
Rosetta

Erez-Yodfat, N. (2017); 'Inscribed Gold Lamella from the Hecht Museum'

Rosetta **21**: 17 - 22

<http://www.rosetta.bham.ac.uk/issue21/erez-yodfat.pdf>

Inscribed Gold *Lamella* from the Hecht Museum

Noga Erez-Yodfat

The gold *lamella* from the Hecht Museum that I would like to present and discuss in this paper is dated to the Roman period and was presumably used for burial (Fig.1).¹ It is in the shape of a *tabula ansata*, its dimensions are about 2.5 cm H x 6 cm W (at its widest point), and is engraved with the following Greek inscription: *θάρσε[ι] Μάξιμε οὐδ[ε]ίς ἀθάνατο[ς]* (Take courage, Maximus, no one is immortal!). The *lamella* was acquired by Reuben Hecht in June 1984, and unfortunately, nothing is known about its origin. Nevertheless, as I intend to show now, by associating the *lamella* with a group of similar artefacts, a possible background and association may be suggested.

The formula *θάρσει οὐδεὶς ἀθάνατος*, frequently abbreviated to $\Theta \ O \ A$, is very common in epitaphs from the Imperial period. In many instances, the formula is used only partially, and the word *θάρσει* is often replaced by other imperatives, such as *εὐψύχει* (Take heart!), *εὐφραίνει* (Be happy!), *εὐθύμει* (Be of good cheer!), *εὐμοίρει* (Have a good share!), *μὴ λυποῦ* (Do not grieve!), etc. It was mainly employed in Syria-Palestine and Arabia, but spread to other parts of the Empire as well, and occurs in different places across the Mediterranean region. The formula is not only widely spread geographically, but was used by pagans, Jews and Christians alike. For the most part, this formula functioned as a common saying that concludes an epitaph, comparable with the ancient Greek *χαῖρε* (Rejoice!) and the Latin *vale* (Farewell!), or the later Christian *R(equiescat) I(n) P(ace)* (Rest in peace!) and the Jewish *ה.ב.צ.נ.ת* (May his/her soul be bound in the bond of living). However, in some cases, the $\Theta \ O \ A$ formula seems to convey more complex views concerning death and the afterlife. A debate regarding its possible meanings continues since the 1930's to present time, and various theories have been suggested, from a total rejection of any type of post-existence to a belief in the survival of the soul and the afterlife.² Although resolving this issue is beyond the limits of this paper, it is important to keep in mind that differing ideas and beliefs could be associated with this expression by adepts of different religions over time and space.

¹ I thank Perry Harel, Shunit Marmelstein and Sharon Poliakine of the Hecht Museum for allowing me to publish this gold *lamella* and for providing me with the attached photo. In addition, I am grateful to Hellena Sokolovsky for her kind help with the illustration, to Miguel Herrero de Jáuregui who generously allowed me to read his paper (Herrero de Jáuregui 2016) before publication and to the anonymous reviewers of this paper for their comments. Finally, I wish to thank my supervisors, Prof. Yulia Ustinova and Prof. Irad Malkin, for their constant support and helpful advice in the preparation of this paper.

² For the bibliography of the debate see Park 2000: 47-63.

Apart from the tombstone inscriptions, all the eleven known inscribed gold *lamellae* that contain the Θ Ο Α formula, originate from Roman Palestine (2nd-3rd c. CE), and have been grouped together by different scholars in the past.³ To this group, several other published inscribed gold *lamellae* are to be added. Two gold *lamellae* of unknown provenance, shaped as *tabula ansata*, are now in the Rockefeller Museum in Jerusalem. One of them features the inscription θάρσι (Take courage!),⁴ while the other one reads θάρσι Γωζμε (Take courage, Gozmos).⁵ We should also mention a gold *lamella* dated to the Late Roman period that was found in the mouth of a female skeleton in a grave next to Hadera, north-western Israel. This tablet, formerly kept at the Museum of 'Emeq Hephher at Ruppin Agriculture College, is currently in the possession of the Israel Antiquities Authority. The original publishers of this *lamella* found it difficult to draw a definite conclusion as to the interpretation of the inscription itself. At first it had been assumed that the name on this gold *lamella* was the masculine name Εύγένης, but since it was found with a female skeleton, the female name Όγῆν or Όγάς, which appears in other inscriptions dated to the same period, were considered more probable.⁶ However, as one can easily observe, the text inscribed on the lamella is θάρσει εύγηνηῖ⁷ ούδεις άθάνατος (Take courage, Eugene, no one is immortal!). This is of particular interest since the name, or adjective, Εύγηνηῖ (Well-born) appears on four of the Palestinian gold tablets and seems to imply some sort of shared custom.⁸ There are a few more unpublished inscribed gold *lamellae* that include the Θ Ο Α formula which I intend to publish in the near future. Besides, since gold *lamellae* belonging to this group continue to be published, additional unpublished *lamellae*, belonging to museums or in private possession, may come to light in future.

Unlike the tombstone inscriptions, the study of the gold *lamellae* is not as comprehensive. Yet, in recent years, new interest in the topic has risen, and it was discussed by several scholars.⁹ Most *lamellae* come from the art market, just like the

³ Benoit 1952: 256, Blumel 2011, Deonna 1929: 224-226, no. 1, Germer-Durand 1899: 24-25, no. 33, Graf and Johnston 2013: 208-213, Michon 1922: 214-218, Siebourg 1905, Siebourg 1907. It is important to note that the origin of the *lamella* published by Lincoln Blumel is unknown. Yet as Blumel 2011: 167 points out, it is very likely that it is from a Palestinian tomb, as well.

⁴ Hestrin et al 1973: 251, no. 254 (Hebrew).

⁵ Cheesman 1979: 3

⁶ Appelbaum 1985: 266 no. 2 (Hebrew), Appelbaum et al 1982: 102 no. 8, SEG 32-1508.

⁷ Spelling mistake in the original text.

⁸ For different views on the significance of the repeated appearances of the name Εύγηνηῖ, see Graf 2016: 18-20, Graf and Johnston 2013: 213, Herrero de Jáuregui 2016: 7, Michon 1922: 216-217, Siebourg 1905 and 1907.

⁹ Kotansky 1983: 167-168; Kotansky 1991: 114-116. The most updated and comprehensive studies on the matter are Blumel 2011, Graf 2016 and Graf and Johnston 2013: 208-213. In addition, brief mentions of the *lamellae* may be found in different contexts : Herrero de Jáuregui 2015: 580, n. 35, Herrero de Jáuregui 2016: 7, López-Ruiz 2015: 71-72, Martín-Hernández 2010: 66, Tovar 2013: 20-22.

one from the Hecht Museum, but in some cases their origin is known. Four *lamellae* were discovered within one grave in Fiq (at the Golan Heights), while six others were reported as originating from several sites located in close proximity to one another: Jerusalem (Aelia Capitolina),¹⁰ Beit Guvrin (Eleutheropolis) and Latrun (Emmaus Nicopolis). This proximity may imply that the owners of the *lamellae* were connected and participated in a common cult or shared beliefs concerning the afterlife. Some scholars suggested that these *lamellae* might be somehow associated with the so-called “Bacchic-Orphic gold tablets”, a possibility that offers an even wider context.¹¹ The main reason for this association, according to Fritz Graf, is that similar to the Bacchic-Orphic gold leaves, “we deal here with a more or less specific group of worshipers that used gold tablets to preserve eschatological hopes”. Given the evidence for the use of this method (writing a message for the deceased on a gold tablet) in the Bacchic rites, as Graf notes, one may assume that the Palestinian group could have consciously adopted this custom from a Bacchic group, which produced and used the Bacchic-Orphic gold tablets.¹² In addition, although the Θ Ο Α formula differs from the texts engraved on the Bacchic-Orphic gold tablets, it is quite likely that in the case of the gold *lamellae* this formula expressed a positive view regarding the afterlife, similarly to the Bacchic-Orphic gold tablets. First of all, most of the gold *lamellae* from Roman Palestine do not contain the second part of the formula (οὐδέις ἀθάνατος), therefore their message was probably focused on the first part (θάρασει), a fact that can be interpreted as reflecting a much more hopeful view of death.¹³ Secondly, since unlike the Θ Ο Α inscriptions on tombstones, the gold *lamellae* were buried with the deceased, and the texts inscribed on them were not meant to be read by anyone but this person - another hint at the possibility of afterlife beliefs.¹⁴ Of course, at the present state of evidence this hypothesis cannot be definitely proved.

In summary, the *lamella* from the Hecht Museum most probably belongs in the group of burial *lamellae* from Roman Palestine that contain the Θ Ο Α formula. By linking the *lamella* from the Hecht Museum, as well as the three additional *lamellae* presented above, to this group, light may be shed on the extent and distribution of the local religious tradition to which it belongs.

¹⁰ The two gold *lamellae* were acquired at Jerusalem, but it is unclear whether they were discovered there.

¹¹ The possible link to the Orphic gold tablets was initially suggested by Roy Kotansky (1991: 115-116) and developed in Graf- Johnston 2013.

¹² Graf and Johnston 2013: 163, 213.

¹³ On the verb *θαρασεῖν* in religious contexts, see Herrero de Jáuregui 2016.

¹⁴ Blumel 2011: 167.

Figures



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ΖΙΜΕΟΥΔΙΣ
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Figure 1 The Hecht Museum Collection. Inv. No. H-2101. Photo: Perry Harel. Drawing: Hellena Sokolovsky.

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