite all these enthralling new results, the Great Tablet from Thurii (OF 492) has remained almost as puzzling and isolated as when Domenico Comparetti produced the first partial transcription of it in 1878-1879, and Hermann Diels published its highly imaginative editio princeps in 1902. In view of the formidable interpretative difficulties surrounding this document, scholars who have significantly contributed to the new appraisal of the gold tablets have usually refrained from advancing any hypotheses on, or even tackling with, the Great Tablet. To be sure, in the case of this text, certainty or final results- or anything even approaching that- is more than what may ever be hoped for.² Yet, however daunting, and possibly hopeless, the task is, the Great Tablet appears to be too intriguing, and possibly too momentous, a document simply to throw in the sponge and admit defeat- as the proverb goes, "nothing ventured, nothing gained". However, since Zuntz, the only scholars who have ventured to re-examine this text systematically are Alberto Bernabé and his co-author Ana Isabel Jiménez San Cristóbal.³ They have not only produced a novel edition, but have offered an attractive original interpretation of the most baffling formal features of the text, and provided some fresh and thought-provoking comments on the content of it. In this brief contribution I will engage with some of their suggestions by making three remarks, first on the nature of the text, second on a formal feature of it, to end, third, with a highly speculative and inconclusive note.

¹ See esp. Bernabé – Jiménez San Cristóbal (2001) and (2008); Pugliese Carratelli (2003); Graf – Johnston (2007); Tzifopulos (2010) and Edmonds (2011).

² Edmonds (2011: 4) somewhat sarcastically remarks that "various editors have picked key words that fit in with their preconceived notions of [the tablet's] meaning – rather like a Rorschach blot". This seems to me somewhat exaggerated, but is an important reminder about the status of the expected results.

³ Bernabé – Jiménez San Cristóbal (2001: 183–200) and (2008: 137–150).

1. The most problematic feature of this text is that intelligible words, and occasionally conjunctions of words, are interrupted by unintelligible strings of letters. Professor Bernabé and Jiménez San Cristóbal object, rightly I think, to the idea that these unintelligible portions of the text are intrusions from another, known or unknown, language. Second, they do not accept that the parts that resist interpretation result from extremely heavy textual corruption. They argue that both the socio-cultural position of the deceased and the relatively high quality of the other tablets from the same sepulchral context militate against this hypothesis. These are powerful, even if by no means watertight, arguments. Third, they also oppose the hypothesis that the unintelligible strings of letters are voces magicae, supposed to possess special power. Rather, by reviving elements of Comparetti's interpretation,⁴ they accept that what looks gibberish is just gibberish. But these meaningless strings of letters, they suggest, serve a purpose: they were inserted into the text intentionally in order to conceal the message of the text. Only the initiate knows what to look for, and thus only he or she will be able to recover the eschatologically potent message from among the unintelligible letter sequences. Only the initiate will be able to solve the «word search puzzle» on which the salvation of his or her soul depends.

This is an intriguing and appealing suggestion – one that, nonetheless, raises a number of questions. Most importantly, we have to realize that the hypothesis in fact assumes multiple levels of concealment. For, armed with our philological skills and information about the religious context, we are, in a sense, also "initiates": we can also, if not know, at least suspect, what to look for. Yet, the fifty odd words that we are able to retrieve do not immediately deliver us any meaningful message. It is unlikely that the number of recoverable words can be dramatically multiplied, and the significant items thus obtained will never, it seems, constitute a continuous text. Occasionally, we get two-, or maximum three word-long syntactic units, but the harvest consists mainly in syntactically disconnected groups of words with or without an apparent semantic link. What the initiate could thus regain by knowing what to look for is no more than fragments of an assumed underlying continuous text. It is of course entirely conceivable that these snippets were meant to serve as aides-mémoire for the initiate to remind him or her of a text, written or orally performed, that he or she got acquainted with at some previous, presumably ritually significant, occasion. And it is also perfectly true that most comparable documents, such as the other gold leaves or the Gurôb papyrus, also presuppose and require a measure of background knowledge. The information recorded on these documents should be supplemented by elements of background knowledge and thus can they

⁴ Comparetti (1910: 12).

be made useful in the relevant ritual or eschatological situation.⁵ Yet all such texts that are sufficiently long tend to contain more extended, articulate, syntactically connected units. The results of the "word search" in the case of the Great Tablet, by contrast, appear just as discontinuous as the juxtaposed words on the Olbia bone plates, the Pherae gold tablet (OF 493) and the tablets from Crete and Macedonia, where only theonyms or the name of the dead initiate appear. On the other hand, our text is much richer and evidently wants to record a much higher amount of information. It does not merely list the *symbola*, but apparently makes reference to some *legomena* containing a mythical narrative presumably about Kore, some dromena (cf. esp. lines 7–8), their explanation in physical terms, and possibly, towards the end of the tablet, the assumed eschatological effect, the salvation of the hero. At the end of the day, the chief impediment for the uninitiated to the understanding of the text is not so much that he or she fails to solve the "word search", but much rather that he or she has not had access to the background knowledge which is required to reconstitute a meaningful continuous discourse from the snatches recorded on the tablet. In this sense, even if we can solve the "word search", we fall into the group of the uninitiated.

2. There are some differences in reading that do not make much variance for the overall interpretation of the text, yet could be significant in other respects. Take for instance the first half of the first line. Professor Bernabé prints $\Pi\rho\omega\tau\sigma\gamma\delta\nu\omega\langle\iota\rangle$ THMAITIETH Fãu $\mu\alpha\tau\rho$ í EIIA. In view of the fact that the scribe's gammas and taus are strictly indistinguishable (as we can see already in the word $\Pi POTOFONO$),⁶ I would be more inclined to read the first and last two characters of group left uninterpreted by Professor Bernabé as Γ H instead of TH.⁷ Then, the remaining letters between these two occurrences of Γ H, *i. e.* MAITIE, will be rather easy to assimilate to the interpreted word $\mu\alpha\tau\rho$ i, especially in view of the fact that it is also followed by an (otherwise uninterpreted) E. The outcome seems to be that the same meaningful items get repeated with some variation or modification.

This phenomenon appears to be a recurrent feature of the text. For at various points of the tablet we can observe the same strings of letters reappearing with some measure of transposition or modification. Towards the end of line 5, for instance, we read the following group of letters: HMEOHMEPAMEPA.⁸ This string manifestly delivers the meaningful word ἡμέρα: HMEO ἡμέρα MEPA. Yet it seems equally clear that the characters that precede and follow this meaningful item, HME and

⁵ This is to be contrasted with the Derveni Papyrus, which seeks to provide a comprehensive explanation, and does not build on any background knowledge.

⁶ I would prefer to retain the nominative to emending it into the dative.

⁷ A number of former editors, such as Diels, Murray, Zuntz, and Comparetti, already suggested to read ΓH, either in the nominative or (with an emendation) in the dative.

⁸ Bernabé reads a Φ where I see an O towards the middle of this group.

MEPA, are fragments of the same word. To quote another instance, we read the following sequence of letters towards the end of the second line: $\Pi ANTA\Sigma THINTA\Sigma TH.^9$ In this case, the letters NTA Σ TH after the sign I repeat the end of what comes before the I: $\Pi ANTA\Sigma TH$. This observation, although in no way conclusive, might in turn provide some support to construing the text as $\pi \dot{\alpha} \nu \tau$ ' $\check{\alpha} \sigma \eta$, as we read in Parmenides B 1.26, and as was proposed already by Diels.

This phenomenon of repetition with fragmentation or variation means that we can decrease the number of letters unaccounted for, without necessarily increasing the number of significant items. On the one hand, we are able to recognize, with some measure of certainty, meaningful items. On the other hand, there are strings of letters that appear to be utterly meaningless or irremediably corrupt. Yet, in between these two, there are groups of letters that we can apparently account for as variations or repetitions of elements from the first group. This consideration suggests that the typographical convention of printing the meaningful items in lower case, and the rest in upper case, does not deliver an entirely clear picture of what parts of the text are accounted for, and what parts have resisted interpretation. Moreover, the problems concerning the overall interpretation of the text may, to some extent, be tested on these cases. The suggestion that we have intrusions of another language is patently inadequate. On the other hand, this does not seem to be a very typical form of systematic textual corruption, and certainly is not in evidence on the other tablets. The main remaining options are, I think, repetition with some ritual or magical purpose (cf. e.g. OF 492 or the Olbia vase base), or the type of encrypting suggested by Professor Bernabé.

3. The possibility that the theonym Phanes turns up in this text is momentous in itself and Professor Bernabé's stimulating remarks invite further speculation.¹⁰ First, as far as I am aware, this might be the earliest occurrence of the name in such a context. Moreover, I agree with Prof. Bernabé and his co-author that it is much more probable that the Protogonos mentioned together with Gaia at the very beginning of the text is Ouranos, just as in the Derveni Papyrus (at least on the interpretation, Professor Bernabé and I

⁹ Let me take this opportunity to rectify Bernabé's and Jiménez San Cristóbal's text and report on this point. In their most recent edition (2008: 263), they continue this group of letters, including the last Σ TH from the group 'quoted' above, as Σ THP $\Omega\Sigma$ ATOΠE. They report in the apparatus that the string HP $\Omega\Sigma$ is my reading, supplanting the reading HNI Σ of previous editors. They add in the commentary (2008: 143, n. 25) that the term $\tilde{\eta}\rho\omega\varsigma$ would be difficult to fit in the context. However, what I have suggested is to read HP $\Omega\Sigma$ instead of the generally accepted reading HNI Σ *not in this line*, but in line 8 (where it is accepted and reported correctly by them). In line 2 I don't propose to read HP $\Omega\Sigma$, but accept the (uninterpreted) HNI Σ of previous editors.

¹⁰ Admittedly, this is not the only possible construal. Diels prints ἐφάνης and a oneletter emendation would yield (σ)τεφάνη or (σ)τεφάνης.

share). If this is accepted, it follows that there could be versions of the Orphic theogony in which the figure of Phanes did appear, yet not in the role of the primordial divinity anterior to Ouranos that he plays in the *Rhapsodies*. Professor Bernabé, however, goes further. He suggests that just as in the Orphic verse quoted by Diodorus Siculus (1.12.3), Phanes is here identified with the sun and Dionysus. I fear that the identification with Dionysus in the tablet is hard to confirm on this basis. On the other hand, the sun seems to play a prominent role in this part of the text; besides, the assimilation of a god called Phanes with the sun does not require much imagination.

These considerations, in turn, might shed some new light on the notorious question of what Zeus swallowed in the poem commented on in the Derveni Papyrus. For the debate has mostly been framed in terms of an exclusive alternative: Zeus swallowed *either* the *aidoion* of Ouranos (which has nothing to do with Phanes) *or* the primordial divinity Phanes as he/she appears in the *Rhapsodies*. The possible reference to Phanes in the Great Tablet might however remind us that there can be a number of possibilities besides these two options. It is remarkable, first of all, that on either interpretation, the object of swallowing is explicitly identified with the sun in the Derveni text (col. XIII and XVI). If the object of swallowing is Phanes, then we get the same identification that Prof. Bernabé suggests for the Great Tablet (without Dionysus).

In the other case the situation is more complex. It is generally assumed that the identification of the *aidoion* to the sun is part of the allegorical interpretation of the Derveni commentator. It might however well be the case that Ouranus' phallus got assimilated to the sun already in the poem. Indeed, Prof. Bernabé has repeatedly suggested that the severed phallus remained suspended between sky and earth during the reign of Cronus, before it got gulped down by Zeus, and that this could help the commentator in identifying it with the sun.¹¹ But it seems to me that with this admittedly verv bizarre image we get so close to assimilating the phallus to the sun, that we hardly need our ingenious commentator to take this exegetical step. We could, moreover, thus have a clear answer to what happened to the phallus all through Cronus' rule. It is thus conceivable that the *aidoion* and the sun got assimilated, explicitly or implicitly, already in the poem,¹² or at least that it was an obvious and relatively widespread interpretation. Now, if both Phanes and the *aidoion* could be identified with the sun in Orphic texts, as Diodorus and possibly the Great Tablet reminds us,¹³ then the assimilation to the sun can bridge the gap between the *aidoion* of Ouranos and Phanes.¹⁴

¹¹ See, most recently, Bernabé (2008: 299) and (2010: 71).

¹² Cf. Calame (2008: 858).

¹³ See also Procl. in Ti. E prooem., III 169.22.

¹⁴ For a different attempt to "bridging the gap", see Brisson (2003).

It seems thus that we can have a middle position between the two interpretative alternatives – with the important difference that Phanes should not be conceived, for these versions, as anterior to the first-born Ouranos.

The immediate sequel of the text after the mention of Phanes is also intriguing. The characters are fairly easily legible and yield the sequence ΦΑΝΗΣΠΑΜΜΗΣΤΟΙΜΟΙΡΑΙΣΣ. Bernabé and Jiménez San Cristóbal prefers to emend the middle part into $\pi \dot{\alpha} \mu \nu \eta \sigma \tau \sigma_i$, 'who remember all'. Yet, apart from this being the more conservative construal, what might speak in favour of keeping $\pi \dot{\alpha} \mu \mu \eta \sigma \tau \sigma i$ (possibly by emending the ending) or some other derivative of $\mu\eta\sigma\tau\omega\rho$ is that the word $\mu\eta\sigma\tau\omega\rho$ (in the form $\mu\epsilon\sigma\tau\omega\rho$) turns up again towards the end of the penultimate line of the text. By evoking Homeric parallels, Professor Bernabé and his co-author suggest that the term here refers to Zeus who is about to engage in an incestuous relationship with Kore (2008: 148). Thus, a word referring to a defining intellectual capacity of Zeus seems to be mentioned in line 3, in the close proximity of Phanes. This connection might remind us of the relationship between Metis, another object of swallowing (cf. Hes. Th. 886-890), and Zeus' enhanced intelligence (cf. μήτιετα PDerv. col. XV 6). And, as is well known, Metis has also been identified in some fragments of the Rhapsodies with Phanes. What is more, the next meaningful unit in line 3 is $\sigma \dot{\nu} \kappa \lambda \nu \tau \dot{\epsilon} \delta \alpha \tilde{\mu} \omega \nu$. This might in turn evoke the problem of the identification of the daimon of the Orphic poem quoted in the Derveni Papyrus (col. VIII 5)- this daimon has sometimes been interpreted as the divinity who will be swallowed by Zeus, be it Metis or Phanes. Interestingly, in one of the texts that identify Metis and Phanes, all these key terms occur together: $\pi\rho\tilde{\omega}\tau\sigma\nu\delta\alpha\mu\sigma\omega\sigma\omega\nu'$ Μῆτιν σπέρμα φέροντα θεῶν κλυτόν, ὄν τε Φάνητα / πρωτόγονον μάκαρες κάλεον κατὰ μακρὸν Ὅλυμπον (OF 140 = Procl. in Ti. I 451).

Admittedly, each step in this reasoning is highly speculative and inconclusive. Nonetheless, what is shows, I hope, is that even if we cannot say anything about the "Great Tablet" with certainty, this intriguing text might still trigger of speculations that can widen the range of interpretative possibilities relevant for this and other related documents. At any rate, what the "Great Tablet" evinces, on any interpretation, skeptical, optimistic, or fantastic, is the remarkably multifarious nature of texts and religious phenomena connected to Orphism.¹⁵

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