

EVIDENCE OF ORPHIC MYSTERY CULT IN  
ARCHAIC MACEDONIAN AND THRACIAN BURIALS

by

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## Abstract

Gold foil is found in numerous burials in the Mediterranean dating to the early Mycenaean period and the material was used as clothing attachments, jewelry, headbands, wreaths, and other decorative adornments. One of the more distinctive uses of gold foil was as a mouth-plate (or *epistomion*), which is an ellipsoidal or rhomboidal piece of gold foil placed on the mouth of the deceased in a burial. An apparent increase in artifact occurrence in Macedonia during the archaic period was the impetus for this thesis, as a change in grave goods suggests a change in funerary rituals. This change may be linked to the rise of local private cults, including mystery cults, that took place in the archaic period.

Furthermore, these artifacts are stylistically, materially, and contextually similar to the later Classical and Hellenistic periods use of gold foil for the inscribed Orphic gold tablets. The inscribed Orphic tablets have clear links to mystery cults and are related to both the initiation and the afterlife expectations of the deceased.

Taking a selection of the uninscribed gold foil mouth-plates found in archaic burials of Macedonia and Thrace, this thesis examines the potential links between these two practices and asks whether the uninscribed gold foil mouth-plates can be assigned to the category of 'things Orphic', or if they are part of an unrelated burial tradition. While it is difficult to arrive at a definitive classification for these artifacts at the moment, this thesis offers a starting point to place the archaic mouth-plates in their proper social, cultural, and ritual context.

## **Preface**

This dissertation is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Lisa Tweten.

## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Preface.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	iv
List of Tables.....	vi
List of Figures.....	vii
Acknowledgments.....	viii
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1	
Introduction.....	6
Distribution of <i>Epistomia</i> .....	7
The Gold Masks.....	10
Social Significance.....	12
Iconography.....	15
<i>Lamellae</i> and <i>Epistomia</i> .....	20
Mnemonic, Proxy, and “Silent” <i>Epistomia</i> .....	22
Literacy and Writing.....	24
Symbolic Muteness.....	27
Chapter 2	
Definitions and Evidence of Orphism.....	32
The Derveni Papyrus.....	36

The Olbian Bone Tablets.....	37
Initiation Rites.....	40
Dionysiac or Orphic?.....	43
Chapter 3	
Introduction.....	47
Ruler Cults.....	49
Local Cults in Macedonia.....	51
Conclusion.....	56
Bibliography.....	59
Appendix A.....	66

## List of Tables

Table 1.....	8
Table 2.....	8

## List of Figures

Figure 1.....	17
Figure 2.....	22

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## Introduction

This thesis examines a selection of the uninscribed gold foil mouth-plates found in archaic burials of Macedonia and Thrace and asks whether the artifacts in question can be assigned to the category of ‘things Orphic’, or if they are part of an unrelated burial tradition.

Gold foil is a common component in burials going back to the early Minoan period; the material was used as clothing attachments, jewelry, headbands, wreaths, and other adornments. Among them are artifacts called *lamellae* and *epistomia* that are considered to be symbols of religious beliefs; the best known of these are the Orphic gold tablets that are presumed to indicate initiation in an Orphic cult. However, the terms *lamella*, *epistomion*, and ‘Orphic’ all need to be defined before we can proceed.

The *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Gender Studies* is one of the few sources to provide a definition of *lamellae*, which it describes as “thin sheets of metal that are inscribed and then folded and placed inside a capsule to be worn, usually around the neck.”<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this study, *lamella* will be used to refer to gold foil sheets with text, regardless of placement.<sup>2</sup> Gold foil sheets have also been found in burials situated at the base of the skull, and these are typically referred to as *epistomia* because they were placed on the deceased's mouth; Fritz Graf and Sarah Iles Johnston use the term sparingly in the first chapter of *Ritual Texts for the*

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<sup>1</sup> Nicola Denzey Lewis, “Material Culture: Votives, Lamellae and Defixiones, and Amulets.” *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Gender Studies*. O'Brien, Julia M., and Oxford Reference Library. (Oxford; New York; Oxford University Press, 2014),

<http://www.oxfordreference.com.ezproxy.library.ubc.ca/view/10.1093/acref:obso/9780199836994.001.0001/acref-9780199836994-e-31?rsk=1&rskey=WwCr8f&result=1>.

<sup>2</sup> Fritz Graf and Sarah Iles Johnston, *Ritual Texts for the Afterlife: Orpheus and the Bacchic Gold Tablets*. (2 ed. (New York; London: Routledge, 2013), 4. An example of a *lamella* is the inscribed tablet from Hipponion which was in a woman's burial, folded on her chest and may have been worn around the neck on a string.

*Afterlife: Orpheus and the Bacchic Gold Tablets*, seemingly only in cases where the placement of the artifact is known to have been on or inside the skull upon excavation. By these definitions, an artifact can be both a *lamella* and an *epistomion*, as is the case with no. 36a in Graf and Johnston's study, which represents an “undisclosed number of gold tablets from fifteen cist-graves...each placed in the mouth of the deceased.”<sup>3</sup> Yannis Tzifopoulos, however, frequently uses the terms *lamella* and *epistomion* interchangeably when describing the gold tablets in his 2010 publication, *Paradise Earned: The Bacchic-Orphic Gold Lamellae of Crete*, and in at least one case uses both *epistomion* and *lamella* to refer to a rectangular sheet of gold foil with no evidence of an inscription that was found *in situ* in the woman's pelvic bones.<sup>4</sup> There exist, then, some distinctions of terminology in the scholarship on Orphic tablets, *lamellae* and *epistomia*.

This thesis focuses on *epistomia* without text and the evidence presented is based on gold foil artifacts described as ‘mouth-pieces’, ‘mouth-covers’ or *epistomia*. In addition, I draw on the 2004 MA thesis of Stavroula Oikonomou, who focused exclusively on gold foil known to have been used as a face cover, with the exception of the pieces in museums or private collections for which there is no provenance or excavation data available. While I have only included in my count of *epistomia* those artifacts which are reported as mouth-plates, mouth-covers, or *epistomia*, I cannot state with complete certainty that the terminology used in the excavation reports that form the background of this study are as strict in their designation of ‘mouth-plate’ as Graf and Johnston are in their publication.

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<sup>3</sup> Graf and Johnston 2013, 46.

<sup>4</sup> Yannis Tzifopoulos, *Paradise Earned: The Bacchic-Orphic Gold Lamellae of Crete*. (Vol. 23. Washington, D.C; Cambridge, Mass: Center for Hellenic Studies, 2010), 31.

*Epistomia* are recovered from archaic burials frequently enough that Zosia Archibald has called them the “single most regular component of elite burials.”<sup>5</sup> A clear increase in the number of *epistomia* is seen in Macedonia during the archaic period in particular, though similar artifacts are found across the Mediterranean from the Bronze Age to the Roman period. Orphic scholar Yannis Tzifopoulos accepts that gold foil face coverings first appear in 5000 BCE through to the second and third centuries CE, though he distinguishes them from the inscribed *epistomia* and considers the practice of “covering the mouth or the whole face of the deceased” as a broad category of funerary rites, of which Orphic *epistomia* are a subset.<sup>6</sup>

The increase in artifact occurrence in Macedonia was the impetus for this thesis, as the change in grave goods suggests a change in funerary rituals that may be linked to the rise of local private cults, including mystery cults, that took place in the archaic period. The first chapter presents the distribution of the archaic Macedonian *epistomia* and examines the iconography of the embossed gold foil sheets. The second chapter delves into the material evidence of ‘Orphism’ in more detail, and provides an overview of current scholarship on ‘Orphism’, while the third chapter offers some suggestions as to how the *epistomia* under study may be interpreted in relation to the ‘Orphic’ material.

As to whether or not the uninscribed artifacts can be included in the category of ‘things Orphic’, let me preface this by saying the criteria for such categorization is not even as clear as the distinction between *lamellae* and *epistomia*. Nearly every publication on the subject of ‘Orphism’ begins with an attempt to define the term, and the sheer number of publications in the

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<sup>5</sup> Zosia Archibald, *The Odrysian Kingdom of Thrace: Orpheus Unmasked*. (Oxford; New York: Clarendon Press, 1998), 171.

<sup>6</sup> Tzifopoulos 2010, 21.

last ten years alone prove there is little consensus across the board. Robert Parker provided one of the clearest summations of Orphism when he wrote in 1995 that “one might be tempted to start by defining it as a religious movement associated, above all, with asceticism and with unusual doctrines about the relation of this life and the next. But even a formula that seems so inoffensively general assumes that there was a thing Orphism and that it was a movement; and doubts on just these scores lead the cautious not to use the word except within inverted commas”.<sup>7</sup>

For my part, the result of much investigation into the terminology and evidence has resulted in little certainty. The term ‘Orphic’ is used for material that alludes, either in text or iconography<sup>8</sup>, to an eschatological view that is associated with the fragmentary corpus of hexametrical poems ascribed to ‘Orpheus’.<sup>9</sup> That is, each piece of evidence that suggests ‘Orphism’ is defined as such by its relationship to the other potential ‘Orphic’ evidence. However, as Graf states, the “textual foundation for any position has become much clearer” since the publication of the Derveni papyrus and the number of tablet texts that have been excavated since the end of the nineteenth century excavations at Thuri.<sup>10</sup> Graf further asserts that “when religions are understood as systems, the Bacchic mysteries are a sub-system among many others, with Orpheus ‘the singer, magician, initiator and visitor to Hades’ belonging to more than one of

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<sup>7</sup> Robert B. Parker, “Early Orphism.” *The Greek World*. ed. Anton Powell. (London: Routledge, 1995), 483.

<sup>8</sup> The southern Italian Apulian vases with underworld scenes are key sources for the kind of iconography categorized as Orphic.

<sup>9</sup> M. L. West, *The Orphic Poems*. (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 260. The surviving fragments date largely from the Imperial Roman period, but West argues that the Protogonos Theogony, at least, was composed around 500 BCE, and that this period is the likely contender for at least some of the fragments attributed to Orpheus.

<sup>10</sup> Graf and Johnston 2013, 187.

them.”<sup>11</sup> This definition that states Orpheus had a connection with many of the mystery cults in antiquity is key for this study. Under the definition provided above, if it can be reasonably proven that the artifacts under study represent an affiliation or initiation in a mystery cult, it is possible the cult had some Orphic influence. Therefore we are looking for iconographic references on the embossed *epistomia* that suggest an ‘Orphic’ association. This will not provide definitive proof that the artifacts in question are Orphic, but offers a starting point to place the archaic *epistomia* its proper social, cultural and ritual context.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

## Chapter 1

The inscribed Orphic tablets offer tantalizing avenues for philological and theological study and scholars have extensively covered their meaning and interpretation. Conversely, the uninscribed mouthpieces have been somewhat neglected in scholarship to date. One can only assume that they are seen as less fruitful avenues for study because they lack text.<sup>12</sup> Yet all artifacts leave behind clues as to their use, symbolism and meaning whether or not they have texts inscribed on them. Yannis Tzifopoulos has included a selection of three uninscribed *epistomia* in his work, *Paradise Earned: The Bacchic-Orphic Gold Lamellae of Crete*, and asks whether or not they should be included in the reckoning of Orphic evidence, though he too finds it difficult to determine with any confidence that they are Orphic. Tzifopoulos is primarily looking at *lamellae* from Cretan burials dated between the first century BCE and the first century CE from sites within 30 kilometers of each other. Nine of the tablets in Tzifopoulos' study are inscribed with texts and three are blank. Finding artifacts related in style, material, location, and context provides a firm basis for asking whether or not they are related.

For this thesis, however, the potential link between uninscribed *epistomia* and the inscribed Orphic tablets is less clear than in Tzifopoulos' study. To clarify, when I use the term "uninscribed", I simply mean that there is no text; the mouthpieces from Macedonia and Thrace are generally embossed or decorated with geometric or floral motifs, and less often with animals or mythological creatures. The sheer number of these artifacts found in burials, and their placement on the mouth, suggests to me something more symbolically significant than mere adornment. That *epistomia* are similar to the inscribed *lamellae* in terms of the gold foil material,

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<sup>12</sup> Graf and Johnston 2013, 18, 28, and 46. Graf and Johnston mention a couple of uninscribed tablets, or tablets inscribed with just a name, but are focused on understanding the meaning of the longer texts and the potential meaning of these tablets is left largely unexplored.

the shape (rectangular, ellipsoidal or leaf-shaped), and the fact that both categories of artifact seem to be exclusively found in burials suggest there is a connection worth investigating. The first question before us, then, is how common were the *epistomia*?

### **Distribution of *Epistomia***

Stavroula Oikonomou's research is invaluable as an overview of the Aegean practice of *epistomion* burials, as no other study has collected the published references to all such artifacts. It is not my intention to repeat the entirety of Oikonomou's research here, though the table below summarizes the distribution of gold foil face coverings found across the Mediterranean world from the Neolithic to the Roman period.<sup>13</sup> Oikonomou's study includes items in private collections (Table 2) which cannot be assigned with any certainty to a particular region due to lack of provenance, though they are assigned dates based on stylistic grounds.<sup>14</sup> The majority of *epistomia* that have a provenance, however, come from just two regions – Cyprus and Macedonia. Excavations on Cyprus have yielded a total of 65 *epistomia*, 54 of which are dated between 1450-1100 BCE.

Macedonia yields 47 *epistomia* from the Archaic period according to Oikonomou's research. When the evidence published between 2002 and 2014 is added, the number of mouth-plates from Macedonia jumps to 105.

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<sup>13</sup> Tzifopoulos 2010, 43-52. Face coverings here refers to *epistomia*, eye-covers and masks. For later use of similar artifacts, Tzifopoulos covers the practice as seen in Cretan burials through the Byzantine period.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Laffineur, "Collection Paul Canellopoulos. Bijoux en or grecs et romains." *Bulletin De Correspondance Hellénique* 104 (1): 345. 1980. Pierre Amandry. *Collection Hélène Stathatos. Les bijoux antiques*. Strasbourg: l'Institut d'Archéologie de l'Université de Strasbourg. 1953.

Period	Dates	Region													
		Bulgaria	Cyclades	Macedonia	Cyprus	Crete	Rhodes	Attica	Boeotia-Thebe	Turkey	Iraq	Syria	Thrace	Black Sea	Italy
Neolithic	7000 - 3000 BCE	2	1	2											
Bronze Age - Iron Age	3000 - 1100 BCE			2	54	1		1			1				
Protogeometric Period	1100 - 900 BCE														
Geometric Period	900 - 700 BCE			8	1		4	1							
Archaic Period	700 - 480 BCE			68	1			2	1	1					2
Classical Period	480 - 323 BCE			15	3										
Hellenistic Period	323 - 146 BCE			7	2			1			1				
Roman Period	146 BCE - 330 CE			1	1	5					3	10	1	6	
Undated	N/A			2	3										
<b>Total</b>		<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>105</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>2</b>

Table 1. Distribution of gold-foil sheets, or *ελάσματα*, including both masks and *epistomia*.

Period	Dates	Museums / Collections - No provenance			
		Kanellopoulos Coll.	Stathanos Coll.	Benake Museum	Private Coll.
Neolithic	7000 - 3000 BCE				
Bronze Age - Iron Age	3000 - 1100 BCE	1	1		
Protogeometric Period	1100 - 900 BCE				
Geometric Period	900 - 700 BCE	3			
Archaic Period	700 - 480 BCE	15	9	2	
Classical Period	480 - 323 BCE		2		1
Hellenistic Period	323 - 146 BCE				
Roman Period	146 BCE - 330 CE				
Undated	N/A				
<b>Total</b>		<b>19</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>

Table 2. Gold foil *ελάσματα* with no provenance. The archaic period has the greatest number at 24, though these dates are uncertain given the lack of provenance.

This region shows the longest period of consistent use, from the Geometric to the Hellenistic period, whereas the Cypriot mouth-plate burials appear in large quantities throughout the Late Helladic period, but only one-to-three finds represent each period after that peak.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Stavroula Oikonomou, *Χρυσά και αργυρά επιστομια*. (MA Dissertation, University of Crete. 2004), 123. For Oikonomou's study, no judgment is made as to whether the items are *epistomia* or *lamellae*; all are *ελάσματα* (sheets). Robert Laffineur would likely designate at least some of these as jewelry. Oikonomou's data is hampered, as mine is, by the lack of published excavation details as to the exact placement of these artifacts when the grave was first opened. I. S. Lemos, *The Protogeometric Aegean: The Archaeology of the Late Eleventh and Tenth Centuries BC*. (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press. 2002), 130. The Cypriot *epistomia* are thought by

It is highly unlikely that the gold foil face coverings all reflect the same burial tradition across such diverse periods and regions. Classification of the artifacts based solely on material and context can only take us so far, especially when we consider that gold face coverings of some sort are found in many cultures around the world. For example, there are gold masks from the Gurugyam Cemetery in Ngari, Tibet from the 2nd- and 3rd-centuries CE. The mountaintop location and inclusion of rare goods, such as wood (a rare resource on the high plateau), suggest to the archaeologists at the site that these are noble burials.<sup>16</sup> Another example comes from the 1990 - 1997 Peruvian excavations under Izumi Shimada, who has discovered elite burials of individuals wearing “gold masks identical to the face of the Sicán Deity.”<sup>17</sup> These burials are from the Lambayeque region of Peru, dated between 750 and 1375 CE, and the masked individuals in these tombs were decapitated, which should immediately put to rest any argument that there was a cultural connection between these masks and those found in the Mediterranean.

What the Peruvian and Tibetan finds suggest, rather, is that the practice of covering the faces of the dead with gold is not unique to any single culture. The specific symbolism is unique to each culture, however, and this must be kept in mind when comparing the evidence from archaic Macedonia to the Orphic tablets.

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some scholars to closely resemble the Mycenaean practice of impressed rosette gold foils, as seen in the Shaft Graves.

<sup>16</sup> Tong Tao, “New Discoveries at Gurugyam Cemetery and Chu Vthag Cemetery in Ngari, Tibet”, *Institute of Archaeology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences*, accessed July 28, 2015, [http://www.kaogu.cn/en/Special\\_Events/Top\\_10\\_Archaeological\\_Discoveries\\_in\\_China\\_2014/2015/0410/49819.htm](http://www.kaogu.cn/en/Special_Events/Top_10_Archaeological_Discoveries_in_China_2014/2015/0410/49819.htm)

<sup>17</sup> Izumi Shimada, Ken-ichi Shinoda, Julie Farnum, Robert Corruccini, and Hirokatsu Watanabe. “An Integrated Analysis of Pre-Hispanic Mortuary Practices: A Middle Sicán Case Study.” *Current Anthropology* 45 no.3 (2004) : 369-402.

## The Gold Masks

The Aegean practice of using gold foil to cover the faces of the deceased goes back to the late neolithic period, as evidenced by the discovery of clay masks covered in gold foil strips in three graves from Varna, Bulgaria.<sup>18</sup> These masks have been dated to the end of the 5th millennium BCE, and Zosia Archibald describes the masks as having “ellipsoidal gold sheets with perforated ends...found on the brow and below the nose of clay funerary masks.”<sup>19</sup> The shape – ellipsoidal strips rather than gold sheets large enough to cover the entire mask – is similar to the *epistomia*, and Aikaterini Despini calls them “harbingers” of the archaic period practice of placing *epistomia* on the mouths of the deceased.<sup>20</sup> Yet the use of a clay mask is unlike any other find in our study.

Oikonomou includes both masks and mouth-plates in her research under the term “ελάσματα”. The masks are from the cemeteries at Trebeniste in Yugoslavia, Sindos in Thessalonike, and Archontiko in Macedonia, the earliest of which is dated to 560 BCE and the latest to the end of the 5th-century BCE.<sup>21</sup> While some of the masks in question are made of a single sheet of gold foil, others are constructed of two or more sheets connected by thin gold wire or bands.<sup>22</sup> In the Archontiko burials, masks seem to be reserved for the wealthiest graves, possibly due to the associated costs of having such a delicate object constructed. The compromise at Archontiko seems to be to create separate eye-covers and mouth-covers, often

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<sup>18</sup> Oikonomou 2004, 92.

<sup>19</sup> Archibald 1998, 171.

<sup>20</sup> Aikaterini Despini, Wolfgang Schürmann, and Jean-Robert Gisler, 2009. “Gold Funerary Masks.” *Antike Kunst* 52 (2009), 21.

<sup>21</sup> Oikonomou 2004, 111.

<sup>22</sup> Pavlina Ilieva, and Petia Penkova, “Funeral Golden Mask and Hand with a Ring the Necropolis of Trebeniste.” *ArchaeoSciences*, (2009), 33. Figs. 1 and 5 show the full mask from the front and the band used to attach the nose piece.

large enough to cover the cheeks and chin, while leaving the nose exposed.<sup>23</sup> The burials that only contain eye-covers and mouthpieces, or mouthpieces alone, are found in the second-highest classification of burials, so in this case the amount of gold foil face-covering, or the complexity of its construction, seems to be linked to social status.

The masks from the three sites show stylistic differences; the Trebeniste masks have embossed facial features bound by a stylized spiral border, some of the masks at Sindos are representations of faces while others have embossed designs of rosettes, and the Archontiko masks have been embossed with a variety of images, primarily rosettes. Though the graves at Trebeniste contained only masks or multiple sheets of gold used to cover the entire face, the masks at Archontiko and Sindos were found in the same cemeteries as the *epistomia* and are contemporaneous, with similar designs.<sup>24</sup> Why gold foil artifacts appear in burials at this time is harder to answer. Despini maintains that the practice was introduced from the east, through Euboean and Rhodian contact; both cultures had mouth-plates and gold foil artifacts as early as the 8th-century BCE with motifs similar to those in Macedonia.<sup>25</sup>

I would further suggest that this practice is inextricably tied to the influx of wealth evident in the region during this period. Though all three sites have interpreted this particular funerary practice in different ways, the connection between Sindos, Archontiko and Trebeniste is clear, as all three sites are near the trade route that later became the Via Egnatia. An increase in trade would have flowed through those three sites and provides an answer as to why wealthy

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<sup>23</sup> Chrysostomou and Chrysostomou, *The Macedonians of Archontiko Pella: The Truth of Things*. Folklore-Παράδοση-Πολιτισμός, accessed September 27, 2014. <http://alexpella.blogspot.ca/2014/09/blog-post.html>. The images of the Archontiko excavations seem to make it clear that the intention of using the eye- and mouth-covers together was still to cover as much of the face as possible.

<sup>24</sup> Chrysostomou and Chrysostomou 2012, 505; Oikonomou 2004, 109, 111; Nikola Theodossiev, "The Dead with Golden Faces II: Other Evidence and Connections." *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* 19 no.2 (2000), 182.

<sup>25</sup> Despini 2009, 36.

burials appear suddenly in the archaic period when Iron Age burials in the same sites had generally poor deposits of local pottery and simple bronze jewelry. With increased wealth comes greater social stratification, and the desire to display that status in life and in death. Tracing the cultural connections back to the first instance of gold masks or mouth-plates in burials is ultimately not necessary to answer the question of why they appear. The independent Tibetan and Peruvian instances show that this is not a singular innovation that had to be transmitted through cultural connections. As Nikola Theodossiev so rightly states, the head is “the most sacred human part” and gold is the most precious metal.<sup>26</sup> Gold has more than just sacred uses, however, and its social uses must be considered before we assign the artifacts under study to the category of sacred objects.

### **Social Significance**

The social impact of an extravagant burial is addressed by Ian Morris in relation to Solon’s funerary legislation for Athens at the beginning of the sixth century, which also sheds light on the meaning behind the wealthy Macedonian burials.<sup>27</sup> While Athenian legislators tried to restrict funerals to the household and immediate family, Macedonian burials were becoming increasingly extravagant in their displays, exploiting the opportunity for a public display of power and status. Lavish funerals were used “as a symbol of power and status, but, most importantly...it was understood by the community as a whole as an overt statement on the social order and the relative significance of its members.”<sup>28</sup> The northern region was under tribal or

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<sup>26</sup> Theodossiev 2000, 176.

<sup>27</sup> Ian Morris, *Burial and Ancient Society: The Rise of the Greek City-state*. (Cambridge [Cambridgeshire]; New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 51.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

dynastic rule, so this did not pose the same sort of threat as it did in Athens; rather, it was an opportunity to assert stability of leadership. The clearest example of this comes from Archontiko, where the necropolis was in use from the Iron Age to the Classical period.

The archaic burials in the west cemetery at Archontiko have yielded a greater concentration of gold mouth-plates than any other site thus far excavated and the site has received a great deal of media attention in recent years for the wealth of gold artifacts recovered.<sup>29</sup> Drs. Anastasia and Pavlos Chrysostomou have been in charge of the site since 1992 and rescue excavations began on the necropolis in 2000 and continued through 2010.<sup>30</sup> Of the 1,001 graves, nearly half are from the Archaic period: 223 males, 213 females and 38 indeterminate burials.<sup>31</sup>

The site is home to the so-called “warrior” graves, which are a series of male graves with iron weapons and imported armour that the Drs. Chrysostomou have divided into four classifications based on the quality and quantity of grave goods. The fourth classification typically contains “a golden mask, shield, helmet, sword, gold and silver jewelry from head to foot.”<sup>32</sup> The third class has neither shield nor mask, but does have gold mouth-plates and eye coverings, with a similar complement of weapons.<sup>33</sup> The 2009 issue of *Archaeological Reports* lists seven 3rd-class warrior burials, and two female burials with mouthpieces.<sup>34</sup> The second and first class of warrior graves contain fewer and poorer grave goods, and there are no gold mouth-plates or jewelry of any kind noted in the published report.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> James Whitley, “Archaeology in Greece, 2004-2005.” *Archaeological Reports* 51 (2004), 59.

<sup>30</sup> Chrysostomou and Chrysostomou 2012, 505.

<sup>31</sup> Chrysostomou and Chrysostomou 2012, 491.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Chrysostomou and Chrysostomou 2010.

<sup>34</sup> Catherine Morgan, Robert K. Pitt, and Todd Whitelaw, “Archaeology in Greece 2008–2009.” *Archaeological Reports* 55 (2008), 58. This is one of the few issues to mention a specific number of mouthpieces.

<sup>35</sup> Chrysostomou and Chrysostomou 2010.

The female burials are grouped into categories that roughly correspond to their male counterparts; the wealthiest graves have masks, the third class has mouth-plates and the second and first class have no *epistomia* and less jewelry. Gender is determined in these burials from the skeletal remains and grave goods, but also from the orientation of the body; women are typically buried with their head to the east, north or south and men face the west, north or south.<sup>36</sup> The masks, mouthpieces, and eye coverings from these graves are “decorated with floral and geometric motifs, animals and astral symbols,” though the rosette is by far the most common motif.<sup>37</sup> In the opinion of the excavators, these artifacts function simultaneously as markers of the social hierarchy and as religiously symbolic pieces, given the association of gold with immortality due to the fact that it will not corrode, rust, or tarnish, and it cannot be destroyed by fire.<sup>38</sup> Zosia Archibald agrees and notes the “close symbolic association between gold and ideas of immortality”, and that the placement of it is consciously connected with the five senses.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, I agree with Oikonomou’s assertion that the duration and geographic spread of the practice points to a powerful concept of the afterlife.<sup>40</sup>

Some scholars, however, maintain that these artifacts were jewelry or clothing adornments.<sup>41</sup> There is a great deal of support for this latter approach; numerous gold foil rosettes, as well as strips adorning helmets, breastplates, and sword hilts were found in burials with *epistomia*, especially those from the Archontiko necropolis. Robert Laffineur’s work is one

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. Even though this cemetery has the most published and publicly available data, in the form of blog posts and newspaper announcements as well as Chrysostomou's 2012 overview of the site, there is as yet no breakdown of the distribution of mouth-plates and eye-covers, although the number of masks excavated (7) to date is confirmed in the publications.

<sup>38</sup> Chrysostomou and Chrysostomou 2012, 498.

<sup>39</sup> Archibald 1998, 172.

<sup>40</sup> Oikonomou 2004, 92.

<sup>41</sup> Chrysostomou and Chrysostomou 2012, 499; Laffineur 1980, 336.

of the most comprehensive studies on the techniques and iconography of gold foil artifacts. He believes there is evidence that such items were sometimes reworked, suggesting that they were worn in life, which lends support to the theory that they were clothing adornments. Yet even Laffineur accepts the oval and leaf-shaped gold foils in the Canellopoulos Collection as mouth-plates and charmingly describes them as funerary ornaments that are often interpreted to indicate a “destination magique.”<sup>42</sup> For example, item 15 in the collection is a small gold leaf, quite similar to the leaf-shaped *epistomia* that contain Orphic texts, though in this case the foil is decorated with striated lines at either end and six circles in two registers in the middle.<sup>43</sup>

Laffineur suggests the rectangular or rhomboid plates, which in some cases match what other scholars categorize as mouth-plates, were worn as pectoral ornaments.<sup>44</sup> If Laffineur is correct, these would have been attached to clothing for important ceremonial events, in much the same way modern people adorn themselves in their finest jewels for special occasions. The ‘special occasions’ could very well have been ritual or religious occasions, and the gold foil attachments may have been emblematic rather than purely decorative.

## Iconography

One of the most prevalent iconographic elements on the *epistomia* is the rosette, appearing on at least 21 of the 38 archaic *epistomia* from Koufalia, Stavroupoli, Archontiko,

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<sup>42</sup> Laffineur, 1980, 354. Despite the ambiguity of “a magical destination”, I believe Laffineur is referring to a particular understanding of the afterlife that suggests pious individuals could expect a relatively pleasant existence.

<sup>43</sup> Laffineur 1980, 353, Fig 13.

<sup>44</sup> Laffineur 1980, 366. The plates in the Canellopoulos Collection range from 8-13 cm in length and 4-6 cm at the highest point, generally the middle. Small holes punched in some of the gold foil artifacts suggest they would have been sewn onto clothing. There is one *epistomion* in the Canellopoulos Collection (figure 33) that has small holes punched in either end as well, suggesting it could have been tied to a shroud or held in place with a string. See Tzifopoulos, 2010, 90 for his proposed method of fastening *epistomia*.

Pella, Karabournaki, Athanasios, Sindos and Amphipolis.<sup>45</sup> There are some deviations; the male burial in grave T742 at Archontiko had two rampant lions embossed on it, and T417 had a lion walking to the right with a tree. This one in particular recalls the one archaic mouth-plate from Aiani, #51, with a similar motif of a lion and what Oikonomou has called a sacred tree.<sup>46</sup>

However, for clear depictions of what these artifacts looked like, the best evidence comes from Laffineur's 1980 catalogue of the Canellopoulos Collection.<sup>47</sup> There are 15 Archaic period mouth-plates in the collection and, while the artifacts in this private collection have no provenance, they are still instructive as examples of the embossed details common to the archaic mouth-plates. They show a range of geometric patterns and emblems which coincide with the recorded embossed designs seen on the *epistomia* from archaic Macedonia, and are generally of an elongated diamond shape with rounded corners, though the frailty of the gold foil means that many of them have torn or ragged edges.

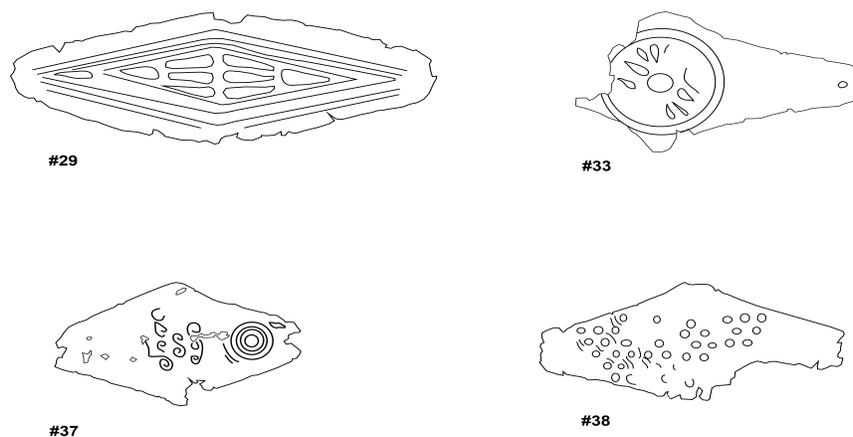


Figure 1. Gold foil *epistomia* from the Canellopoulos Collection. Figure 29 measures 13.9cm in length; figure 33 is 9.4cm, figure 37 is 8.2cm and figure 38 is 10.1cm.

<sup>45</sup> Oikonomou 2004, 106-110.

<sup>46</sup> Oikonomou 2004, 109.

<sup>47</sup> Laffineur 1980, 365 - 371.

Number 29 (figure1), which Laffineur states has an “incomplete and illegible” decorative pattern that makes it difficult to date, has a series of three borders and a simple pattern of oval shapes radiating to the centre.<sup>48</sup> Number 33 has a hole punched in its one complete end, which indicates the piece was originally attached to a shroud or clothing of some sort.<sup>49</sup> Number 36 (not pictured) has a large central rosette, similar to that of number 33, but with a palmette on either side, pointing to the ends. The sides are too damaged to tell if there were holes punched in them. Number 37 in the Canellopoulos Collection has a pattern of seemingly random spirals and concentric circles at the ends, and number 38 has a pattern of very small overlapping concentric circles, and the ends of this one are damaged as well.<sup>50</sup> The rosette is by far the most common design in the Macedonian finds, and not just in the archaic period - it appears consistently through to the Roman period. The rosette appears on the Mycenaean Cypriot finds as well, though they show a greater variety of iconographic elements including embossed lips, ram’s heads, one with a phoenix, and one with stylized human figures.<sup>51</sup>

The rosette may be dismissed as a simple floral motif, but Matteo Compareti argues, in reference to the eight-pointed rosette in particular, that it is also used as an “astronomical-astrological symbol”, and that the goddess Inana was often represented by either a star or rosette.<sup>52</sup> Further, there are Babylonian references to divine figures “dressed with a garment of heaven”, thought to be similar to figures in 8th-century BCE Babylonian seals, whose clothing is

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<sup>48</sup> Laffineur 1980, 364. For the photo of this artifact, see figure 29 on page 361. For similar stamped gold plaques from Balkan burials of the 5th-century, see Archibald, Zosia 1998, 172.

<sup>49</sup> Laffineur 1980, 365. Figure 30-36 for similar pieces with a central rosette.

<sup>50</sup> Laffineur 1980, 366.

<sup>51</sup> Oikonomou 2004, 117.

<sup>52</sup> Matteo Compareti, “The Eight-pointed Rosette: A Possible Important Emblem in Sassanian Heraldry.” *Parthica* 9 (2007), 205.

embellished with astronomical symbols.<sup>53</sup> This early Near Eastern iconography of gods and goddesses in clothing embellished with astrological symbols may be similar to the Macedonian evidence of gold foil rosettes that are found in numerous graves, with and without *epistomia*. Rosette motifs are seen throughout the ancient world, however, and are associated with so many deities that it cannot be confined to a single religious or ritual tradition. In trying to distinguish a particular meaning, Erwin R. Goodenough states:

rosettes take on many forms – geometrical, floral, whirl – and I have been unable to see anything but personal preference to distinguish them...The ones with eight points seemed there to be Innin or Ishtar, since they were frequently buried with women sacrificed to her. But rosettes and many other forms appear, and all seem to me to represent heavenly bodies – especially, when shown alone, the sun. But as such, they represented divinity; hence gods and their earthly counterparts, kings, usually wear them on bracelets.<sup>54</sup>

This confusion of iconography comes, in part, from the religious syncretism that characterizes the ancient Aegean; any deity with similar aspects or associations can become linked to their counterpart from another pantheon. Inana, or Ishtar, can be connected to the Iranian goddess Anahita further east, with Aphrodite and Artemis to the west, and Isis to the south. While this syncretic approach to religion is to be expected in polytheistic traditions, it makes disentangling evidence that is vague to begin with difficult.<sup>55</sup>

The eight-pointed rosette became an official emblem associated with the Macedonian royal house in the 4th-century BCE, and is a common motif in the Vergina grave goods.<sup>56</sup> There is no evidence of the rosette on Macedonian coins from the 5th- to 4th-century BCE, however.

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<sup>53</sup> Campareti 2007, 206. The seal referred to is in the British Museum.

<sup>54</sup> Goodenough, Erwin Ramsdell. *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1953), 141-143. The rosette, Goodenough continues, is an enduring symbol that is seen across the Mediterranean with varying degrees of popularity and symbolism, even to being used as an apotropaic sign to ward off witchcraft by the Pennsylvania Dutch in the United States.

<sup>55</sup> The confusion is only increased when we consider the iconographic symbols used to represent the gods; for example, Goodenough states that Dionysus was “represented, so far as we know quite interchangeably, as a snake, a baby, or a phallus.” (Goodenough 1953, 115).

<sup>56</sup> Campareti 2007, 206

There are almost always heads on the obverse, usually attributed to Zeus, Helios, Apollo or Heracles, or horses with and without riders. On the reverse, eagles, lightning bolts, or the forefront of a lion in profile are common; nothing resembling rosettes is seen on Macedonian coins of this period.<sup>57</sup> The fact that the rosette is an enduring symbol in the region well beyond the archaic period but is not evident on coinage suggests that the rosette on the *epistomia* is a religious or ritual emblem, rather than an administrative one.

There is a recurring theme of Dionysus and rosettes or flowers that may indicate a link between the motif and eschatological beliefs of a Bacchic mystery religion. A number of Apulian vases show Dionysus presenting a woman with a flower, which Paloma Cabrera describes as “the necessary password for the woman, the deceased who, after the transit of death, will require the symbol of her initiation in Dionysos’ blessed paradise..and and promise of her own transformation.”<sup>58</sup> For Cabrera, “the flower is a symbol of the initiate deceased and brought back to life in the sphere of the god.”<sup>59</sup>

Thus it is possible to read the gold foil rosettes in archaic burials as a reference to initiation, rebirth, and transformation as they are on Apulian vases, though in quite a different form. I believe that rosettes on an *epistomion* may be read as iconographic representations of an initiate's expectation for rebirth, though I would be remiss if I failed to mention that many scholars see the rosette on vases as simple filler, especially as it is used on Proto-Corinthian and

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<sup>57</sup>American Numismatic Society. <http://numismatics.org/Collections/Greek>. The earliest Macedonian coins in the ANS Greek collection are from the reign of Alexander I and date between 489-454 BCE. Alexander I's coins have a male head on the obverse, identified as Helios, and a lightning bolt on the reverse.

<sup>58</sup> Alberto Bernabé Pajares, Miguel Herrero de Jáuregui, Ana Isabel Jiménez San Cristóbal, and Raquel Martín Hernández. *Redefining Dionysos*. Vol. B and 5 (Berlin; Boston: De Gruyter, 2013), 501.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

Corinthian pottery. Yet the placement and context of a rosette-embossed *epistomia* strongly implies a symbolic and eschatologically relevant meaning was attached to these artifacts.

### ***Lamellae and Epistomia***

It is possible that the rosette design was purely decorative and reading any symbolic reference to the sun, divinity, rebirth or transformation is unfounded conjecture, though I would argue quite strongly that the context negates this aggressive skepticism. Given the burial context, the Orphic gold tablets offer a very close parallel for comparative study. The association of gold with immortality is well-established<sup>60</sup>, and a number of Orphic tablet texts clearly state that the individual is claiming special status with the line “I am a child of Earth and starry Sky”.<sup>61</sup> The variety of texts, placement, and shape evident in the accepted Orphic texts make it clear that there was no specific guideline that had to be followed to designate an individual as an initiate, though regional similarities are to be expected if we are talking about local cults rather than a pan-Hellenic cult with an established doctrine. Such regional preferences are apparent in the texts, as the following map (figure 2) illustrates.

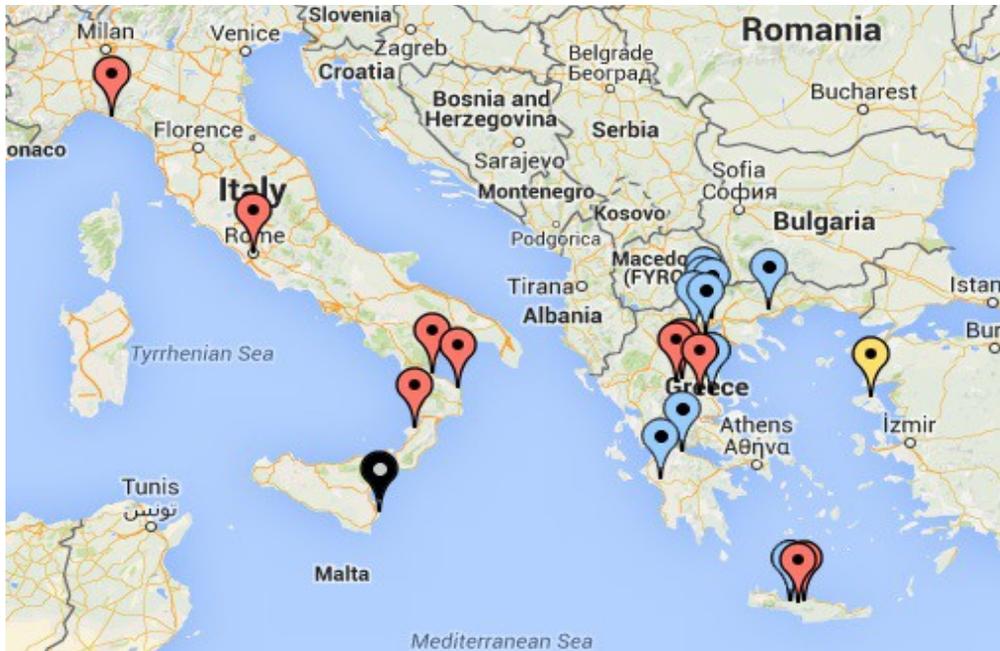
The longer texts that contain instructions for the initiate's journey to the underworld are found in Italy, Crete and Greece, while the shorter texts that contain only the initiate's name, or state “To Persephone” are found primarily in Greece, and extend further north into Macedonia and Thrace, which to date has yielded no tablets with long texts.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Zosia Archibald, *Ancient Economies of the Northern Aegean: Fifth to First Centuries BC*. (New York: Oxford University Press, Incorporated. 2013), 316.

<sup>61</sup> Graf and Johnston 2013, “Γῆς παῖς εἰμι καὶ Οὐρανοῦ ἀστ(ερόεντος), Ἀστέριος οὐομα, διωνι δ'εἰμ' αὖος ἄλλα δότε μοι” p34. The same line appears on nos. 10-14, 16, 18, and 25. For the full descriptions of the tablets, shape, placement (when known), date and location of all the Orphic tablets, Graf and Johnston's 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of *Ritual Texts for the Afterlife* is invaluable.

<sup>62</sup> Graf and Johnston 2013, nos. 31 – 36.



**Figure 2.** The distribution of the Orphic tablets, where the red tags represent the longer texts and the blue tags represent the tablets that only have a name, or the word “initiate”. The black marker represents the uninscribed tablets found at Syracuse, and the yellow marker is the as yet unpublished “inscribed sheet with an Orphic text” from Lesbos, reported in the 1989 issue of *Archaeological Reports*.

The map in figure 2 makes it clear that in the northern region, Orphic initiates were less interested in the instructional function of *epistomia* and possibly focused on the artifact as a symbolic representation of initiation. The dates assigned to the tablet texts are quite broad, yet the longer instructional tablets and the ones with just a name seem to be roughly contemporaneous, so these two functions of Orphic *epistomia* were concurrent but regionally determined. It is highly possible, given the regional overlap of the embossed archaic *epistomia* and the inscribed Orphic texts, that the archaic practice of gold foil mouth-covers was adopted and adapted by Orphic-influenced cults. It seems to be a matter of personal preference for the Orphic initiates represented by the tablets whether they had an *epistomion* or *lamella*, a longer

text or just their name, an ellipsoidal or leaf-shaped tablet. The salient points for the Orphic tablets when taken together seem to be that they are on the body of the deceased, made of gold foil, and indicate initiatory status in some way.

The ambiguity – to modern eyes, at least – of the embossed designs is likely why they have been largely left out of literature dealing with the Orphic tablets. Besides making their owner's initiatory status clear, the Orphic tablets offer much for philological and theological investigation. Yet the uninscribed mouth-plates are dated no more than two centuries before the inscribed *epistomia* included in the corpus of accepted inscribed Orphic tablets; the material, shape, and burial context are identical in many cases to the inscribed Orphic tablets, and the iconographic elements mean these artifacts are not “silent”. These facts, in addition to the prominence of Macedonia and Thrace in many texts about Orpheus, from Conon and the *Orphic Argonautica*, as well as being the findspot of the *Derveni Papyrus*,<sup>63</sup> suggest that an early “Orphism” could have flourished here as a local cult, and be represented by the embossed *epistomia*. While an uninscribed mouth-plate cannot function as a mnemonic device, they function quite well as symbols signaling initiatory status to the guards of the underworld.

### **Mnemonic, Proxy and “Silent” *Epistomia***

Further to the discussion above, Sarah Iles Johnston has divided the tablet texts in two categories based on what she sees as their main function: mnemonic devices designed to remind the initiate of the path to take or passwords needed when they reach the underworld, and proxy tablets that “speak on behalf of the soul” and identify them to Persephone as initiates.<sup>64</sup> The

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<sup>63</sup> Bernabé et al. 2007, 183.

<sup>64</sup> Graf and Johnston 2013, 95.

mnemonic tablets are all the longer texts, and the proxy tablets are those that just say “initiate”, or have a name inscribed on them, or say “To Persephone”.<sup>65</sup>

Johnston says that it is “always dangerous to make arguments from silence”, yet she then seems to conclude that the proxy tablets represent a less sophisticated Orphism than the longer texts, stating that “it’s hard not to infer that some *orpheotelestai* either didn’t know or didn’t care about the more complex eschatological doctrines that were constructed based on the longer mnemonic tablets...perhaps, initiation was the first and only task to be performed to guarantee paradise. Once this had been accomplished and a certificate of completion - a tablet - had been issued, the soul had nothing further to worry about and nothing further to do.”<sup>66</sup>

This line of thought is precisely the one Johnston seemed to be warning against when she cautions us not to argue from silence. It is hard not to infer that her above statement means that a sophisticated, complex eschatology is one that is written out, and that if a text is simple, the beliefs behind it must be as well. Yet an individual’s religious beliefs can be very complex whether or not they go to the grave with their entire belief system written out and buried with them. Even with the tablet texts and Derveni Papyrus, the information that comes down to us about Orphic beliefs is obscured in metaphor and allusions that were only fully understood by those who had experienced initiation. When we are dealing with a mystery religion, we ought to curb any expectation of finding clear, highly detailed information.

Mystery cults tended to emphasize the personal experience of epiphany during initiation; this is not necessarily something that could be, or should be, written out as instructions.<sup>67</sup> In her

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<sup>65</sup> Graf and Johnston 2013, 46. There are twenty *epistomia* that Johnston calls mnemonic and eighteen proxies, although T36a actually indicates an “undisclosed number of gold tablets from fifteen cist-graves” from Pella.

<sup>66</sup> Graf and Johnston 2013, 135.

<sup>67</sup> Walter Burkert *Ancient Mystery Cults*. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press 1987), 89.

assessment of the proxy tablets, Johnston does not offer the inverse interpretation that these individuals may not have required mnemonic reminders of how to respond or navigate the underworld. Yet Burkert reminds us that several ancient texts explicitly state that initiation “was a special form of experience, a *pathos* in the soul, or *psyche*, of the candidate” and was assumed to create a change in the psyche that prepared the participants to face death unafraid, because they had already symbolically experienced it.<sup>68</sup> The preparatory function of initiation could well make instructions for the underworld unnecessary for the truly dedicated initiate.

A final point against the longer tablet texts being representations of a more serious-minded Bacchic-Orphic initiate is the inherent secrecy of mystery rites. The injunction against sharing details of mystery rites is well-attested in ancient sources, and is tied to the experiential nature of the rites; they are less effective if what happens during the initiation is widely known. Granted, the tablet texts do not describe the initiation rites per se, but they do share information that ought only to be known to the properly initiated. This may not have been a factor if the initiates themselves wrote the Orphic tablets, and chose what they represented. Again, personal preference may be the determining factor in the absence of an established Orphic doctrine.

### **Literacy and Writing**

The possibility that initiates may have inscribed their own tablets means the question of literacy, especially in terms of the archaic *epistomia*, must be addressed. It also gives us a chance to explore the possibility that the uninscribed *epistomia* may have been inscribed with ink as proposed by Pavlos Chrysostomou; the suggestion was also referenced by Tzifopoulos in

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

*Paradise Earned*.<sup>69</sup> As we do not have notes of embossed designs on all of the archaic Macedonian *epistomia*, and taking into consideration the fact that Tzifopoulos' study contained a completely blank example, Chrysostomou's suggestion should not be dismissed out of hand. There could very well be un-embossed, uninscribed *epistomia* that once had inscriptions written in ink, though the ink in question would have to have been of such a composition that no trace of it survived. However, I believe it would have been easier to simply inscribe the gold foil itself than to attempt to find an ink that would set properly on the material. Gold foil is embossed in many cases so there was no concern about damaging the artifact by inscribing it; clearly they had the means to mark the foil without tearing through it. This leaves two possibilities; writing was either considered unnecessary in this instance or it was unknown to the creators of the artifacts.

For the first point, the variety of embossed iconography indicates that the creators had a symbolic repertoire to convey any message that was deemed necessary for the *epistomion*. All grave goods are imbued with meaning, and "are much more than goods in graves. They are result of deliberate act of mourners and as such they are loaded with symbolic and emotional meanings. Potentially grave goods are very rich in information containing allusions about the deceased person, mourners, as well as about their wider cultural context, religion and social system."<sup>70</sup>

For the second point, the Pella curse tablets are some of the earliest written evidence from Macedonia, and they date to the mid-4th century BCE.<sup>71</sup> They are written in a Doric Greek dialect which was falling out of use in the region at about the same time the curse tablets were written; koine Greek became the dominant language after this point.

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<sup>69</sup> Tzifopoulos 2010, 69.

<sup>70</sup> Marge Kansa, "Things in Culture, Culture in Things." IV Autumn Conference of the Centre of Excellence in Cultural Theory. University of Tartu, Estonia, October 20–22, (2011). Abstract.

<sup>71</sup> James L. O'Neil, "Doric Forms in Macedonian Inscriptions." *Glotta* 82 (2006), 192–210.

Susan Sherratt, looking at writing and its appearance at different points in Greek history, states that there is “no history of inscribing metal objects or indeed anything much other than clay tablets” in Greece during the period of Linear B script (1400 - 1200).<sup>72</sup> Further, there is “no history in Linear B usage of marking personal ownership or merely proclaiming one’s existence in permanent and visible form by writing one’s name on objects.”<sup>73</sup> Archaeological visibility plays a role in this; the most common surviving instances of writing are inscriptions on stone, metal, or pottery.<sup>74</sup> The lack of this evidence does not mean that writing was unknown or unused in Macedonia prior to the 4th-century BCE, only that it was not commonly used in a form that has survived.

Sherratt’s most intriguing argument is that writing was closely tied to concepts of identity and barbarism, and that the inception of writing as a social phenomenon requires a trigger. For Sherratt, this trigger is evident on Cyprus in the 9th-century BCE when a Tyrian colony is established on the island, and for mainland Greece in the 8th-century BCE with the period of colonization.<sup>75</sup> She further suggests that “the visible expression of the language...was fast becoming a focal pivot of collective Greek identity.” However, if this model is to hold true for the Macedonians, the period of cultural contact that led to literacy should have begun in the 8th-century when Greek colonies appeared on the Chalkidike coast. Potentially this trigger was delayed until the period of Persian contact at the end of the 6th-century BCE, and required more stable settlements than were common among the dispersed tribes in the north at earlier periods; that alone could explain why inscribed *epistomia* are not found in Macedonia until the late

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<sup>72</sup> Susan Sherratt, “Visible Writing: Questions of Script and Identity in Early Iron Age Greece and Cyprus.” *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* 22 no.3 (2003), 224.

<sup>73</sup> Sherratt 2003, 226.

<sup>74</sup> Sherratt 2003, 228.

<sup>75</sup> Sherratt 2003, 231.

Classical - early Hellenistic period. In any case there is little evidence for either writing or literacy in the Macedonian archaeological record prior to the fourth century BCE.

It is still possible to read a great deal of symbolism into the embossed *epistomia*, though harder to substantiate such readings with as much certainty as the Orphic tablets. They may represent initiation into a mystery cult as the Orphic tablets do, but there is also, as Laffineur's work on archaic gold jewelry has made clear, a more straightforward explanation; they could be ornamental clothing attachments. Yet even as clothing attachments, the embossed designs may still have some religious symbolism, as there is no way of knowing whether or not the clothing in the burials was also ceremonial or worn while alive during rituals.

### **Symbolic Muteness**

The placement of gold foil sheets on the mouth, however, suggests something more symbolically meaningful than mere jewelry. In cases where the pieces appear to have holes punched on the ends, as seen on number 33 in the Canellopoulos Collection, Tzifopoulos has proposed a fastening method of two straps around the head and over the mouth that would hold the *epistomion* over the mouth.<sup>76</sup> In other cases, it appears the gold foil was simply placed on the mouth or perhaps inside it. This placement makes it highly unlikely these items were ever used as jewelry while the individual was alive, though I suppose one could make a case for a ritual in which participants are literally rendered mute by a metal mouth-plate. There is, however, no evidence that *epistomia* were ever used or worn outside of the grave.

A mouth-cover of this sort implies muteness or silence, which can be easily correlated to mystery religions, as "obligatory secrecy is characteristic of Greek mystery cults in general and

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<sup>76</sup> Tzifopoulos 2010, 90.

of the Orphic movement in particular.”<sup>77</sup> Silence was not just to keep the details of the rites secret from the uninitiated, it was part of the initiation itself.<sup>78</sup> Though there is no textual evidence of silence in the particular stages of the Eleusinian initiation, the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* includes mention of the goddess sitting in solemn silence while she mourns the loss of her daughter; a similar solemn silence “might be appropriate as an initial purificatory step” for the Eleusinian rites.<sup>79</sup> There is also what Edmonds describes as the “bewildering and terrifying treatment of the initiate” in the Korybantic rites, where it is believed that a hooded initiate was seated in silence and an ecstatic dance was performed around them.<sup>80</sup>

Silence can have very different significance within the different rites, in addition to keeping the details of initiation rites secret. The Orphic rites in particular are associated with silence and secrecy. Some scholars suggest Herodotus himself may have been an initiate based on his repeated references to a vow of silence, and his general reluctance to discuss the particulars of the many “eschatological schools” that existed in Greece at that time.<sup>81</sup> Ritual silence and secrecy about the rites are neatly referenced by the mouth-plates that accompanied the dead to the afterlife. These artifacts function as physical manifestations of silence and the initiate's faithfulness in following the cultic statute of secrecy, which was a feature of many mystery cults. As to the specific rites associated with Orphism, however, as Jan Bremmer says,

we have hardly any information about the rituals.. A chance remark tells us that Bacchic initiates were crowned with the twigs of a white poplar as it is a chthonic tree...Philodemus associates an Orpheotelest with a tambourine, which shows that ecstatic

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<sup>77</sup> Pia Gulder Bilde, and Jane Hjarl Petersen. *Meetings of Cultures in the Black Sea Region: Between Conflict and Coexistence*. (Vol. 8; Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2008), 374.

<sup>78</sup> Radcliffe Edmonds “To Sit in Solemn Silence? "Thronosis" in Ritual, Myth, and Iconography.” *The American Journal of Philology* 127 (3) (2006), 347.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid. For more detail on the Korybantic mysteries, see Jan N. Bremmer. *Initiation into the Mysteries of the Ancient World*. Vol. 1. Boston: Walter De Gruyter Incorporated 2014, 48-53.

<sup>81</sup> Bilde et al. 2008, 383.

dancing was part of their activities, and is also a valuable confirmation that Orphic initiators were associated with Dionysos Bakchios....Finally the texts seem to suggest communal activities.<sup>82</sup>

How, then, do we determine whether or not the embossed *epistomia* are representative of Orphic initiation if we do not know precisely what was entailed by such initiations? The *epistomia* can be read as material proof that an initiate has gone to the grave without divulging the mysteries. Examining the particular anxieties about the afterlife that are addressed by an Orphic initiation gives us some ideas about the mythological and ritual developments taking place in the archaic to classical periods that mystery cults sought to address.

*Epistomia* may be similar to the coin for Charon, as the basic concept of the underworld they engage with is functionally the same. Charon expressed similar concerns as those in the Orphic tablets about how the underworld was guarded and navigated. The concept of a guarded underworld was “a complex interaction, which included models borrowed from abroad, in order to fill 'spaces' created by local needs...Given Charon's similarity to the Sumerian ferryman of the river of death, his emergence can be seen as the result of the interaction between local elements and needs...and an Oriental model that helped elaborate further the journey to Hades.”<sup>83</sup>

Prior to the 5th-century BCE, there was “no Charon, and Hermes Chthonios does not appear in the role of guide of the souls in Hades.”<sup>84</sup> Earlier concepts of the underworld suggest communication and movement between the worlds of the living and that of the dead was less structured and no intermediary was needed; Odysseus is able to speak directly with the shades of fallen comrades with a blood sacrifice, but there are no underworld guardians barring his

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<sup>82</sup> Bremmer. 2014, 74-75.

<sup>83</sup> Sourvinou-Inwood, Christiane. *"Reading" Greek Death: To the end of the Classical Period*. Oxford; New York: Clarendon Press. 1995, 313.

<sup>84</sup> Sourvinou-Inwood 1995, 59.

interaction with them.<sup>85</sup> Yet by the 5th-century, there were guardians barring passage between the two worlds in myths, and while the physical barrier of the River Styx was maintained as “a potent image of the final transition to the Land of the Dead”, some need or anxiety about movement between the worlds led to the development of stricter, sentient guardians who would control passage between the two worlds.<sup>86</sup> Thus mystery cults which claimed to prepare the initiate for death filled a need created by this new concept of the underworld. Orpheus, Dionysus, and Hermes all emerge as benevolent psychopompoi who help guide the newly dead through the underworld, and it became necessary to conceive of a token, a password, or a toll that identified the initiates among the newly dead.<sup>87</sup>

The practice of including a coin for Charon in a burial is more prevalent than *epistomion* burials, but they share some important characteristics. Coins are placed on the mouth, on the chest, in or near the hand. There are a couple instances where a coin also has a name inscribed on it, mimicking the proxy qualities of half of the *epistomia* known to date.<sup>88</sup> Very broadly, we can say that these coins, inscribed or not, along with the accepted tablet texts and uninscribed *epistomia*, are related in that they all indicate a certain expectation on the part of the deceased; the bearers expect the underworld guardians to acknowledge these tokens as distinguishing them from the rest of the shades. Further, “the burial-coins, the wreaths, and the gold *lamellae* and *epistomia*, incised or unincised, are items ingeniously devised by humans to help them face

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<sup>85</sup> Homer. *The Odyssey* with an English Translation by A. T. Murray, PH.D. in two volumes. Cambridge, MA., Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann, Ltd. 1919.

<sup>86</sup> Sourvinou-Inwood 1995, 315.

<sup>87</sup> If we accept that a gold mouthpiece was a necessary token, it suggests quite strongly that this was a practice reserved for the elite, or at least those wealthy enough to obtain the token of admission. Poorer individuals may simply have not had the option of initiation into a mystery cult whose criteria for membership required such an expenditure.

<sup>88</sup> Tzifopoulos 2010, 32-34.

the most terrifying fact of life. They attempt to solve practical problems and at the same time come to terms with the fear of death.”<sup>89</sup>

Practically speaking, the *epistomia* may be more prevalent in Macedonian burials because the earliest Thracio-Macedonian coins appear in the 6th-century, while *epistomia* were known and used in the region from the Iron Age. The *epistomia* are also more mysterious than a coin, which could well have attracted the initiates of a newly developed mystery cult. The following chapter discusses the known mystery cults, and Orphism in particular, in greater detail, and investigates how these societies dealt with the fact of their own mortality.

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<sup>89</sup> Tzifopoulos 2010, 237.

## Chapter Two

The introduction briefly discussed some of the issues around 'Orphism', and the question of whether or not scholars are overstating the evidence. There is a strong body of evidence that suggests 'Orphism' was, if not a cult on its own, at least a coherent eschatological view that was known in the ancient world at least as early as the 5th-century BCE or earlier, and was incorporated into many of the mystery cults of the ancient world. However, let us start at the beginning with the ways 'Orphism' has been defined, and the material evidence that has survived.

### Definitions and Evidence of Orphism

Herodotus (2.81.2), in his description of the Egyptians and their customs, states that the “ταῦτα τοῖσι Ὀρφικοῖσι καλεομένοισι καὶ Βακχικοῖσι, ἐοῦσι δὲ Αἰγυπτίοισι καὶ Πυθαγορείοισι”<sup>90</sup>. This encompasses many of the issues scholars face when trying to determine exactly what ‘Orphic’ beliefs or doctrine may have been; it is so often mentioned in conjunction with Bacchic, Dionysiac, Pythagorean or Egyptian cults that it is difficult to tell if even the ancient world saw it as a separate cult, or simply an accompaniment to the others. With an eponymously titled cult, it is reasonable to expect to find explicit references to the individual who lent their name to the cult. That is often not the case with ‘Orphism’.

The evidence often used to support the concept of 'Orphism' that survives from antiquity consists of theological allusions that have many elements in common with other known mystery cults, and exist within a recognizably Greek theological landscape; that is, there are references to the Olympian gods, and the underworld is ruled by Persephone and Hades. Yet despite operating

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<sup>90</sup> Herodotus (2.81.2) “ they agree in this with practices called Orphic and Bacchic, but in fact [are] Egyptian and Pythagorean” in the Perseus Digital Library. Accessed August 04, 2015. <http://perseus.uchicago.edu/perseus/cgi/citequery3.pl?dbname=GreekFeb2011&getid=1&query=Hdt.%202.81.2>

within the familiar Greek religious landscape, we know from references by playwrights, historians, and other surviving texts that ‘Orphism’ was seen as something outside the normal religious sphere.<sup>91</sup>

The material evidence comes from a variety of sources; the gold tablet texts discussed in the previous chapter, the Derveni papyrus, some inscribed bone tablets and a bronze mirror from Olbia, and the corpus of Orphic fragments, or “a number of poems in hexameters that were falsely attributed to the mythical singer Orpheus.”<sup>92</sup> These fragmentary bits of poetry were first collected and published in 1924 by Otto Kern, but collecting the evidence has not dispelled any confusion.<sup>93</sup> As Martin West states:

while ancient authors frequently refer to poems by Orpheus or attributed to Orpheus, they seldom refer to Orphics, except in the sense of authors of Orphic books, and never to ‘Orphism’. They mention various cults and rituals that Orpheus was supposed to have founded, and they apply the adjective ‘Orphic’ to certain rites and religious practices and to an ascetic way of life...But the essential principle to remember is that a poem becomes Orphic simply by being ascribed to Orpheus.<sup>94</sup>

As to the dating of the assembled Orphic poems, Christopher Faraone states that “the date of any individual Orphic Hymn is, of course, difficult to pinpoint, but there is a general consensus that the collection transmitted to us from antiquity was assembled sometime in the third century AD perhaps in western Anatolia.”<sup>95</sup> This is contemporary with, or just after, the burial of the most recent of the Orphic tablets, which at the moment seems to be one from Rome dated to the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> James Diggle (ed.), *Theophrastus: Characters*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 111.

<sup>92</sup> Parker, 1995, 483.

<sup>93</sup> Kern, 1963.

<sup>94</sup> West 1983, 2.

<sup>95</sup> Bremmer 2010, 394.

<sup>96</sup> Graf and Johnston 2013, 18.

However, the first potential iconographic evidence of a Macedonian and Thracian Orpheus is found in a 6th-century BCE Attic Black Figure lethykos with an image of a man playing a lyre.<sup>97</sup> By the mid 5th-century BCE, a handful of Attic vases show a lyre-playing Orpheus with Thracian horsemen or Thracian women.<sup>98</sup> Yet these vases do not have a clear connection to the underworld mythology associated with Orpheus; for that we have to look to the southern Italian Apulian red-figure vases, which are typically dated between 430 and 300 BCE. Much work has been done to connect the scenes of the underworld on Apulian vases in particular to the Orphic tablets,<sup>99</sup> and there was undoubtedly an iconographic language available to depict an underworld landscape that is “practically identical” to the one presented in the Orphic tablets and fragments.<sup>100</sup> Yet few of these underworld scenes feature Orpheus himself. Far more often the scene illustrates a meeting between Dionysus and Persephone which some read as an intervention by Dionysus on behalf of an initiate.

This is not wholly unexpected. Orpheus obtains his authority on religious matters through his own *katabasis*, his *Theogony*, and his interactions with deities, most frequently Dionysus and Persephone, who were associated with their own mystery cults. Disentangling the ‘Orphic’ from the Dionysiac or Eleusinian is made even harder if we accept the possibility that:

Orphics are simply people who in their religious beliefs or practices, whatever these may be, accord a place of honour to texts ascribed to Orpheus. There was no doctrinal criterion for ascription to Orpheus, and no copyright restriction. It was a device for conferring antiquity and authority upon a text that stood in need of them.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Archibald 1998, 208.

<sup>98</sup> Archibald 1998, 209.

<sup>99</sup> Tzifopoulos, *Paradise Earned*, 102; Bernabé and Jiménez San Cristóbal, *Instructions for the Netherworld*, 191-202; Moreno, Francisco Molina “Non-musical Notes on the Orphic Lyra (OF 417)” *Tracing Orpheus : Studies of Orphic Fragments*. Jiménez San Cristóbal, Ana Isabel, Santamaría Álvarez, Marco Antonio, and Luján Martínez, Eugenio R., eds. Munchen, Walter de Gruyter, 2011: 148-150.

<sup>100</sup> Bernabé and Jiménez San Cristóbal, *Instructions for the Netherworld*, 191-202.

<sup>101</sup> West 1983, 3.

West himself argues against this vague notion of Orphism, and posits that there were sects that “may be properly called Orphics” based on the material evidence.<sup>102</sup> He suggests we accept the 5th-century BCE Olbian bone tablets as evidence of Olbian Orphics, which must be distinguished from the late 4th-century artistic evidence of a distinct sect of Tarentum Orphics.<sup>103</sup> West also states that the only appropriate definition of ‘Orphism’ is the practice of ascribing certain texts to Orpheus to gain the authority conveyed by such authorship.<sup>104</sup>

West’s 1983 publication did not put to rest the debate over what Orphism might have been, or if it even existed as its own independent cult, but there are two points that I find particularly useful in his approach. The first is his insistence on the separation of the practicing ‘Orphics’ from the texts assigned to the category of ‘Orphism’; and the second is his recognition that different locations and periods will inevitably result in independent practices that can produce distinct material evidence that can nevertheless be considered ‘Orphic’. For the first point, almost all Orphic scholars agree that we do not, as yet, have a unified Orphic doctrine for this early period; some seem to believe this can be reconstructed with enough evidence and time, while others are of the opinion that no such doctrine – or no single doctrine, at least – existed for the ancients and any modern ‘reconstruction’ is useful only inasmuch as it helps us understand the evidence. As to the second point, too often scholarship looks for homogeneity across geographic and temporal barriers at the expense of allowing for the simple fact that most cultural institutions express regional variations and undergo changes over time. This second point guides

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<sup>102</sup> West 1983, 4.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

our investigation of the material evidence of Orphic cults, including the Derveni Papyrus and the Olbian inscriptions.

### **The Derveni Papyrus**

The Derveni papyrus is a partially burned scroll from a cremation burial dated ca. 340-320 BCE, though the papyrus itself could be older; one scholar, Richard Janko, believes the author's style puts him "firmly within the fifth century BCE."<sup>105</sup> It was discovered in 1962 just 10 kilometers from Thessalonike, though full publication of the 113 fragments of the scroll that were recovered did not occur until 2006.<sup>106</sup> The Derveni papyrus is invaluable for Orphic studies because "it contains embedded within it actual fragments of the Orphic Theogony" as well as being one of the few pieces of evidence that specifically unites Orphic rituals and poems.<sup>107</sup> Janko notes that the text "attacks people who get initiated into the mysteries...they are gullible and waste their money...because they accept the priest's explanation and do not enquire further into what they have heard."<sup>108</sup> The author further states that a literal interpretation of religious texts is "a danger to one's faith in the divine itself."<sup>109</sup>

The papyrus' value for this study lies in the comments about other Orphic initiates. The author apparently agrees with Theophrastus' characterization of some Orphics as foolishly superstitious while he himself is appropriately concerned with the deeper philosophical meaning of the Orphic poems.<sup>110</sup> This lends credence to Johnston's assertion that some Orphics thought

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<sup>105</sup> Richard Janko. "Reconstructing (again) the Opening of the Derveni Papyrus." *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 166 : 2008, 37.

<sup>106</sup> Kouremenos, Parásoglou, and Tsantsanoglou "The Derveni Papyrus." *Studi e Testi per il Corpus dei Papiri*, Vol. 13. Firenze: L.S. Olschki. 2006.

<sup>107</sup> Parker 1995, 488.

<sup>108</sup> Janko 2008, 38.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Theophrastus and Diggle. *Theophrastus: Characters*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2004, 113.

only as far as initiation and a token show of ritual purity, as opposed to committing themselves to a genuinely Orphic lifestyle, whatever that might be.<sup>111</sup> An incidental relationship to the philosophy behind religious beliefs is not unique to the Orphic initiates described in the Derveni papyrus, however, and does not negate the fact that these casual initiates would have nevertheless identified themselves as Orphics. We cannot excavate sincerity of belief, nor are we justified in demanding a philosophical treatise from each individual before posthumously allowing them association with the sect they were initiated into.

The Derveni papyrus provides evidence that there was at least one form of an Orphic doctrine available, if the initiates chose to interpret the poems as such. Edmonds suggests that we accept the Derveni author as an Orphic “not simply because he refers to Orpheus, but rather because he claims special knowledge and expertise in religious matters pertaining to purification, initiation, and other practices that might provide a better relation with the gods.”<sup>112</sup> I am using this same reasoning to connect the Orphic tablets and the embossed *epistomia* in the category of initiatory tokens.

### **The Olbian Bone Tablets**

How exactly would a claim to having special knowledge manifest itself in the material evidence? The obvious example of material evidence of Orphism, after the gold tablets and Derveni papyrus, are the three inscribed bone tablets from Olbia. While West maintains that inscribed bone tablets are not unusual finds for 6th- and 5th-century BCE Olbia, as “many such tablets have turned up at Olbia at different times, both in the *temenos* and in residential areas,”

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<sup>111</sup> Graf and Johnston, 2013, 135.

<sup>112</sup> Radcliffe G. Edmonds “Extra-ordinary people: Mystai and Magoi, Magicians and Orphics in the Derveni Papyrus.” *Classical Philology* 103 (1) : 2008, 32.

only the three mentioned have an “Orphic and an eschatological aspect.”<sup>113</sup> The *temenos* at Olbia held a number of altars, one of which was perhaps dedicated to Zeus or Athena, and in the early 5th-century a temple to Apollo Delphinios was added.<sup>114</sup> It is not known whether the *temenos* held an altar or any other references to Dionysus. The bone tablets are much like the *epistomia* in that the message they held was largely determined by the individual inscribing it, rather than a standard inscription used by a specific doctrine. The Olbian bone tablets may further help bridge the gap between the Orphic gold tablets and the archaic embossed *epistomia* in that the texts are short and simple, sometimes containing a single word, and may be an intermediary step between tablets with no text and the longer instructional tablets.

These tablets reflect what West describes as “exciting new ideas about the destiny of the soul” brought about in part by interactions with other cultures. According to Jane Petersen, “the Olbian burials display a very diverse and multifaceted attitude to burial customs, both in terms of rather wide parameters for individual taste and/or family traditions within the circle of relatives or others who undertook the burials and in terms of the use of objects and customs with both Greek and Scythian cultural affiliations.”<sup>115</sup> These cultural interactions could very well have brought about “cosmological speculation” and West suggests that the Greeks in Olbia then turned to the “pre-Trojan” works of Orpheus to add authority, and a Greek connection, to these ideas as they were assimilated into religious practices in the area.<sup>116</sup> Taking this one step further, West posits that from this point on, “Orpheus became more generally exploited by organizers of *teletai*, or non-standard rites, of all kinds.”<sup>117</sup> All three of the Olbian tablets mention Dionysus,

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<sup>113</sup> West 1982, 17.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Jane Hjarl Petersen. *Cultural Interactions and Social Strategies on the Pontic Shores: Burial Customs in the Northern Black Sea Area c. 550-270 B.C.* (1st ed. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2010), 305.

<sup>116</sup> West 1982, 28.

<sup>117</sup> West 1982, 29.

though in an abbreviated form as Dion or Dio, though one may reference Orphic[s]; the edge is damaged and the final lettering is uncertain.<sup>118</sup> If this is indeed the case, it would support the theory that Orphic texts were used to add the authority of antiquity to emerging mystery rites and initiations.<sup>119</sup>

The other Olbian inscriptions may reinforce the idea that the residents were experimenting with new conceptions of the afterlife, especially the Bacchic mystery cult. There is an inscription on a bronze mirror that comes from a burial in Olbia dated to ca. 500 BCE, the inscription of which reads “Demonassa daughter of Lenaeus, euai! and Lenaeus, son of Damoclus, euai!”.<sup>120</sup> This is an early instance of the Bacchic thiasoi cry, ‘euai’.<sup>121</sup> An Attic black-figure vase-stand dated to the 5th-century BCE has an inscription in two concentric circles, the inner of which reads “Life life Apollo Apollo sun sun order order light light.”<sup>122</sup> The strongest connection between Apollo, Dionysus and Orpheus is seen in Aeschylus’ *Bassarai* which:

seems to document the clash between Dionysos and Orpheus, and one should not marginalise or fail to mention this source. According to the evidence within Eratosthenes’ *Catasterisms*, and provided one accepts West’s textual integrations, the Aeschylean tragedy would include a narrative sequence articulated in two phases: in the first, Orpheus honoured Dionysos and had been favoured by him, while in the following phase, Orpheus – after being in Hades, perhaps to get his spouse back, and having seen ‘how things were there’ – had ceased to honour Dionysos, believing that Helios, whom he named Apollo, was *μέγιστος τῶν θεῶν*. At dawn, every day, Orpheus would go to the Pangaion Mount to see Helios rise. Then Dionysos, enraged, sent the Bassarides against him and they tore him into pieces and scattered his limbs.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Graf and Johnston, 2013, 214-216.

<sup>119</sup> Parker 1995, 484. It is likely many of the poems ascribed to Orpheus were in fact written by others using his name for a sense of authority. See also West 1983, 7.

<sup>120</sup> Graf and Johnston, 2013, 216.

<sup>121</sup> Bernabé Pajares et al. 2013, 164.

<sup>122</sup> Graf and Johnston, 2013, 217.

<sup>123</sup> Bernabé Pajares et al. 2013, 149.

Parker's reading of Aeschylus' Orpheus is that he is at once a "true Orphic in that he is a religious extremist, a sectarian, a devotee of a 'greatest god' other than Zeus; a strange Orphic, by contrast, in his exaltation of Apollo over Dionysus." Here the contradictory nature of Orpheus is found in a single text, which also indicates that the ancient audience had a high tolerance for the fluid associations of religious figures.

The burial context and Bacchic cry on the bronze mirror and the repetitive inscription on the vase-stand show the residents were engaging with eschatological concerns that West and Petersen agree were sparked in the region in the 5th-century BCE. The Olbian evidence clearly indicates some of the population was experimenting with a Bacchic-Orphic mystery cult, though it is difficult to extrapolate any particulars of the cult from the evidence. However, the initiation process was primarily a sensory experience wherein the "actions, sights and sounds of the mysteries are thus themselves symbolic, in the sense that they constitute signs, and give the initiates a glimpse of something neither directly accessible nor fully translatable into words."<sup>124</sup> It follows that symbols or tokens of such an experience would be neither directly accessible nor fully translatable into words.

### **Initiation Rites**

There were a number of mystery cults in the ancient world, not all of which are clearly represented in the surviving evidence, and not all of which involved eschatological beliefs. The most famous of the ancient mystery rites are the Eleusinian mysteries of Athens, though there was "no mention of immortality at Eleusis, nor of a soul and the transmigration of souls, nor yet

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<sup>124</sup> Olga Levaniouk. "The Toys of Dionysos." *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 103 : (2007), 177.

of deification”.<sup>125</sup> The *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* states quite clearly that those who have seen the rites are blessed while the uninitiated will waste away in the musty dark, which Bremmer suggests means that early initiates expected the rites to bless them with wealth and/or fertility in life rather than grant them a blessed afterlife.<sup>126</sup>

The Samothracian mysteries have a more direct Macedonian connection, although the evidence is later than the majority of the *epistomion* burials. Philip II and Olympias are said to have met during an initiation ceremony, and most of our sources are from the Hellenistic period due to the *Diadochi* taking an interest in the sanctuary.<sup>127</sup> Inscriptions indicate that men, women, slaves, and royalty were all admitted to the mysteries, but we have few details on the actual rites involved. It is interesting to note that the gods associated with the rites are referred to in the Roman period only as the ‘Great Gods’, and prior to that some associated the sanctuary with the Kabeiroi. This hardly resolves any confusion, as the Kabeiroi themselves are “one of the most problematic groups of divinities.”<sup>128</sup> These examples illustrate how little information regarding initiation is available and further supports that the central tenet was secrecy.

It is likely, however, that some *orpheotelestai* incorporated the Orphic poems on the afterlife into emerging cults to confer some authority on new religious practices. As to which poems might have been used, it is hard to say. The Eleusinian mysteries reportedly incorporated the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, and it was “in some way acted out by the Eleusinian clergy and the prospective initiates on the first night.”<sup>129</sup> There are also suggestions that the initiates reenacted Demeter's search for Persephone.<sup>130</sup> If the organizers of an ‘Orphic’ rite had the same

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<sup>125</sup> Bremmer 2014, 18.

<sup>126</sup> Bremmer 2014, 18-20.

<sup>127</sup> Bremmer 2014, 22.

<sup>128</sup> Bremmer 2014, 37.

<sup>129</sup> Bremmer 2014, 10.

<sup>130</sup> Bremmer 2014, 11.

need to present the initiates with performative actions, it follows that any Orphic poem incorporated into a ritual would have been chosen for the performative aspects, as the transformative experience of initiation seems from all accounts to have been emphasized over all else. For example, West believes that the Orphic poems *Korybantikon* and *Enthronements for the Mother* “must belong to those Korybantic rites in which the novice was set on a throne and the initiates danced round him.”<sup>131</sup> In this case, the initiate's role would be less active than that of the Eleusinian novices, while still being immersed in the performance. However, West's attribution of specific texts to the Korybantic rites is purely speculative, similarities of name notwithstanding.

Fritz Graf also finds the meter of the texts to be a key feature that “imply a ritualized, performative background”.<sup>132</sup> This performative aspect could be applied to the Orphic poems as well, which would explain why (in addition to their eschatological knowledge and the authority associated with the author) they were incorporated into mystery cults, and initiations, in the first place. The combination of an authoritative text with performative ritual potential would have been a tempting addition to burgeoning cultic practices. This is not to say the texts were written with initiatory performances in mind, or that any text had only a single ritual interpretation, rather that the body of Orphic poetry already available was an appealing resource with ritual potential.<sup>133</sup> Nevertheless, the frustrating nature of the evidence is best summarized by Robert Parker, who states that “Orphic rites, however, conducted by Orpheus-initiators, certainly did

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<sup>131</sup> West 1983, 26.

<sup>132</sup> Graf and Johnston, 2013, 137.

<sup>133</sup> Parker 1995, 486.

take place, and in that sense there certainly was an Orphism. What is indeterminable is the extent to which the whole of Orphic literature was related to that ritual practice.”<sup>134</sup>

Whether we can define the texts or not, however, Orpheus is a perfect mediator for new ideas of the afterlife. As Graf and Johnston say, he was “firmly entrenched in Greek heroic myth yet set apart from other heroes by virtue of his musical accomplishments; like other heroes, a survivor of a *katabasis*.”<sup>135</sup> The *katabasis* is the basis of Orpheus’ religious authority in an eschatological mystery cult; having successfully navigated the underworld and its perils, he can instruct others on how to attain entry to the isles of the blessed. He is, however, not a god himself, and that makes it hard to envision a purely ‘Orphic’ cult without the association of a deity, especially as much of the evidence of ‘Orphic’ eschatological beliefs is tied to Dionysus. It does make it easier, however, to envision Orphic texts used as a voice of authority added to a variety of mystery cults.

### **Dionysiac or Orphic?**

George Hinge suggests Orphic and Dionysiac rites are “two sides of the same coin” where the ritual transgression of Bacchic rites, including reported madness and eating raw meat, are intended to lead initiates to a sober life afterward.”<sup>136</sup> Hinge is not alone in this; many scholars “have framed Orphic religion and its eschatology within the now canonical scheme of a Dionysian mystery religion, basing their assumptions on the analogies concerning ritual

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<sup>134</sup> Parker 1995, 487.

<sup>135</sup> Tzifopoulos 2010, 186.

<sup>136</sup> Bilde et al. 2008, 371.

expressions or otherworldly visions.”<sup>137</sup> Distinguishing the Orphic from the Dionysiac is not always easy, and even Herodotus seems to have used the two terms synonymously.<sup>138</sup>

If we are looking for evidence that an individual gave “a place of honour to texts ascribed to Orpheus,”<sup>139</sup> based on the belief of an immortal soul, the material evidence would expand considerably to include an indeterminate number of other mystery cults. We would have to make a distinction between Dionysian Orphics from Olbia (represented by the bone tablets which have clear allusions to Orphic eschatological ideas of death and rebirth, or even the name of Dionysus and the word *ορφικ*), initiates who were Dionysiac but not Orphic (from the inscription on the bronze mirror which includes the Bacchic cry *euai* but nothing that alludes to Orphic eschatology) and potentially to an Apollonian initiate (from the vase-stand, though this inscription does not allude to life after death, only life and order).

Orphism, then, seems to be dependent not only on geographic and temporal factors, but also on the individual interpretation. For the author of the Derveni papyrus, to be an Orphic required a philosophical examination of texts that were allegorical and not literal; for others, even his direct contemporaries, the experience of initiation may have been enough to constitute belonging. For the Olbian community that created the bone tablets, the cult evidently incorporated both Orphic texts and Dionysus as a key figure. For the later cult at Thurii that produced the gold tablet texts, we can say that purity was a concern, though how – or even whether – this actually manifested in day-to-day practice remains unknown. The Hipponion tablet, ca. 400 BCE, with its reference to *mystai kai bakchoi* “demonstrates beyond doubt that Dionysus played a main role in the ritual.”<sup>140</sup> This is also the case with the Pelinna tablet

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<sup>137</sup> Bernabé Pajares et al. 2013, 144.

<sup>138</sup> Graf and Johnston, 2013, 142.

<sup>139</sup> West 1983, 3.

<sup>140</sup> Bernabé Pajares et al. 2013, 144.

inscribed with “Tell Persephone that the Bacchic one himself released you.”<sup>141</sup> So why do we call the tablets Orphic instead of Dionysiac?

For that, we can look to Domenico Comparetti (1835-1927), the Italian scholar who may have been the first to categorize the tablets from Petelia and Thurii as “Orphic and Bacchic” based on what he saw as a clear connection between the *Descent Poems* and the meter of the tablet texts.<sup>142</sup> It is natural for many scholars raised in a Judeo-Christian tradition to look for a canonical text behind religious beliefs, though of course the ancient material connects the Orphic and Dionysiac often enough that Comparetti was well-justified in choosing to categorize the tablets as such. Yet the actual texts of the Pelinna and Thurii tablets available to Comparetti mention neither Dionysus nor Orpheus directly.<sup>143</sup> Persephone, Demeter, Zeus, Eucles and Euboleus are all mentioned by name, which explains why Comparetti’s first impulse was to connect the tablets to the Eleusinian mysteries.<sup>144</sup> However, as mentioned above, there was nothing connecting the Eleusinian mysteries to a concept of the transmigration of souls, which is the main focus of the tablet texts.

A *bricolage* approach<sup>145</sup> to the creation of a mystery cult is better understood when we accept that “the religions of ancient Greece had no canonical, sacred texts. Myths, and especially myths associated with cults, were fluid.”<sup>146</sup> Myths, and evidently the Orphic fragments, were used and reinterpreted to suit the circumstances, and cults built “secret interpretations..or secret rituals” around the myths to suit the purpose of the cult.<sup>147</sup> So far, we have seen that the evidence

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<sup>141</sup> Graf and Johnston, 2013, 37.

<sup>142</sup> Graf and Johnston, 2013, 54.

<sup>143</sup> Graf and Johnston, 2013, 6-15. Graf and Johnston supply bibliographies for each tablet and suggest alternate translations.

<sup>144</sup> Graf and Johnston, 2013, 54.

<sup>145</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss. *Savage Mind (La Pensée Sauvage)*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966, 17.

<sup>146</sup> Graf and Johnston, 2013, 67.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

of an Orphic mystery cult manifests in similar but individual ways; that is, the material will be the same within a given sect, whether it is gold foil or bone, but the message inscribed on it can vary widely depending on personal preference or perhaps the specific teaching of the orpheotelest. This is not to be wondered at, as even modern religions offer some freedom of choice in the particular aspects of the doctrine an individual feels most strongly about; no one regulates the Psalm or verse that can be inscribed on a gravestone, for example. It should be easy to accept a similar freedom of choice and expression for the ancient world where most of the religions available at the time had no strictly determined doctrine. Further, when we consider the cultural interactions born out of the archaic period and the generally syncretistic approach to religion that characterized the Greek world, it ought to be all the more surprising when we find largely homogenous evidence of mystery cults. Initiations are, after all, expected to be a deeply personal ritual experience; why then should the material evidence of such be any less individual?

### Chapter Three

The discussion so far has presented the evidence of *epistomia* in Macedonian burials, and the previous chapter was a brief look at how it is possible to provide a definition of what constitutes ‘Orphic’ that can encompass all the material evidence of ‘Orphism’ that survives from antiquity. When we focus on individual, and regional, expressions of cult rather than a singular pan-Hellenic ‘Orphism’, it is much easier to understand the evidence. Even the terms used to describe mystery cults make it clear that the Orphic/Bacchic/Dionysiac cults will show greater variety than the Eleusinian cult, or other localized cults such as Samothrace.

The word *mystêria* is not a technical term or diagnostic of a specific content but invokes rather the prestige of Eleusis as a reference point; *teletai* and *orgia* occur even more frequently in the sense of privately or locally organized rituals. Since they depended so heavily on the religious philanthropy of individual patrons or managers, such associations had variable life expectancies. The only enduring institutionalized mysteries were those closely linked to local civic cult.<sup>148</sup>

The lack of canonical texts, not just for Orphic rites, but Greek religion in general, suggests a couple of points to consider. Mystery cults would not likely have a set, written doctrine. Outside of Eleusis and Samothrace, which had dedicated sanctuary spaces and regular initiation times during the year, mystery cults seem to have been fluid, small scale associations. Syncretism being the norm, people would have incorporated appropriate elements from known practices when a new cult was established, leading to the confusion of gods and Orphic allusions in the material evidence that survives. It would be far more unusual to find identical Orphic allusions from cults across geographically and temporally distinct spaces.

Returning our attention to the archaic Macedonian burials, we can state with certainty that the mouth-plates are part of a regional funerary practice. These artifacts may be evidence of

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<sup>148</sup> Gordon Richard L. 2013. “Religion, Roman.” *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Archaeology.*, ed. Daniel M. Master. Oxford University Press.

mystery cults or local civic cults, which may have made use of some Orphic texts, but that cannot be determined without a closer look at the evidence.

As mentioned in chapter one, burials were used in the ancient world to signal social status. Staša Babić's work on princely burials in the Balkans is useful to explain how this manifests in the Macedonian burials. Babić, like Morris, notes that social status was maintained through a conspicuous display of material wealth, but further suggests that extravagant burials are used to emphasize the line of descent.<sup>149</sup> This emphasis on descent from a founder – real or mythological – is a typical feature of chiefdoms around the world.<sup>150</sup> For Anastasia and Pavlos Chrysostomou, the gold foil face masks and mouthpieces at Archontiko:

comprised part of an effort by the Macedonians to connect themselves with the pre-Doric past of the Argolid, which also supported the claim of the Temenid's descent from the Dorians of this region. This effort served the Macedonian dynasty in multiple ways, allowing only the Temenid descendants of Heracles to monopolize the right to the Macedonian throne, stressing by every means possible their relations with the powerful Doric world of the Peloponnese as well as their Greek descent from Hercules, and imposing their supremacy and power not only on the Macedonians, but also on the independent Greek colonies in the region.<sup>151</sup>

The Archontiko burials appear organized by family group, and the fact that both women and children have luxury grave goods strongly indicates that status was inherited. Status and the economic power associated with the control over trade and acquisition of luxury goods are “reflected in the right to possess exceptional goods. These objects symbolically represented the status of their owner in political and economic respects, but they did not create this status.”<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Staša Babić. “Princely Graves' of the Central Balkans – a Critical History of Research.” *European Journal of Archaeology* 5 (1): 2002, 80.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Chrysostomou and Chrysostomou 2012, 505.

<sup>152</sup> Chrysostomou and Chrysostomou 2012, 505. This is another indication that initiation may have been restricted at least to those wealthy enough to afford the symbolic/ritual items required, if a gold *epistomion* was required.

Claudia Chang considers the tumulus burials of the Balkans a symbolic means of claiming the land in perpetuity as well as a display of the “available labour power and relative strength of a kin grouping.”<sup>153</sup> The labour required to create monumental burials has long been recognized as a way of ranking the elite in a society, but Chang further suggests that these tumulus burials in the Balkans may represent a shift from local autonomous tribes to “pan-regional confederacies”.<sup>154</sup> Similarities across Illyria, Thrace, and Macedonia during the late Archaic period – common burial traditions, similar grave construction, common iconography – indicate “strong interrelations and interactions between ethnically different people.”<sup>155</sup> Thus far, the material evidence of the Archontiko burials suggests that the ruling families maintained control of the economy through a combination of military might and propaganda about their divine right to rule. It also supports Chang’s suggestion that a confederation of tribal elites was developing in the region at the time burials became concerned with declaring the status and wealth of the deceased.

That said, the social factors evident in the wealth of these burials do not mean the artifacts did not have a simultaneous religious or ritual symbolism. Separation of church and state was not a concern for ancient Greek rulers, and as many of the founding myths make explicit, the right to rule was often directly tied to an assumption of divine descent.

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<sup>153</sup> Claudia Chang, “Lines of Power: Equality or Hierarchy Among the Iron Age Agro-pastoralists of Southeastern Kazakhstan. *The Archaeology of Power and Politics in Eurasia: Regimes and Revolutions*, ed. Charles W. Hartley, 122. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2012), 139.

<sup>154</sup> Chang 2012, 141.

<sup>155</sup> Despini 2009, 204.

## Ruler Cults in Macedonia

Chrysostomou and Chrysostomou have already posited that the gold masks and *epistomia* from Archontiko were an attempt to tie the deceased to Heracles, but we have more direct evidence that the Macedonian ruling family practiced a ruler cult in the Classical and Hellenistic periods. Elizabeth Carney states that for Philip II, Alexander the Great, and his successors, “ruler cults were about the recognition of the power, often the beneficial or protective power, of a human being over an individual or a city. They provided a way to integrate this power into existing institutions, a way to express the relationship between rulers and cities or individuals, and to control or modulate it.”<sup>156</sup> When we look at the evidence of the Philippeum which contained ivory and gold statues of Philip II, his father Amyntas and his son Alexander III, it is clear that Philip II saw the value of using religion to reinforce his political power.<sup>157</sup> Carney suggests that Philip “chose to express his power in familial rather than individual terms because he intended Greek understanding of Macedonian power to be long-term and dynastic.”<sup>158</sup> This is likely what we see happening with the wealthy family burials at Archontiko, a long-term dynastic claim to the land accompanied by the spectacle of extremely wealthy burials but also the construction of tumulus burials.

If the ruler cult and the Philippeum were intended as a message directed at the southern Greeks recently conquered by Philip II, it suggests that such associations were already present in the minds of the Macedonians. The fact that the Macedonian army was prepared to follow Alexander the Great’s mother, Olympias, and his half-sister Adea-Eurydice on the basis of blood relation to their fallen leader suggests that faith in the divine right of the Argead dynasty – even a

<sup>156</sup> Elizabeth Carney. “The Initiation of Cult for Royal Macedonian Women.” *Classical Philology* 95 (1) (2000), 22.

<sup>157</sup> Carney 2000, 24.

<sup>158</sup> Carney 2000, 25.

female leader, in a pinch – was a long-held belief, and not merely imposed on the population at the end of Philip II’s reign. It is not a huge leap to posit that the wealthy burials at Archontiko, Trebeniste, and Sindos were similar to the later ruler cults, if not the direct antecedent.

This sounds political rather than religious to modern readers, but Carney reminds us that “defining a religion in terms of personal belief is an idea that we have imposed on a culture to which it is alien. Because of this imposition, ruler cult has not been understood as religion at all, but politics, even though this distinction is ours and not that of antiquity. Recent disdain for ritual tends to make us ignore its power.”<sup>159</sup> The Imperial cult of the Roman empire stands as conclusive proof that the distinction between political and religious was not present in ancient cultic practices. Carney’s suggestion that the ruler cult of the late fourth century helped “legitimize the newly emergent dynasties” also provides an explanation for the burials at Archontiko, Trebeniste and Sindos.<sup>160</sup>

### **Local Cults in Macedonia**

We cannot fully discount the possibility that the wealthy burials are indications of a Bacchic-Orphic mystery cult, at least at Macedonian Archontiko. Letters from Olympias to Alexander offer further proof that there was a long-established cult for the Argead dynasty; in one she is asking Alexander to recommend a cook experienced in his ancestral sacrificial rites, “both Argead and Bacchic”.<sup>161</sup> This clearly states that both an Argead ruler cult and a Bacchic cult were established in Macedonia at this time and that the royal family was involved in the administration of it. However, there is the fact that mystery cults are generally believed to have

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<sup>159</sup> Carney 2000, 23.

<sup>160</sup> Carney 2000, 35.

<sup>161</sup> Elizabeth Carney, *Olympias: Mother of Alexander the Great*. (Vol. 2. New York: Routledge, 2006), 112.

been a marginal practice in antiquity. It would be highly unusual for the ruling population to have been initiated into a marginal cult, and there is not enough evidence to suggest that Orphism was the major dynastic cult in Macedonia. The idea that the elite population of Archontiko was involved in a Bacchic-Orphic cult en masse should be regarded as unlikely without substantial evidence to the contrary. There is the myth of the Theban king Pentheus who denied Bacchus though his mother and aunts were followers, but one myth of women of a ruling family belonging to a Bacchic cult is not sufficient to categorize the rulers at Archontiko as initiates.

But what of the other *epistomion* burials that are found singly or at sites far from the seats of economic power? It is equally unlikely that each of the reported *epistomion* burials in the archaic period represented a ruler cult, and even more unlikely in the case where the other grave goods are modest or poor. The single *epistomion* burial uncovered to date at Veroia is a good example. It was found in one of the ten Archaic graves excavated in 2003-04 in the grave of a male with a single spear and dagger, and six vessels.<sup>162</sup> A subsequent season of excavations on ten Archaic graves failed to yield any further *epistomia*.<sup>163</sup> The single find at Veroia represents the many basic questions we still cannot answer about the Orphic tablets or *epistomia* in general, such as when they were created, and how much they cost. The Veroian find may represent an individual who was initiated in a city that had a mystery cult, received his token of initiation at the time, and moved away. It may be that this was the only individual in the Veroian cult who could afford an *epistomion* at the time of death, or the only one who had the forethought to purchase or prepare his own. Such practical questions can likely never be answered. It should be

<sup>162</sup> James Whitley, Sophia Germanidou, Dusanka Urem-Kotsou, Anastasia Dimoula, Irene Nikolakopoulou, Artemis Karnava, and Don Evely. "Archaeology in Greece 2006-2007." *Archaeological Reports* 53 (2006), 88.

<sup>163</sup> Don Evely, Heinrich Hall, Catherine Morgan, and Robert K. Pitt. 2007. "Archaeology in Greece 2007-2008." *Archaeological Reports* 54 (2007), 64.

acknowledged that initiation into a mystery cult is not the only answer for the Veroian *epistomion*. It is unlikely, however, that the *epistomion* in this case is a unique manifestation of the practice of gold face coverings for the dead, like the Tibetan and Peruvian gold masks, given the proximity to Pella, Archontiko and Thessalonike, all sites with contemporaneous evidence of *epistomia*.

The evidence for local cults is much easier to determine when there are multiple *epistomion* burials in a necropolis, such as at Thessalonike, Thermi, and Pella. The appearance of a small, local, short-lived cult is not out of the ordinary for the ancient world in general. The temptation may be to consider cults as a primary religious affiliation, and that individuals would belong to one the way modern people may belong to a church, but this is hardly the case. It is important to remember that polytheism allowed private, local cults “to flourish alongside state cults, and the participant in these private cults did not worship one god to the exclusion of others.”<sup>164</sup> Thus a proliferation of cultic evidence, in the form of a particular funerary artifact for example, is not out of the question.

For Macedonia, local cults may have filled the religious needs of much of the population. There were few large sanctuaries or temples until the end of the 5th-century BCE and there is “no evidence of impressive Macedonian temple building before the Temple of Zeus was build in Dium by Archelaus I” who ruled from 413 – 399 BCE.<sup>165</sup> The Argead and Antigonidae dynasties are known to have supported the Samothracian sanctuary and the sanctuary of Zeus at Dodona, but it is known that there were cults to Zeus, “Bendis, Orpheus, the Thracian Horseman, and

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<sup>164</sup> Andrea Purvis. *Singular Dedications: Founders and Innovators of Private Cults in Classical Greece*. 1st ed. Vol. 1. (New York; London: Routledge. 2003; 2004), 2.

<sup>165</sup> Joseph Roisman and Ian Worthington. *A Companion to Ancient Macedonia*. (Malden, MA; Chichester, West Sussex, U.K: Wiley-Blackwell. 2010), 97.

some other 'primitive' indigenous cults.”<sup>166</sup> These could well have had local altars, shrines, or sacred spaces that have not necessarily been excavated or recognized as such, but the Macedonian religious landscape is considered sparse compared to southern Greek cities.

There is also the Thracian cult evidence presented by Zosia Archibald, who states that:

nothing has yet been discovered which might coherently be connected with Orphic traditions, at least in the manner in which they first appear on the fringes of the Greek world. No attempt has been made to examine mortuary evidence in the light of references to those Thracians who opted for an ascetic, celibate, and perhaps vegetarian lifestyle. The existence of celibate Thracians called *Κτίστοι* (recluses) is attested in a fragment from Poseidonios, in which these men were compared on the one hand with the Mysians, described as pious and peaceable vegetarians, consuming only honey, milk, and cheese, who are also described as *Καπνοβάται* ('walkers on smoke', consumers of hallucinogenic substances? Shamans?)...<sup>167</sup>

She further asserts that although “Orpheus always seems to be a Thracian in Greek religion” the evidence currently available provides “no apparent link between Thracian and Greek Orphic rituals or myths.”<sup>168</sup> The most common associations of Orpheus in Thracian traditions are as an “initiator and patron of male secret societies” which Archibald suggests can be expected to mean high-ranking males. She also proposes the idea that the Thracians were divided into age classes, which suggests “instructors who initiate new members” from Strabo's description of Zalmoxis as an “instructor of aristocratic males and a religious adviser of kings.”<sup>169</sup> There is little beyond this to substantiate the possibility that high-ranking Thracian males were initiated into a secret society somehow associated with Orphic patronage. While it is tempting to connect it to the Archontiko “warrior-graves”, those cemeteries were fairly equal in the gender distribution of *epistomia*. The fact that the majority of the artifacts for each gender were embossed with the

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> Archibald 1998, 170.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> Archibald 1998, 171.

same rosette emblem makes it highly unlikely that these pieces are evidence of the ‘secret male societies’ Archibald has suggested.

Yet the idea of Orpheus as initiator of cults is found throughout mainland Greece. Pausanias states that Orpheus was the founder of a number of cults throughout Greece, including a cult to Hecate in Aegina, and one to Demeter Chthonia in Sparta (and potentially also the shrine of Kore the Saviour).<sup>170</sup> He further mentions that the Lycomidae sang short hymns by Orpheus, Musaeus and Pamphlos in the mysteries of Phyla in Attica; this anecdote attests to the ‘*bricolage*’ use of poems or hymns of various authorship in at least one instance, and suggests that – in some cults, at least – priests were at liberty to incorporate what they felt were relevant materials.<sup>171</sup>

We must accept the evidence that in the archaic period, at least, temples and sacred locations were less important than other aspects of religious expression for Thracians and Macedonians. Local cults, ruler cults, and experiential initiations would not necessarily have required temples or sanctuaries, and if we are looking at a Bacchic-Orphic mystery cult, the obvious choice of ritual space is the wilderness itself. It is clear that Orpheus was associated with a number of cults throughout the Mediterranean, as a founder, as the initiator, as a central authoritative voice through the incorporation of poems attributed to him, and as a tangential figure brought in when appropriate. The manifestations of Orphic influence in mystery cults are as individual as the material evidence his initiates left behind.

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<sup>170</sup> West 1983, 28. The Pausanias passages West is referring to are 2.30.2, 3.14.5 and 3.13.2.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

## Conclusions

The evidence presented supports the assertion that ‘Orphism’ was similar to Greek religion in general, in that it existed on a spectrum. This is not a new idea; other scholars have proposed the same concept in relation to Greek religion as a whole and noted that “the trend is now distinctly towards a more flexible and pluralistic depiction of the religious culture”<sup>172</sup> Certainly, some flexibility is needed to bring all the disparate elements of ‘Orphic’ evidence together.

Christopher Faraone makes a good point that a ‘pan-Hellenic’ deity may be ‘pan-Hellenic’ in name but not aspects or manifestations.<sup>173</sup> In terms of Orphic aspects or manifestations, we are left to accept Parker's assertion that the question of Orphic unity must remain unanswered.<sup>174</sup> While it would undoubtedly be satisfying to find a description of Orphism that accounts for the entire corpus of evidence, such a definition would probably not be accurate for the real-life practice of Greek religion which was fluid and adapted to the needs of the population. Looking for a single expression of ritual connected to Orpheus will always be in vain.

There is, likewise, no single explanation for the artifacts in this thesis. It is well to acknowledge that there are a number of factors we still do not know; how the *epistomia* were chosen, who prepared them, or whether we can assume that they were placed in the grave of every initiate. I believe, however, that I have made a case for considering the *epistomion* as ritually significant artifacts rather than simple jewelry. The inclusion of such an artifact in the grave, placed on the mouth, lends a greater significance than mere decoration to these artifacts.

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<sup>172</sup> Kindt, Julia. *Rethinking Greek Religion*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2012), 97.

<sup>173</sup> Bernabe 2013, 121.

<sup>174</sup> Parker 1995, 487.

Their meaning may be lost on us, but a deliberately created gold foil mouth-plate, whether it was inscribed, embossed, or left blank, was not placed in any grave on a whim.

There is a spectrum of appropriate use for the artifact that I see in the evidence at hand. While Archibald's suggestion of a Thracian Orpheus associated with secret male societies for the elite is intriguing, there is little to connect such a claim with the burials at Archontiko, apart from the fact that many of these are clearly the graves of high-ranking males. They may well have been part of an age-group initiation, though the character of such an initiation is unknown. Given the near-equal distribution of *epistomia* between male and female burials at Archontiko, I am more inclined to attribute these artifacts to a ruler cult aimed at the consolidation of power centered on a dynasty as was the case with the Argeads of the Classical and Hellenistic periods.

The instances of multiple *epistomion* burials within a necropolis, as found at Thessalonike, Thermi, Pella, and Vergina, however, seem likely candidates for expressions of a local mystery cult. The rosette design can certainly be read as an emblem of rebirth, and can be linked to Dionysus in a number of instances on Apulian vases, while recognizing that the entire Greek pantheon had multiple aspects and attributes – it would probably be possible to connect the rosette to Hephaestus or Poseidon as well. Nothing specifically precludes these *epistomion* from indicating ‘Orphic’ initiation, but there is likewise nothing that specifically includes them in the body of ‘Orphic’ evidence. Nevertheless, this does suggest a distinct funerary practice and by association, that suggests some belief that such an artifact was meaningful or useful to the deceased. It is highly probable that this is an adaptation of the elite burials, with different associations. While the wealthy burials of Archontiko are concerned with asserting their privileged status in this life, and maintaining it long-term for their families, the less wealthy burials with *epistomia* are asserting their privileged status in the afterlife. That alone, in some

circles, might be considered ‘Orphic’, though I myself would suggest rather that this practice is a precursor to the Orphic tablets.

As to the single *epistomion* burials, I strongly believe these are most likely also representative of the burial practices of a local cult tied to developing eschatological views brought on in part by increased cultural contact. The evidence may be isolated for any number of reasons; looting, the lack of full scale excavation at the sites in question, or an isolated initiate in a city without a cult.

The fact that multiple instances of these artifacts are found across Macedonia indicates that this was a widely known practice. It could have easily been adopted into the Bacchic-Orphic cults that produced the proxy and mnemonic tablets we call the Orphic tablets. While the earlier practice may not have represented the same eschatological beliefs as the latter, there are too many similarities to dismiss out of hand the possibility of adoption and adaptation of the artifact. Adoption and adaptation reflect the nature of Greek ritual practices, which were fluid and changed to meet the needs of the population. A sharp change from cities without mystery cults and burials without *epistomia* to cities with initiatory cults and *epistomion* burials would require a clear doctrinal religion that appeared in a complete form. The spectrum of symbolism possible for *epistomia* presented in this thesis actually accounts for the fluidity and independent nature of Greek religious practices as a natural progression when cities first begin experimenting with new eschatological beliefs. The unscribed *epistomia* are most likely the material evidence of a gradually developing eschatological view of the afterlife with potential connections to mystery cults which originated and flourished in the archaic period.

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## Appendix A

The following lists the publications detailing *epistomia* and *lamellae* excavated since 2002.

### Abbreviations:

AR Archaeological Reports  
AEMTH Archaeological Work in Macedonia and Thrace  
Adelt Archaiologikon Deltion

### Iron Age

#### Nea Philadelphia

Some mouthpieces found, number unknown, dated to the Iron Age.

Publications: AR 2006, 65.  
V. Misailidou-Despotidou, Adelt 552-553.

#### Stavropouli

One mouthpiece found, dated to the Iron Age.

Publications: AR 2006, 71.  
A. Lioutas, Adelt, 548.

### Archaic Period

#### Archontiko

I have been unable to determine with any certainty the total number excavated between 2002 – 2010.

Publications: AR 2008 (9 epistomia listed) AR 2010 (4 epistomia listed)  
A. and P. Chrysostomou, *AEMTH 15* 2001 477-88, *AEMTH 16* 2002 465-78  
A. and P. Chrysostomou, *AEMTH 18* 2004, 561-571.  
P. Chrysostomou and A. Zarogiannis *AEMTH 19* 2005, 427 – 34;  
A. and P. Chrysostomou *AEMTH 19* 2005 435-37  
Kathimerini, Ta Nea, Eleftherotypia and To Vima 11/09/08.

#### Argilos

One mouthpiece.

Publications: AR 2009, 142.

#### Gazoros

Single mouthpiece.

Publications: AR 2003, 55.

#### Makedonis

Male burials with epistomia.

Publications: AR 2005, 89.  
A. Kottaridi *AEMTH 18* 2004 543-50.

Nea Philadelphia  
One mouthpiece.  
Publications: AR 2001, 72.

Thessalonike  
Unknown number found.  
Publications: AR 2003, 49 and AR 2004, 74.  
K. Soueref *AEMTH 15* 2001 241-8; *AEMTH 16* 2002 277-89.

Vergina  
Unknown number of mouthpieces found.  
Publications: AR 2006, 59.

Veroia  
Single mouthpiece reported.  
Publication: AR 2005, 88.  
L. Stefani *AEMTH 18* 2004, 485 – 94.

### **Classical Period**

Thermi  
Unknown number of mouthpieces.  
Publications: AR 2006, 63 and 2009, 139.  
E. Skarlatidou *Adelt 55* 2000 675-76

### **Hellenistic Period**

Drymos  
One potential fragment found.  
Publications: AR 2009, 132.  
A. Kemaris *Adelt 55* 2000 684-86.

Spelia Eordaias, Aghia Paraskevi.  
Single mouthpiece found.  
Publications: AR 2006, 49.  
G. Karamitrou-Mendesidi *AEMTH 19* 2005, 495 – 509.

Neos Skopos  
Unknown number found.  
Publications: AR 2006, 71.  
K. Peristeri, Th. Salonikios, V. Halkiopolou *AEMTH 19* 2005 119-27  
H Kathimerini 25/02/2007.

## **Roman Period**

Didymoteicho

Single mouthpiece found.

Publications: AR 2000, 109.

AEMTH 12, 19-29