

LINCOLN H. BLUMELL

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

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A GOLD *LAMELLA* WITH A GREEK INSCRIPTION  
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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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, a date between the first and third centuries A.D. seems most likely. Regrettably, the piece is without provenance.<sup>4</sup>

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” (θάρσει NN 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.<sup>5</sup> Funerary inscriptions containing this formula, or close derivations of it (sometimes with εὐψύχει or μὴ λυποῦ/λυπῆς instead of θάρσει), can be found throughout the Roman Empire: Italy; Pannonia; Greece; Asia Minor; Syria; Arabia and Egypt.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup>

Aside from funerary stelae there are a few examples where the θ.ο.α. formula appears on gold *lamellae*,<sup>8</sup> as is the case in the present piece. These *lamellae* range in date from the second century B.C. through the

<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> Roy Kotansky, A Silver Phylactery for Pain, *The J. Paul Getty Museum Journal* 11 (1983) 169 n. 3, who notes that for whatever reasons most published *lamellae* are of unknown provenance.

<sup>5</sup> I.Pal.Tertia Ia (= Yiannis E. Meimaris and Kalliope I. Kritikakou-Nikolaropoulou, *Inscriptions from Palaestina Tertia. Vol. Ia: The Greek Inscriptions from Ghor Es-Safi (Byzantine Zoora)* Meletemata 41 (Athens, 2005), 94.

<sup>6</sup> 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?); CIL VI 22945 (= IGUR II 812) (date?); IG XIV 2009 (= IGUR II 941) (date?); IG XIV 2118 (= IGUR II 1051) (date?); IGUR II 1110 (date?); IG XIV 2187 (= IGUR II 1112) (date?); IGUR II 1114 (date?). Pannonia: SEG XXIX 1039.1 (A.D. III). Greece: SEG XL 397.9–11 (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 1695 (A.D. VI/VII); SEG LV 1824 (A.D. VI/VII); IGChrEg (= *Inscriptiones Graecae Aegypti. Vol. V: Inscriptiones Christianae Aegypti*) 202, 244, 310, 318, 348, 445, 459, 462, 476, 479, 490, 494, 507, 515, 525, 556, 573, 575, 576 (all Byzantine period [A.D. IV–VII]).

<sup>7</sup> I.Pal.Tertia Ia, index pp. 435–36 s.v. οὐδεὶς ἀθάνατος and οὐδὶς ἀθάνατος and p. 438 s.v. θαρσέω and θάρσι 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. 140/41).

<sup>8</sup> 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; P. 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.<sup>9</sup> Though the present piece is unprovenanced, in light of such evidence it seems likely that it too may have come from some Palestinian tomb.<sup>10</sup>

Concerning the actual meaning of the  $\theta.\omicron.\alpha.$  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).<sup>11</sup> While it is generally believed that the  $\theta.\omicron.\alpha.$  formula on funerary inscriptions affirmed some kind of post-mortem existence, there is no consensus on what was actually intended by the phrase.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup>

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*Inschriften der Stadt Jerusalem* (Leipzig, 1922), 113 no. 208; E. Michon, A propos d'un bandeau d'or palestinien, *Syria* 3 (1922) 214–18; W. Deonna, Monuments orientaux du Musée Genève, *Syria* 4 (1929) 224–26; P. Benoit, Nouvelles ‘brattées’ trouvées en Palestine, *RB* 59 (1952) 253–58.

<sup>9</sup> Roy Kotansky, Incantations and Prayers for Salvation on Inscribed Greek Amulets, in Christopher A. Faraone and Dirk Obbink (eds.), *Magika Hiera: Ancient Greek Magic and Religion* (New York and Oxford, 1991), 115–16.

<sup>10</sup> The very same iotacisms that appear in the present piece ( $\theta\acute{\alpha}\rho\sigma\iota$  for  $\theta\acute{\alpha}\rho\sigma\epsilon\iota$  and  $\omicron\delta\iota\varsigma$  for  $\omicron\delta\epsilon\iota\varsigma$ ) also occur in the various Palestinian pieces: Siebourg (n. 8), 391 –  $\theta\acute{\alpha}\rho\sigma\iota$   $\epsilon\upsilon\gamma\acute{\epsilon}\nu\eta$   $\omicron\delta\iota\varsigma$   $\acute{\alpha}\theta\acute{\alpha}\nu\alpha\tau\omicron\varsigma$ ; Deonna (n. 8), 225 –  $\theta\acute{\alpha}\rho\sigma\iota$   $\Pi\acute{\epsilon}\tau\rho\epsilon$   $\omicron\delta\iota\varsigma$   $\acute{\alpha}\theta\acute{\alpha}\nu\alpha\tau\omicron\varsigma$ ; Benoit (n. 8), 256 –  $\theta\acute{\alpha}\rho\sigma\iota$   $\text{Νικόμεαχ}\epsilon$ .

<sup>11</sup> SEG LV 1764 p. 581 (a summary of I.Pal.Tertia Ia) where it is noted, “... the expression [ $\theta\acute{\alpha}\rho\sigma\epsilon\iota$  NN  $\omicron\delta\epsilon\iota\varsigma$   $\acute{\alpha}\theta\acute{\alpha}\nu\alpha\tau\omicron\varsigma$ ] was used indiscriminately in Pagan, Jewish, and Christian epitaphs”; cf. M. Simon,  $\theta\acute{\alpha}\rho\sigma\epsilon\iota$   $\omicron\delta\epsilon\iota\varsigma$   $\acute{\alpha}\theta\acute{\alpha}\nu\alpha\tau\omicron\varsigma$ : 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* ( $\acute{\omicron}$   $\theta(\epsilon)\delta\varsigma$   $\acute{\alpha}\theta\acute{\alpha}\nu\alpha\tau\omicron\varsigma$  (I.Pal.Tertia Ia 11.9–10 [27 Dec A.D. 349])) or contained distinctly Christian symbols such as the cross ( $\times$ ), staurogram ( $\text{Ϟ}$ ), chi/rho monogram ( $\text{Ϟ}$ ), or XMG (SEG XXVIII 1460–64, 1467, 1490 [A.D. V/VI]; IGChREg 202, 244, 310, 318, 348, 445, 459, 462, 476, 479, 490, 494, 507, 515, 525, 556, 573, 575, 576). In Jewish contexts this phrase was sometimes accompanied by various Jewish symbols such as the Menorah (CIJ 335 [date?]; JIWE II 99 [date?]), the torah-shrine (JIWE II 187 [date?]) or the palm-branch (JIWE II 31 [date?]). On the Jewish use of this phrase see M. Schwabe and B. Lifshitz, *Beth She'arim. Vol II: The Greek Inscriptions* (Jerusalem, 1974) 105, 172; Joseph S. Park, *Conceptions of Afterlife in Jewish Inscriptions. Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2. Reihe. 121* (Tübingen, 2000), 52–63 for a useful overview of Jewish uses. In demonstrably pagan funerary inscriptions invocation is sometimes made to the “infernal gods”  $\Theta(\epsilon\omicron\iota\varsigma)$   $\text{Κ}(\alpha\tau\alpha\chi\theta\omicron\nu\iota\omicron\tau\omicron\varsigma)$  at the start of the inscription: IG XIV 2009 (= IGUR II 941) (date?); IG XIV 2118 (= IGUR II 1051) (date?); IGUR II 1110 (date?).

<sup>12</sup> Simon (n. 11), 188–206; F. Cumont, *Recherches sur le symbolisme funéraire des Romains* (Paris, 1942), 76; R. Joly, L'exhortation au courage ( $\Theta\text{ΑΠΠΕΙΝ}$ ) 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, IVe siècle av. J.-C.–IVe siècle ap. J.-C.* (Paris, 2001), 159–60. In C. B. 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  $\theta.\omicron.\alpha.$  formula does not deny the afterlife and is much different than *non fui, fui, non sum, non curo* formulae.

<sup>13</sup> Simon (n. 11), 188–206.

<sup>14</sup> Richmond Lattimore, *Themes in Greek and Latin Epitaphs* (Urbana, 1962), 250–56. On 253–54 he cites IG XIV 1806 (date?)  $\epsilon\upsilon\psi\acute{\upsilon}\chi\iota$   $\text{Μίδων}$   $\omicron\delta\epsilon\iota\varsigma$   $\acute{\alpha}\theta\acute{\alpha}\nu\alpha\tau\omicron\varsigma$ ;  $\kappa\alpha\iota$   $\acute{\omicron}$   $\text{Ἡρακλῆς}$   $\acute{\alpha}\pi\acute{\epsilon}\theta\alpha\nu\epsilon$  to illustrate how this formula was principally consolatory. Cf. Simon (n. 11), 196 who also cites this inscription; Park (n. 11), 48, 51.

<sup>15</sup> 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 Ἡρα-  
κλιανέ, οὐ-  
δὶς ἀθάνα-  
4 τος.

1. ἰ. θάρσει. 4. ἰ. οὐδεὶς.

## Translation

Take courage Heraklianos, no one is immortal.

Lincoln H. Blumell, Brigham Young University  
lincoln\_blumell@byu.edu