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A GOLD LAMELLA WITH GREEK INSCRIPTION IN THE BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY COLLECTION

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In 2006 the Harold B. Lee Library at Brigham Young University acquired a number of artifacts from a private collection in California. Among the various items obtained was a small gold lamella that contained a four line inscription written in Greek; it is rectangular in shape and measures 3.0 cm (H) × 5.5 cm (W) with writing widthwise. There are no symbols or designs on the piece. Paleographically the inscription is difficult to date with much precision since the writing sample is very small and does not contain any specific letter peculiarities that signal a specific date. However, it may be noted that the letterforms on the amulet closely resemble the letterforms on a few amulets written on various lamellae (gold, silver, copper and bronze) that date between the first and third centuries A.D. Therefore, a date between the first and third centuries A.D. seems most likely. Regrettably, the piece is without provenance.

The inscription preserved on the lamella is a common one that appears on funerary stelae where the deceased is addressed and is asked to “cheer up” or “take courage” since “no one is immortal” (οὐδεὶς ἀθάνατος). As a general rule the θ.ο.α. formula almost always appears as the concluding element of the epitaph after biographical information (age and perhaps date of death) is given. Funerary inscriptions containing this formula, or close derivations of it (sometimes with εὐψύχης or μὴ λυπης instead of θάρσει), can be found throughout the Roman Empire: Italy; Pannonia; Greece; Asia Minor; Syria; Arabia and Egypt. However, it may be noted that it was especially widespread in epitaphs from Palestine (and the Transjordan) between the third and sixth centuries A.D. where there are well over a hundred attestations of the phrase.

Aside from funerary stelae there are a few examples where the θ.ο.α. formula appears on gold lamellae, as is the case in the present piece. These lamellae range in date from the second century B.C. through the third and first centuries A.D.

I thank Russell Taylor of Special Collections at the Harold B. Lee Library and Mark Pollei of the Conservation Lab at the Harold B. Lee Library for allowing me to examine this piece and for allowing me to publish it. I also thank Thomas Wayment for reading a draft of this article.

The artifacts were donated to the library by a Mr. David H. Swingler of Oxnard California. The items donated by Mr. Swingler (including the gold lamella) were purchased between 1983 and 1985 from the Royal Athena Gallery in New York through the director of the gallery Dr. Jerome M. Eisenberg.


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3 Roy Kotansky, Greek Magical Amulets: The Inscribed Gold, Silver, Copper, and Bronze Lamellae. Part I: Published Texts of Known Provenance. Papyrologica Coloniensia Vol. XXII/1 (Opladen, 1994), no. 16 Silver lamella (A.D. III); no. 28 Gold lamella (Augustan Period); no. 40 Gold lamella (A.D. II); no. 42 Gold lamella (A.D. II?). Dates for the cited pieces are listed according to how they appear in the work.


6 Italy: IG XIV 910 (date?); IG XIV 1353 (= CIL VI 11082) (date?); IG 1634 (= IGUR II 565) (date?); IG XIV 1699 (= CIL VI 20453; IGUR II 624) (date?); IG XIV 2009 (= IGUR II 941) (date?); IG XIV 2188 (= IGUR II 1051) (date?); IGUR II 1110 (date?); IG XIV 2187 (= IGUR II 1112) (date?); SEG XXIX 1039.1 (A.D. III); Greece: SEG XL 3979–11 (late A.D. II); Asia Minor: TAM III 634. Syria: SEG L 1411.1 (date?); Arabia: SEG LI 2078 (before A.D. VI); Egypt: SB I 3514 (date?); SB I 3515 (date?); SB I 3992 (date?); SB III 6209 (date?); SB III 7015 (date?); SB XII 11099 (IV?); SEG XVIII 711 (A.D. V?); SEG XXVIII 1460–64, 1467, 1490 (A.D. V/VI); SEG XXXVIII 1659 (A.D. VI/VII); SEG LV 1824 (A.D. VI/VII); IGChrEg (= Inscriptiones Graecae Egypti. Vol. V: Inscriptiones Christianae Egypti) 202, 244, 310, 318, 445, 459, 462, 476, 479, 490, 494, 507, 515, 525, 556, 573, 575, 576 (all Byzantine period A.D. IV–VII).

7 I.Pal.Tertia Ia, index pp. 435–36 s.v. οὐδεὶς ὀθάνατος and οὐδεὶς ὀθάνατος and on p. 94 where additional references to other Palestinian inscriptions are given. See also SEG LI 2027 (A.D. IV?); SEG LV 1749 (A.D. IV?).

8 Max Siebourg, Zwei griechische Goldtänien aus der Sammlung C. A. Niessen in Köln, ARW 8 (1905) 390–410; idem, Neue Goldblättchen mit griechischen Aufschriften, ARW 10 (1907) 393–99; F. Thompson, Die lateinischen und griechischen
Roman Period and have been found almost exclusively in tombs from Palestine where they were buried with the deceased and seem to have been placed on the foreheads of the deceased so as to function as some kind of funerary headband.\textsuperscript{9} Though the present piece is unprovenanced, in light of such evidence it seems likely that it too may have come from some Palestinian tomb.\textsuperscript{10}

Concerning the actual meaning of the θ.ο.α. formula it should first be pointed out that at least on funerary stelae this phrase was not exclusively used by one religious system but appears in a number of different religious contexts (Christian, Jewish and Pagan).\textsuperscript{11} While it is generally believed that the θ.ο.α. formula on funerary inscriptions affirmed some kind of post-mortem existence, there is no consensus on what was actually intended by the phrase.\textsuperscript{12} Some have taken it as a way of encouraging and strengthening the deceased as they encountered various dangers on their underworld journey to their final resting place in the blessed hereafter.\textsuperscript{13} For others, however, this phrase is taken as primarily consolatory in nature and was intended principally to comfort the deceased by reminding them that all are subject to death.\textsuperscript{14} In the present case, since we are not dealing with a “public” funerary stela which could be read by any passerby but with a “private” artifact which was deliberately interred with the dead and it would not have been expected that any other living person would ever read it, it seems more likely that an interpretation along the line of the first proposal seems more likely.\textsuperscript{15}

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\textsuperscript{10} The very same iotacisms that appear in the present piece (θάρσει for θάρσει and οὐδὶς for οὐδὲς) also occur in the various Palestinian pieces: Siebourg (n. 8), 391 – θάρσει Εὐγένει οὐδὲς θάνατος. Deonna (n. 8), 225 – θάρσει Πέτρα οὐδὲς θάνατος. Benoit (n. 8), 256 – θάρσει Νόμοσα.

\textsuperscript{11} SEG LV 1764 p. 581 (a summary of I.Pal.Tertia Ia) where it is noted, “… the expression [θάρσει ΝΝ οὐδὲς θάνατος] was used indiscriminately in Pagan, Jewish, and Christian epitaphs”; cf. M. Simon, Θάρσει οὐδὲς θάνατος: étude de vocabulaire religieux, RHR 113 (1936) 188–206; T. B. Mitford, The Inscriptions of Kourion (Philadelphia, 1971), 300 no. 156. In securely Christian epitaphs this phrase was sometimes accompanied by various other phrases that either incorporated nomina sacra (ὁ θεὸς θάνατος (I.Pal.Tertia Ia 11.9–10 [27 Dec A.D. 349]) or contained distinctly Christian symbols such as the cross (\(\chi\)\(\rho\)\(\omicron\)\(\omicron\)\(\sigma\)), staurogram (\(\Psi\)), etc. Deonna (n. 8), 225 – θάρσει Πέτρα οὐδὲς θάνατος. Benoit (n. 8), 256 – θάρσει Νόμοσα.

\textsuperscript{12} Simon (n. 11), 188–206; F. Cumont, Recherches sur le symbolisme funéraire des Romains (Paris, 1942), 76; R. Joly, L’exhortation au courage (THAPEIN) dans les Mystères, REG 68 (1955) 164–70; H. Kosmala, Hebräer – Essener – Christen (Leiden, 1959), 421–22; B. Lifshitz, La vie de l’au-delà dans les conceptions juives. Inscriptions grecques de Beth-She’arim, RB 68 (1961) 403; M.-T. Olszewski, Le langage symbolique dans la décoration à scènes mythologiques et son sens dans les tombes peintes de l’Orient romain. Nouvelle approche, in A. Barbet (ed.), La peinture funéraire antique, Ve siècle av. J.-C.–Ve siècle ap. J.-C. (Paris, 2001), 159–60. In C. H. Welles, The Inscriptions, in C. H. Kraeling (ed.), Gerasa, City of the Decapolis (New Haven, 1938), 454–55, he argues that while such an interpretation (supporting post-mortem existence) was certainly valid for Jews and Christians it was not necessarily so for pagans. See also Park (n. 11), 47–49, 62–3. Simon (pp. 188–89) insists that the θ.ο.α. formula does not deny the afterlife and is much different than non fui, non sum, non curo formulae.

\textsuperscript{13} Simon (n. 11), 188–206.

\textsuperscript{14} Richmond Lattimore, Themes in Greek and Latin Epitaphs (Urbana, 1962), 250–56. On 253–54 he cites IG XIV 1806 (date?) εὐφροσύνη Μίδαν οὐδὲς θάνατος; καὶ ὁ Ἰρωκλίς ἀπέθανε to illustrate how this formula was principally consolatory. Cf. Simon (n. 11), 196 who also cites this inscription; Park (n. 11), 48, 51.

\textsuperscript{15} Kotansky has noted that certain kinds of amulets were deliberately buried with the deceased so as to act as a kind of Totenpaß for the soul of the bearer in the world to come”. See Kotansky, Amulets (n. 3), 75; cf. idem, Incantations (n. 9), 116. Although the present piece has an arch in the middle there is no indication that it was rolled and inserted into a capsule, thereby being buried with the deceased unintentionally because they were already wearing it. Its placement in the tomb was likely post-mortem and deliberate.
Transcription

Θάρσι Ἡρακλιανός,
κλιανὲ, οὐ-
δὶς ὀθάνας-
4 τοὺς.

1. θάρσει. 4. οὐδεὶς.

Translation

Take courage Heraklianos, no one is immortal.

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