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The Inscribed Gold *Lamellae* from Roman Palestine: Old Questions, New Evidence¹

Noga Erez-Yodfat

Abstract: The paper discusses a group of gold *lamellae*, originating from graves in Roman Palestine, which bear the ancient Greek formula θάρσει ΝΝ· οὐδεις ἀθάνατος (Take courage, NN! No one is immortal) or its variations. It also contains a publication of two new *lamellae*, and several *lamellae* that have not been associated with this group in the past are added to the list. The new evidence is considered in the context of the ongoing debate on cultural and ritual connotations of the Palestinian *lamellae*.

Keywords: Roman Palestine; gold *lamellae*; burial customs; Bacchic-Orphic tablets; afterlife

In recent years a group of gold *lamellae* (small thin plates) originating from graves in Roman Palestine have attracted a great deal of attention, especially in relation to another, much more famous, group of inscribed gold plates: the “Bacchic-Orphic” gold tablets.² The *lamellae* are dated around 200 CE and inscribed, fully or partly, with the ancient Greek formula θάρσει ΝΝ· οὐδεις ἀθάνατος (Take courage, NN! No one is immortal). The objective of this paper is to publish two additional gold *lamellae* that belong to this group; to add several published *lamellae* that were not associated with the group in the past; and to examine the ways in which the new materials may contribute to the ongoing debate regarding the function and cultural connotations of these exceptional artefacts.

At the moment, there are sixteen known *lamellae*, although, as mentioned above, not all of them have previously been associated with this group. Many of the *lamellae* come from the antiquities market, leaving us with very little information regarding their origin and archeological context.

¹ I am grateful to the Israel Antiquities Authority for allowing me to publish the new *lamellae* presented in this paper. I am also indebted to Adi Ziv, Yael Barschak, Alegre Savariego and Yosef Abkin for their kind help in gathering the information and photos of the *lamellae*. Further, I wish to thank Dr. Yoav Farhi for his useful suggestions and Noa Granot for her helpful advice on my English. In addition, I am very grateful to my supervisor, Prof. Yulia Ustinova, for her constant support and valuable advice. Finally, I thank the anonymous reviewers whose insightful comments and suggestions have greatly improved this paper.

² The association with the “Bacchic-Orphic” gold tablets was initially suggested by Kotansky (1991), 115-116, and recently supported by Graf-Johnston (2013), 208-213. See also: Martín-Hernández (2010), 66, Tovar (2013), 20-22, López-Ruiz (2015), 71-72, Herrero de Jáuregui (2015), 580 n. 35, Herrero de Jáuregui (2016), 7, Graf (2016).

	Provenance	Location	Shape	Dimensions (cm)	Archaeological context	Text
1-4	Fik (Golap Heights) ³	-	<i>Tabula ansata</i> (tablet with handles)	-	The four <i>lamellae</i> from Fik were discovered together in one grave	θάρσει (Take courage!)
5	Beit-Govrin (?) ⁴	Köln, Römisch-Germanisches Museum	Band with two little holes at the edges	27.5 x 2	-	θάρσει εὐγένη· ⁵ οὐδὶς ἀθάνατος (Take courage, you noble [woman]! No one is immortal)
6	Beit-Govrin (?) ⁶	Köln, Römisch-Germanisches Museum	Band with four little holes at edges	16.5 x 3	-	θάρσει εὐγένη· συγενη (Take courage, you noble [woman]!...)
7	Purchased in Jerusalem ⁸	Bonn, Akademisches Konstmuseum	<i>Tabula ansata</i>	4 x 2.5	-	θάρσει εὐγένη· οὐδεις ἀθάνατος (Take courage, you noble [woman]! No one is immortal)
8	Purchased in Jerusalem ⁹	Bonn, Akademisches Konstmuseum	<i>Tabula ansata</i> with broken handles	2 x 2.25	-	θάρσει εὐγένη (Take courage, you noble [woman]!)

³ Germer-Durand (1899), 24-25 no. 33, Benoit (1952), 154.

⁴ Siebourg (1905), 391 no. 1.

⁵ Here and in many other *lamellae* belonging to the group we find the form θάρσει for θάρσει and οὐδὶς for οὐδεις.

⁶ Siebourg (1905), 391 no. 2.

⁷ Siebourg (1905), 391 marks that the writer probably meant to write οὐδεις, but after writing the first two letters he was confused by the presence of the *upsilon* and accidentally kept writing the vocative again (εὐγένη). This may imply that the inscription was copied from other source, or from another inscribed *lamella*.

⁸ Siebourg (1907), 393-394 no. 1.

⁹ Siebourg (1907), 394 no. 2.

9	Beit-Govrin (?) ¹⁰	Geneva, Musée d'art et d'histoire	Band with two little holes at the edges	29.5 x 3.5	-	θάρσι Πέτρε· οὐδὶς ἀθάνατος (Take courage, Petros! No one is immortal)
10	Latrun ¹¹	Private collection	Rectangular / broken <i>tabula ansata</i>	2.3 x 2.8	Discovered in a sarcophagus	θάρσι Νικόμαχε (Take courage Nikomachos!)
11	Unknown ¹²	Brigham Young University, Harold B. Library	Rectangular	5.5 x 3	-	θάρσι Ἡρακλιανέ· οὐδὶς ἀθάνατος (Take courage, Heraklianos! No one is immortal)
12	Unknown ¹³	Köln, Römisch-Germanisches Museum	Band with two little holes at the edges	26.5 x 3.1	-	θάρσι εὐγένη· οὐδίε ¹⁴ ἀθάνατος (Take courage, you noble [woman]!) *The inscription is framed by an engraved <i>tabula ansata</i>
13	Unknown ¹⁵	Jerusalem, Studium Biblicum Franciscanum museum	Band	29 x 3	-	θάρσι εὐγένη· οὐδὶς ¹⁶ ἀθάναθος (Take courage, you noble [woman]! No one is immortal)

¹⁰ Michon (1922), 214-218, Deonna (1923), 224-226 no. 1.

¹¹ Benoit (1952), 255, no. 2.

¹² Blumell (2011).

¹³ Naumann-Steckner (2005), CIIP IV 3493.

¹⁴ The spelling error (the swap between the cursive *sigma* and the *epsilon*) appears in the original inscription.

¹⁵ CIIP IV 3489.

¹⁶ Spelling error (the swap between the *tau* and the *theta*) appears in the original inscription.

						*The inscription is framed by an engraved <i>tabula ansata</i>
14	Unknown ¹⁷	Jerusalem, Rockefeller Museum	<i>Tabula ansata</i> with two little holes on each handle	4.5 x 1.5	-	θάρσι (Take courage!)
15	Unknown ¹⁸	University of Haifa, Hecht Museum	<i>Tabula ansata</i>	6 x 2.5	-	θάρσε Μάξιμε· οὐδεις ἀθάνατος (Take courage, Maximus! No one is immortal)
16	Hadera (northwest Israel) ¹⁹	Israel Antiquities Authority ²⁰	Broken band ²¹	4.8 x 3.3	Discovered in the mouth of a female skeleton in a grave dated to the Byzantine period. Probably laid on the mouth of the deceased as an <i>epistomion</i> .	θάρσει ²² εὐγήνη· οὐδεις ἀθάνατος (Take courage, you noble [woman]! No one is immortal) *The inscription is framed by the remains of what seems to be an engraving of a <i>tabula ansata</i>

¹⁷ Hestrin *et al* (1973), 251 no. 254.

¹⁸ Erez-Yodfat (2017).

¹⁹ Applebaum *et al* (1982), 102 no. 8, Applebaum (1985), 266 no. 2, CIIP II 2094, SEG 32-1508. I suggest a new reading of the inscription, and especially of the name/adjective. Shimon Applebaum (1985) relates that at first it had been assumed that the name on this gold *lamella* was the masculine name Εὐγένης, but considering the fact that the *lamella* was discovered in the mouth of a female skeleton, the female name Ὀγήνη or Ὀγάς, which occurs in other inscriptions dated to more or less the same period, is in his opinion more probable. Accordingly, Applebaum reads the inscription as follows: θάρσε ΟΓΗΝ· οὐδεις ἀθάνατος. However, close examination of the *lamella* and its association with the entire group clearly reveals that what is really written upon the *lamella* is θάρσει εὐγήνη [...].

²⁰ The *lamella*, formerly kept at the Museum of 'Emeq Hephher at Ruppin Agriculture College, is currently in the possession of the Israel Antiquities Authority (Inv. No. 93-5007).

²¹ According to the original publishers, the *lamella* is in the shape of a band, but only the square around the inscription is preserved today.

²² The spelling error (the swap between the *epsilon* and the *eta*) appears in the original inscription.

To this list we may now add two more inscribed gold *lamellae*, both dated to the Imperial period (second or third century). The first *lamella* (Fig. 1) is preserved in the Rockefeller Museum in Jerusalem (Miss Newton's collection, Inv. J-902).²³ The *lamella* is of unknown provenance; it has the shape of a *tabula ansata* and measures 2.1cm long and 6.7cm wide. Each handle of the *lamella* is pierced with two little holes. The *lamella* contains the following inscription:

θάρσι
Γωζαλε²⁴
Take courage,
Gōzala!

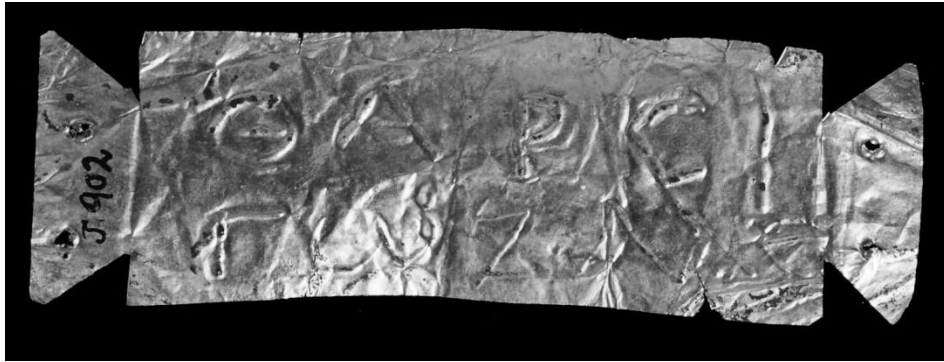


Fig. 1. Inscribed gold *lamella*, the Rockefeller Museum (photo by Yael Yolovitch, courtesy of the Israel Antiquities Authority)

The name that appears on this *lamella*, Γωζαλε, is the vocative form of the female name Γωζαλα, attested on a tombstone inscription discovered in Kfar HaNassi (Upper Galilee) dated to the same period (second or third century).²⁵ The name could be of Semitic origin.²⁶

²³ The *lamella* is briefly mentioned by Paul Cheesman in the October 1979 issue of *Ensign Magazine* of the LDS church.

²⁴ I thank the anonymous reviewer of this paper for suggesting this reading. It is worth mentioning that the inscription allows also the reading of the male name *Gozmos* or *Gozmes*, both options, as far as I am aware, are unattested elsewhere.

²⁵ SEG 28 1349. However, Ovadiah (1976), 200-201 no. 19, who originally published the inscription from Kfar HaNassi, reads: Παγωζα[. .]λα.

²⁶ The root *gzl* is common in various Semitic languages. The name *Gōzala* could perhaps be related to the Semitic names *Ġazāla* (gazelle), and *Gawzal* (pigeon/young dove), which occur in different variations and languages, as mentioned by Dirbas (2017), 236 no. 33, 265 no. 111. In addition, it is worth noting that Sidonius Apollinaris mentions a Jew named *Gozolas* (*Gozolas natione Iudaeus*) in two different letters dated around 470-473 CE (Sid. Apoll. *Epist.* 3.4.1, 4.5.1).

The second *lamella* (Fig. 2) was brought to the National Treasures Department in 1968 and is presently exhibited at the Jerusalem Municipality (Inv. 1968-130). The *lamella* was supposedly discovered in Sheih' Jarah in East Jerusalem, next to the British Embassy building. It is a *tabula ansata*, about 2cm long and 4cm wide, inscribed with one word:

θάρσει
Take courage!



Fig. 2. Inscribed gold *lamella*, Sheih' Jarah, Jerusalem (photo by Noga Erez-Yodfat)

Together with the *lamellae* added to the list in this paper, the group now contains eighteen *lamellae*.²⁷ These additions necessitate a brief examination of the scholarly debate regarding the *lamellae* and the ways in which the new materials may contribute to our understanding of the entire group and shed light on different aspects of it, such as the religious association of the *lamellae*, their function and use.

The formula inscribed on the *lamellae*, θάρσει ΝΝ· οὐδεις ἀθάνατος (take courage NN! no one is immortal), is very common in epitaphs from the Imperial period. It occurs in different places across the territory of the Roman Empire, especially in the eastern regions, and can be found in pagan, Jewish and Christian contexts. In many instances, as

²⁷ The most recent and comprehensive listing is provided by Graf-Johnston (2013), 208-213, who mentions eleven *lamellae* (no. 1-11). Two additional *lamellae* (no. 12-13) that Graf-Johnston does not mention are included in CIIP's listing of the *lamellae* from Bet-Govrin (CIIP IV 3488-3494). I briefly mentioned some of the additional *lamellae* in Erez-Yodfat (2017).

in the case of the *lamellae*, the formula is used only partially, and its first part, θάρσει, is often replaced by synonymous imperatives, such as εὐψύχει (Take heart!), εὐφραίνε (Be happy!), εὐθύμει (Be of good cheer!), μὴ λυποῦ (Do not grieve!), etc. In addition, in the fourth century John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, relates that the formula was also employed orally and mentions funerary liturgical expressions in which the relatives of the deceased bade them to ‘take courage, for no one is immortal’ (θαρρεῖν ὅτι οὐδεὶς ἀθάνατος).²⁸

The possible message expressed by this formula on gravestones is a subject of ongoing debate, and various theories have been suggested.²⁹ Marcel Simon was the first to advance an interpretation of this expression, and his study is still most influential. Simon focused on the encouraging first part of the formula, θάρσει, which reflected, in his view, the need to gather strength and courage when approaching the dangers of the journey to the underworld; he further suggested its association with the initiation rites of Osiris.³⁰ This interpretation is accepted, with minor modifications, by many scholars. For instance, Robert Joly, who agrees with Simon’s interpretation of the formula as reflecting a positive approach towards death, suggests that it originated from the mystery cult at Eleusis.³¹ In fact, as demonstrated by Miguel Herrero de Jáuregui, the verb θαρρεῖν (to be of good courage), with its strong cultic overtones, frequently occurs in relation to Greco-Roman mystery cults and was probably used in various mysteries.³² The fourth-century Sicilian astrologer, Firmicus Maternus, confirms that the term was included in a *symbolon* (password) of a mystery cult, which was uttered by the priest at the end of the rite and reflected the initiate’s anticipation of salvation by the god: ‘Take heart, initiates (θαρρεῖτε μύσται)! Our god appears as saved. And we shall find salvation springing from our woes’.³³

This interpretation, however, ignores the second part of the formula, ‘no one is immortal’, which cannot be construed as conveying a positive attitude to death and the afterlife. Consequently, some scholars reject the association of the formula with Greco-Roman mysteries and afterlife beliefs and regard it as a consolatory expression meant to offer the deceased and their relatives some comfort in light of the universality of death.³⁴ This disagreement on the meaning of the formula suggests perhaps that different ideas and beliefs could have been attributed to this formula by members of various religious groups across time and space.³⁵ Therefore, the eschatological context of this formula can be neither proven, nor ruled out.

Furthermore, the gold *lamellae* constitute a remarkable example of the use of the formula in which the possibility of eschatological perceptions seems almost certain. Unlike tombstone inscriptions and funerary liturgies, in the case of the *lamellae* the formula was written on a plaque and buried with the deceased, which implies that their

²⁸ Joannes Chrysostomus, *In epist. II ad Corinthios sermo 23* (PG 61.553–563).

²⁹ For a detailed bibliography regarding the research debate on the uses and meanings of the formula in epitaphs, see Park (2000), 47–63.

³⁰ Simon (1936).

³¹ Joly (1955).

³² Herrero de Jáuregui (2016). See also Chaniotis (2012), 205–208.

³³ Firm. *De err. prof. rel.* 22.1.

³⁴ Lattimore (1962), 250–56, Park (2000), 47–63.

³⁵ Van der Horst (1991), 120–122, Grill (2013), 29–30.

relatives probably believed that the deceased was expected to have some sort of afterlife and that he or she would be able to read it. The use of expensive sheets of gold as a writing surface may support this assumption as well.³⁶ In this respect, the *lamellae* of Roman Palestine seem to function similarly to other ancient inscribed metal plates that bear messages to the dead and convey eschatological hopes, most notably, the “Bacchic-Orphic” gold tablets.³⁷ Although the use of the same technology (i.e. writing a message to the deceased on a golden plate) cannot prove any further relation to the “Bacchic-Orphic” gold tablets, it can still support the association of the *lamellae* with afterlife beliefs of sorts, be they pagan, Jewish or Christian.

Not only do the *lamellae* convey a formula that could be associated with different religious groups, but they also originate from an area characterized by heterogeneous religious activities, and bear names that do not disclose their religious identity (Petros, Heraklianos, Nikomachos and Maximus). In this respect, the distinct name Gōzala, which appears on the new *lamella* from the Rockefeller museum, could be an exception; further investigation on its origin and uses may shed light on the social identity of the *lamella*'s owner and the possible religious association of the entire group.

In addition, the new materials may influence our understanding of the distribution of the tradition to which the *lamellae* belong, since, hitherto, the *lamellae* included in this group were all dated around the second or third century. However, the addition of the *lamella* from Hadera, dated to a later time, may suggest that this tradition was passed on and survived into the late antique world. Of course, it is possible that the *lamella* was produced during the same period as the other *lamellae* and passed down from generation to generation until it was ultimately buried, or alternatively, excavated from a tomb and reused. Nevertheless, the correlation between the sex of the deceased and the feminine form of the adjective (εὐγένη), seems to suggest that the *lamella* was manufactured for its owner.

This leads us to another important issue, i.e. the reappearance of the vocative εὐγένη on seven out of the eighteen *lamellae*. This subject has attracted some scholarly attention and several hypotheses have been proposed over the years regarding the function and meaning expressed through this laudatory attribute. For instance, Max Siebourg suggests that it was used as an identification mark (*signum*) of the members of an exclusive group.³⁸ Miguel Herrero de Jáuregui proposes that similarly to some “Bacchic-Orphic” gold tablets, the adjective may refer not to the deceased, but rather to his or her soul (ψυχή), which explains the use of the female form of the adjective.³⁹ It is noteworthy that the laudatory attribute εὐγενής, literally meaning ‘well-born’, resembles the initiate’s declaration to the guards and rulers of the underworld in some of the “Bacchic-Orphic” gold tablets that he or she belongs to a ‘heavenly race’ (γένος οὐράνιος), or to a ‘blest race’ (γένος ὀλβιος).⁴⁰ Alternatively, Fritz Graf suggests that the vocative εὐγένη

³⁶ See Jiménez San Cristóbal (2014) on the prevalence of the eschatological function of gold and its relation to the bearer salvation in otherworldly aspects.

³⁷ See n. 2 on the association with the “Bacchic-Orphic” gold tablets. See López-Ruiz 2015 on the association with other burial *lamellae* in the ancient Mediterranean region.

³⁸ Siebourg (1905), 400ff.

³⁹ Herrero de Jáuregui (2016), 7.

⁴⁰ Graf-Johnston (2013) no. 2:7, 5:3, 6:3, 7:3, 8:15, 29:4.

functions as a kind of honorific title that was used with the aim of avoiding mentioning the woman's personal name and marking her nobility, which explains, according to Graf, why we find several male names on the *lamellae*, and not even one female name.⁴¹ Indeed, the *lamella* from the late grave at Hadera that was discovered in the mouth of a female skeleton and contains the title 'εὐγένη' seems to support Graf's hypothesis. However, if the reading of the female name Gōzala on the new *lamella* from the Rockefeller museum is correct, then we finally have a female name, which suggests that there were no restrictions on specifying the woman's personal name. In addition, the reappearance of the adjective could be a result of mass production. Be that as it may, I tend to agree with Graf, who understands the adjective as referring to nobility, not in the social, but rather in the ethical sense, which might be related to the deceased's hope of being rewarded in the time after death.⁴²

In terms of their shape and possible position in the grave, the *lamellae* are divided into several different categories. Five *lamellae* have the shape of a typical funerary headband and the little holes found along the edges of most of them indicate that they were probably attached to the deceased's forehead by a cord, as a kind of a diadem.⁴³ At the same time, the late band-shaped *lamella* from Hadera, which is now in a broken state, was discovered in the mouth of a skeleton, which implies that it was probably laid on the deceased's mouth as an *epistomion*. Eight *lamellae* are in the shape of a *tabula ansata*, and two *lamellae* are probably *tabulae ansatae* with broken handles. In addition, in two different band-shaped *lamellae*, the inscription is framed by an engraved *tabula ansata*.⁴⁴ The form of the *tabula ansata* was very popular in the Roman period, and alongside its public use, it was commonly used as a frame for various types of private inscriptions: the *tabula ansata* was often used in funerary inscriptions;⁴⁵ it was engraved on various kinds of amulets to enclose magical texts and figures;⁴⁶ and it was used as a framing for the texts inscribed on wooden and painted mummy labels, some of which contain the imperatives εὐψύχει and μὴ λυπήσῃς, which, as mentioned above, functioned as synonyms of the imperative θάρσει in funerary inscriptions;⁴⁷ finally, three gold *lamellae* in the shape of a *tabula ansata*, supposedly originating from Gaza and a grave

⁴¹ Graf-Johnston (2013), 213, Graf (2016), 18-20.

⁴² Graf (2016), 18-20 shows that this kind of meaning for the adjective was especially common in late antique Christian texts but can be traced back to the Classical period.

⁴³ As was suggested by different scholars in the past: Kotansky (1991), 116, Blumell (2011), 167, Graf-Johnston (2013), 212, Graf (2016), 12, 20. On funerary headbands see Higgins (1961), 96-97. On the considerable number of funerary gold headbands that have been discovered in Late Roman burials in the region of Jerusalem see Winter (2015) 94-95.

⁴⁴ No. 12 and 13, possibly no. 16 as well.

⁴⁵ On the development and diverse uses of the *tabula ansata* form late Archaic Greece to the Byzantine period, see Leatherbury (2019), esp. 384-385.

⁴⁶ Kotansky (1987), Kotansky (1994), 81-88 (no. 18), 236-238 (no. 45), Michel (2001) 114, no. 180, 181-185, no. 289-294, 210, no. 331, 240, no. 380, 295, no. 478, 302, no. 494, 305, no. 499, 312, no. 513, 326, no. 559, Mastrocinque (2003), 295, fig. 14-15, Faraone (2018) 193.

⁴⁷ Derda (2006), 31-33, no. 4, Torallas Tovar 2013 20-24, Torallas Tovar-Korp (2013), no. 2, 4, 13, 24, Walker (2000), 147-148, no. 99.

in Bet Govrin,⁴⁸ contain a greeting to a couple on their wedding day: ‘εὐτυχῶς τοῖς νυμφίοις’ (‘Good luck to the newly-wed!’). Two of the *lamellae* in the shape of a *tabula ansata* added to the list in this paper contain little holes in their handles, and it is likely that, similarly to the larger headband *lamellae*, they were probably attached to a cord or a garment designated to place them on the deceased’s body, though they may have been attached to certain objects in the grave as well. As to the remaining *lamellae*, we can only guess that they were laid somewhere on the deceased’s body or in the grave.

To conclude, together with the *lamellae* added to the list in this paper, the group now contains a considerable number of *lamellae*, and it is very likely that other unpublished *lamellae* may still be found in different museums and private collections around the world. The religious and social context of the *lamellae* is still obscure; their association with the “Bacchic-Orphic” gold tablets is limited to the use of similar technology of writing a message to the dead on a gold plate, and although their association with eschatological perceptions appears quite probable, it is impossible to relate them to any particular belief or group. The new *lamellae* provide pieces of information that may hint at the religious identity of their owners, the distribution of the tradition to which they belong, and some customs associated with it. At the same time, these materials pose additional questions that remain as yet unanswered. New materials may provide additional clues and answers.

Ben-Gurion University of the Negev

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⁴⁸ CIIP III 2518, CIIP IV 3487.

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