

Children of Earth and Starry Sky: Reconsidering Gender and Identity in the Orphic Gold Tablets.  
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The so-called “Orphic” gold tablets, found in burials throughout Greece and Italy, are some of the most enigmatic evidence we have for ancient Orphic/Bacchic cult. The texts have frequently been interpreted as instructions for deceased initiates on what to do and say in the Underworld, or as proxies that speak for the deceased and identify them as initiates. These interpretations come into question, however, when the texts are read within their archaeological contexts. While many of the tablets lack a secure provenance, some of the better-documented ones such as the Hipponion tablet reveal a discrepancy between the gendered identity of the speaker in the tablet and the actual sex of the deceased. For example, a tablet with a grammatically male speaker may be found with a female burial or the gender of the speaker may change within the text.

Although there has been significant scholarship on the meaning of the tablets as texts, little attention has been paid to them as material objects. Fritz Graf and Sarah Johnston, in a recent book on the gold tablets, address this by grouping them by findspot and providing brief notes on the archaeological context of each, though they do not discuss this in depth. The contexts of the tablets exhibit a wide range of traditional Greek funerary customs, from inhumation to cremation; placing the tablet on various parts of the body; and burial in graves, sarcophagi, or tumuli. One of the most striking details is that the variations in the texts of the tablets are localized, with similar or identical texts found in the same site or region. Variations in text and funerary context within these regions may exhibit an attempt to individualize the tablet for a specific initiate. By reconsidering the Orphic gold tablets as both Greek religious texts and material artifacts, I propose a reinterpretation of each of the texts on its own terms and within its own regional and individual context.

Graf, F. and Sarah Iles Johnston. *Ritual Texts for the Afterlife: Orpheus and the Bacchic Gold Tablets*. New York: Routledge, 2007.