

# REPORT ON EARLY GREEK GOLD LAMELLA

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## DESCRIPTION

This *lamella*, or strip of thin sheet gold, is incised with six lines of Greek, written from left to right. There are margins on all sides of the text, indicating that the *lamella* is complete and that the writing was made to fit onto a pre-made sheet of gold, rather than the gold being cut to size around the inscription. The gold is unworn but shows some fold lines with slight damage along them, though the *lamella* itself does not seem to have been rolled up, unlike the later Roman examples which were folded to be worn or fitted into amulet cases.

## PALAEOGRAPHY AND DATING

The method of inscription on this object is, to my knowledge, unparalleled. Other *lamellae* and inscriptions on metal of approximately equivalent date to this example were incised directly onto the metal with a sharp object like a stylus (see L.H. Jeffery, *The Local Scripts of Archaic Greece* (revised edition, Oxford, 1990, [henceforward Jeffery] plates 3 no 21, 41 no 27, 42 no. 6, 49 no. 19, 75 no 7, 80 no 1, etc.; for gold examples specifically see A. Olivieri, *Lamellae Aureae Orphicae* (Bonn 1915) and M. Guarducci, 'Laminette auree orfiche: alcuni problemi', *Epigraphica* 36 (1974) 7-31 [henceforward Guarducci]). Our example, however, has been 'struck' like a coin from a master inscription with letters that stood proud of its surface. The thin sheet of gold was placed over this prototype, and pressure applied to the upper side of the gold in order to impress the letters into it. This is why the inscription on the *lamella* appears raised and rounded, rather than impressed as it would be if written with a stylus. This method of inscribing the text implies that the *lamella* comes from a context in which mass-production of the inscription was required, a fact that will be come important when the purpose of this object is considered.

The letter forms of the inscription are also unusual and indicate an early date, at least for the production of the master copy from which this *lamella* was struck. In pre-Classical Greece, scripts were highly localised and the idiosyncracies of a particular inscription's letter forms can give a good indication of provenance. The unusual shape of the *lambda* in our text, like an inverted tick-mark resembles the shape of this letter in north-eastern Greek inscriptions from Attica and Euboea. Other letter forms are also consistent with an origin for this text in north-eastern Greece, such as the *kappa* with forks positioned in the middle of the descender and the round *theta* with internal cross. However, some of the other letters look more like examples from Greek colonies in western Turkey, especially those from Cnidus: compare the similarity of the forms of the *alpha* and *sigma* in the *lamella* with those used in Cnidian inscriptions (tabulated by Jeffery). *alpha* and *sigma* tend to look rather different in inscriptions from Attica and Euboea, though more than one form of *sigma* is used in the inscription on our *lamella*. All in all, this *lamella* seems to have been made from a prototype manufactured in north-eastern Greece or one of the east Greek colonies in Turkey, with Cnidus an attractive possibility. As for date, the palaeography of early Greek inscriptions is still problematic, but the comparanda in Jeffery suggest a date in the mid-sixth century BC: see her plate 3 no 21 (bronze plaque from Attica, c. 550 BC?) and plate 11 no 1 (stela from Thessaly, c. 550 BC). Both Jeffery and Guarducci are cautious about dates, and it is important to remember that it is difficult to compare inscriptions on different materials for dating purposes. However, a sixth-century date for this *lamella* does seem possible. If this early date were correct, the *lamella* would be of considerable rarity and possibly unique.

## INSCRIPTION

The six lines of the inscription are mostly fairly clear and legible, especially when read from the reverse (i.e. the side closest to the prototype from which the *lamella* was 'struck'). Though most of the text is legible, not all of it is intelligible and there are some letter sequences of which I could not make any sense. The grammar and syntax seem quite strange at times, as though the prototype was copied from a defective original: peculiar grammar is often a feature of these sorts of texts (see R. Kotansky, 'Incantations and Prayers for Salvation on Inscribed Greek Amulets' in C. Faraone and D. Obbink (eds) *Magica Hiera* (Oxford 1990) 111, 115 [henceforward Kotansky]). Some of the clearer phrases may give a sense of the whole text: a few phrases could fit into hexameters, again a feature of the early Greek *lamellae* (see Kotansky, *op.cit.*, with references).

Our *lamella* opens with an invocation to the god Phoebus Apollo, *O Lord Phoebus Apollo who rules over man (anax Phoibe Apollon t'andros aisumnon...)* and then mentions pouring out libations to him (*loibas*) at the end of the line; the second line apparently begins with the phrase *odeiton enekes* 'travelling afar' (perhaps a title of Apollo?), followed by something which seems to read *to panphrena* (meaning unknown to me, word not included in the any of the Greek dictionaries) and then the phrase *to baktron antithemi* 'raise your staff/weapon against' something. At the beginning of the third line I read four illegible letters at the left-hand margin and then *k'atrapisd' te stratos* perhaps meaning 'and go through the army': so the whole phrase running between lines two and three could roughly be translated as 'raise your staff against [something] and go through the army'. After *stratos* the word *makar* 'blessed' is legible, presumably referring to Apollo again. At the end of the next line there is another reference to a mighty staff/club (*..loiporon skeipon*). The fifth line is legible but I can make no sense of it: apparently to *danion k'elelutha epeidon cheiran...eluetheron*. *Danion* means a debt or obligation, and could be taken with the verb *elelutha*, to free or discharge.

The general import of the text seems to be that Phoebus Apollo is being invoked and praised and made sacrifices to, in order that he may take up arms against somebody or something, presumably for the benefit of the person making the invocation.

I ran most of these phrases through the computerised database of Greek literary texts (*Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*) and various epigraphic databases and found no close matches, so evidently this text was not copied from a known original. This is another indication that the *lamella* is probably genuine.

**USE AND FUNCTION OF THE OBJECT**

Two types of inscribed metal *lamella* are well known from early Greece: the so-called Orphic *lamellae*, which are often on sheet gold; and the amulets known as *ephesia grammata*.

Some of the Orphic *lamellae* are of comparable size to our example and like it have not been folded up. They were placed in burials as passports to the next world for initiates into the mystery cult of Orpheus (for overviews see Guarducci, and also Kotansky 114-115 and footnotes 48 and 49, with extensive references). According to Kotansky, the Orphic *lamellae* are often 'carelessly written and uncertainly interpreted, the text seems to contain a hymnic address of some sort' – just like our example. Another feature they share with our text is that they were mass-produced by copying from an original, though all the examples I have seen were incised with a stylus rather than being 'struck' from a prototype with raised letters. However, none of the formulae that appear in the Orphic texts correspond with the phraseology of our *lamella*, so it cannot be an example of this category of text, which has been well-known since the late nineteenth century.

A more promising parallel is the type of amulet known generically as *ephesia grammata*. These amulets, worn on the body, gained their power by being inscribed with magical letters/words that were supposed to have been incised on the cult statue of Artemis at Ephesus, hence the designation *ephesia*. References to them in Greek comedies and literary texts suggest that they were mass-produced and frequently worn, though not many actual examples still exist. I know of no extant gold examples of *ephesia grammata*, but lead ones have survived: see Kotansky 111-112 and footnotes 27-29, with full references. These amulets were apotropaic, used to ward off danger and evil by a combination of an appeal to the gods and the magical letters of Ephesus. Just like our text, amulets preserving the *ephesia grammata* have hymnic/hexametric sections and invoke deities appropriate for healing, success and general well-being, including Apollo. So, there are some parallels between our *lamella* and the *ephesia grammata*, especially if our text were produced somewhere in western Turkey (where Ephesus is situated), as the letter-forms might indicate. There are some problems with this identification, however, since our *lamella* does not actually include the magical letters of Ephesus that read *askion, kataskion, lix, tetrax, aision*. Perhaps it was derived from another prototype.

**SUMMARY**

The circumstantial evidence I have outlined above goes some way to suggesting that this *lamella* is an authentic magical amulet whereby someone petitioned the god Phoebus Apollo to gain a favour. Its orthography and palaeography might well indicate that the original prototype from which this *lamella* was struck was written in the manner of eastern Greek or western Turkish scripts of the sixth century BC.

London  
Elizabeth Horsley, (1965-2000)  
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