Afterlife and the Orphic Lamellae

The “Orphic” lamellae – gold tablets inscribed with promises of postmortem blessedness and instructions to guide the soul through the underworld – are a group of unusual funerary objects that have been found at burial sites in Southern Italy, the Peloponnese, Thessaly/Macedonia, and Crete. They represent perhaps our most important primary source for beliefs and hopes concerning the afterlife in Greek mystery cult, and in recent years have benefitted from heightened interest and intense specialized study. Drawing on the recent work of philosopher Samuel Scheffler and cultural historian Thomas Laqueur (and in particular on Scheffler’s concept of the “collective afterlife”), I argue that the tablets can be understood within a broader understanding of “afterlife” that encompasses the continuing social existence of the commemorated dead within living communities. Developing a generic comparison with inscribed funerary monuments of the 5th/4th c. BCE, I argue that these gold lamellae and their specialized eschatology should be seen as an imaginative extension of more familiar Greek strategies of poetic and epigraphic memorialization – a supplement to, rather than a replacement for, conventional Greek death ritual and belief.