

Eva Tegou/Yannis Z. Tzifopoulos\*  
**New *Epistomia* from Eleutherna**

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**Abstract:** Publication of two new gold *epistomia* unearthed during systematic excavations of a cemetery at the site Mnemata (Graves) in Alphá, near Eleutherna. They belong to category B, the so-called Mnemosyne- or Underworld-Topography-texts: the new *epistomion* B14 from grave 84 was found folded and is identical to that incised on B3–5, B7–8 and the concise B13, except for one minor misspelling; the other *epistomion* B15 from grave 56 betrays more similarities with the Cretan *epistomia* B12 and B6 in the recognition dialogue, and is only the second text from Crete which places the spring in the Underworld topography to the left, as B12.

**Keywords:** Bacchic, Orphic, Crete, *epistomion*, *Mnemosyne*, Underworld topography, left/right direction.

During public works for the improvement of a rural road from the village Alphá to Eleutherna, a distance of approximately 4 km from N to S (fig. 1), Eva Tegou and Loukia Flevari of the Ephorate of Antiquities carried out rescue excavations from March 2007 until April 2008 and located at a length of ca. 900 m 128 graves clustered in five sections (fig. 2). Although this site near the village Alphá – known as Mnemata (Graves) because a number of ancient graves are still visible (fig. 3) – was the most likely candidate for the provenance of the majority of Cretan *epistomia*, this is the first time that a systematic excavation was attempted.<sup>1</sup> The site Mnemata to the north-northwest of Eleutherna is located on hilly terrain approximately 200 m above sea-level, and the east side of the hill is very steep due to

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<sup>1</sup> Tegou/Flevari 2010 with extensive previous bibliography; Tzifopoulos 2010, 53–59 ([http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.ebook:CHS\\_TzifopoulosY.Paradise\\_Earned\\_The\\_Bacchic-Orphic\\_Gold\\_Lamellae.2010](http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.ebook:CHS_TzifopoulosY.Paradise_Earned_The_Bacchic-Orphic_Gold_Lamellae.2010)). We are grateful to Loukia Flevari for her collaboration and to the staff in the Archaeological Museum at Rethymno for facilitating the study; for their constructive suggestions and improvements we are indebted to Stavros Frangoulidis, Niki Oikonomaki, Angelos Boufalis, and also to the editors of *Trends in Classics*, Franco Montanari and Antonios Rengakos, and the anonymous readers.

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erosion. The graves cut on top of the limestone hill are cist-graves (fig. 4), whereas in the hillside are carved chamber tombs with larnakes inside (fig. 5). It is part of the extensive north cemetery, roughly at the midpoint of the approximately 10 km distance from ancient Eleutherna to the north shore where Eleutherna's seaports at Panormon and/or at Sfakaki-Stavromenos. In the cemetery at the Sfakaki area more *epistomia* have been unearthed,<sup>2</sup> a total of fifteen so far from this necropolis in Crete.

## Context and Chronology

The modern road coincides with the western boundary of the extensive necropolis and the gorge serves as the eastern limit. All 128 are cist-graves cut into the natural soft limestone rock and covered with three simple slabs which however were preserved in only three graves. In most graves fragments of the covering slabs were found damaged and fallen inside due either to looting or to the original construction of the road. Some graves betray rudimentary construction while others more diligent with carving in their perimeter for better fit of the covering slabs or with a carved cushion for the deceased's head. Most graves were oriented on the N-S axis with smaller or larger deviations, except for ten that were oriented on the E-W axis. The skeletal remains were found decomposed, but in a few preserved cases the dead were buried in a supine position with their hands along the sides and their heads to the south in graves of N-S orientation and to the west in the E-W, whereas in a few graves two deceased were found buried. The mainly ceramic grave-goods were placed along the sides, on or between the legs, next to the head and in some cases on the pelvis, whereas the coins were found under the skull or in the left hand. The majority of the grave-goods are 657 closed and small clay vessels of very few types (unguentaria, lekythia, prochoi, oinochoi, but no clay figurines), a number of coins, a stone alabaster, clay balls, some silver and bronze jewelry, and two incised gold *epistomia*, turned into so thin a sheet usually by hammering or using a roller.<sup>3</sup>

Based on the type of the graves and the grave-goods, the chronology for the 128 graves covers the Hellenistic period, with the earliest burial belonging to the late 4th and early 3rd BCE.

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<sup>2</sup> Tzifopoulos 2010, 24–32 (edition) and 93–101 (classification) ([http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.ebook:CHS\\_TzifopoulosY.Paradise\\_Earned\\_The\\_Bacchic-Orphic\\_Gold\\_Lamellae.2010](http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.ebook:CHS_TzifopoulosY.Paradise_Earned_The_Bacchic-Orphic_Gold_Lamellae.2010)).

<sup>3</sup> Untracht 1986, 17 and 71.



crossbar or a crossbar which leans in either direction; zeta with vertical middle bar; the rather wide eta with verticals straight or curving; the sometimes lunate ( ) ) iota; mu with leaning and sometimes curving verticals; the xi with a slightly smaller middle horizontal stroke; the pi with straight or outward-curving verticals and with the right vertical smaller than the left; the upsilon with a vertical; and the open, quasi-symmetrical omega. The sigma is either lunate (C) or angular (<); the middle bar of the lunate or angular epsilon may be incised at some distance and extend well beyond the letter space.

**Grave 56** (fig. 10). Cist-grave 56 was found in the 5th grave-cluster of 56 graves. Oriented N-S and measuring  $1.94 \times 0.48 \text{ m} \times 0.35 \text{ m}$ , it was cut carefully as the floor walls and the corners indicate, but it was disturbed with its covering slabs broken and fallen inside in the southern half whereas two large fragments were found leaning to the east wall in the northern half. The surface layer 0.11 m thick consisted of hard gray-brown soil with small and medium-sized stones and contained bone fragments, shells and the gold *epistomion*. In the next lower layer of reddish brown soil and less hard with small and medium stones, fragments of the deceased's lower skeleton were found on the floor as well as seven clay unguentaria (figs. 11abcdefg), and a small hydria (fig. 12). The unguentaria (low height, rudimentary to low foot, spherical body and relatively short neck with usually beveled rim, with parallels from Crete, Athens, Macedonia<sup>5</sup>), and the hydria (with parallels from Crete, Athens, Thessaly<sup>6</sup>) suggest a date from the end of the 4th to the beginning of the 3rd centuries BCE. The small clay assemblage is homogeneous, despite individual differences in clay purity and color, with the exception of one egg-shaped unguentarium (fig. 11 f).

**Inscription** (fig. 13). Rethymno, Archaeological Museum, inv. no. M 4474.

The rectangular paper-thin gold *epistomion* is torn into three joining pieces (upper right and bottom left corners) but the fourth bottom right corner is missing. As it was found in the grave's upper layer and also is preserved with wrinkles and tears (one in the middle to the right), the *epistomion* may not belong to grave 56 but to another adjacent one, wherefrom it was carried away to grave 56 during

5 For unguentaria similar to fig. 11 b, c, e, f, g see: Galanaki 2006, 14, pl. III.5; Galanaki/Chaniotis 2006, 126, 127 (Hersonissos, Crete); Tsatsaki 2004, 749, II 15612 pl. 346α, (Sfakaki, Crete); Chrysostomou/Chrysostomou 2011, 403, pl. 168β (Pella, Macedonia); Tzanavari/Tsimbidou-Avloniti 2018, 76, 81, pl. 1β2, pl.5α2 (Thessaloniki, Macedonia); for similar unguentaria to fig. 11d: Knigge 1976, 185, E 86.1, pl. 96.1 (Athens, Kerameikos).

6 For similar small hydriae see: Galanaki/Chaniotis 2006, 121 (Hersonissos, Crete); Englezou 2005, 117, pl. 100β, 543 (Phaistos, Crete); Pologiorghi 1981, 172, fig. 11.5383 (Kissamos, Crete); Karapanou/Katakouta 2004, 114–115, pl. 25α (Pelinnaio, Thessaly).

the road's original construction. A thin almost imperceptible line on the upper middle edge may indicate the mark for the cutting with scissors.

**Bibliography:** Tegou/Flevari 2010, 501, 510 fig. 5.

Dimensions: H. 0.13 m, W. 0.35 m, Th. less than 0.001 m, LH. 0.001–0.002 m.  
end 4th-early 3rd century BCE

- δίψαι ΑΤΟΙΥΤΟΣ παρα{π}-  
πόλλυται. ἀλλὰ πιῆν {μ}  
3 μοι κρ{ω}άνα<ς> ἀϊρό[ω] ἐπ'  
ἀριστερ<ὰ> τᾶς κυφ[αρίζ]-  
ω. τίς δ' εἶ ἢ πῶ δ' [εἶ; Γᾶ?]  
6 Μ..ΜΑΤΡΗΔΕΜ[.4..].

Because of thirst surely(?) he is  
perishing. But (give) me to drink  
from the ever-flowing spring  
to the left of the cypress.  
'Who are you?' 'Where are you from?'  
Earth is my mother(?) ...

1 ΑΤΟΙΥΤΟΣ, perhaps {α} (or even α<ῦος>) τοι <α>ὑτός 3 ΚΡΩΝΑΑΙΠΟ, perhaps the final C abbreviated κράνα(ς). ΑΙΠΟ for intended ἀ<ε>ιρο? | 4 ΑΡΙΣΤΕΡΤΑΣ, perhaps the final A abbreviated ἀριστερ(ὰ). Of the Φ only a trace of the upper left circle | 5–6 ]Μ..ΜΑΤΡΗΔΕΜ[, perhaps Γᾶ] | μ[οι] μάτ<ηρ> (as in B12 and in an epitaph from Knossos, ca. 300 BCE, *SEG* 41.760: ἄ μάτ[ρ]ηρ; unless Μάτρα / Μάτρη is a name, *LGPN* online); or Γᾶς ἡ]μ[ί]. ματρη δ' ἐμ[ –].

The letters are carefully incised, even though more than one attempt was made for K in line 3; the engraver covers the entire surface and respects word-divisions, except in lines 4–5 (Ζ|Ω, but in lines 1–2 and 2–3 he reincised Π and Μ in the next line).

Characteristic letter-shapes, which are similar to that of other Cretan *epistomia*, especially B12, include the following: the alpha's crossbar is horizontal or slanting to the left and forming an angle (sometimes in the shape of delta); the middle bar of the lunate or angular epsilon may be incised at some distance and extend well beyond the letter space; the rather wide eta with verticals straight or curving; mu with leaning and sometimes curving verticals; the pi with straight or outward-curving verticals and with the right vertical smaller than the left; the lunate sigma (C); the upsilon with a vertical; and the open omega tall and wide, either symmetrical or asymmetrical (with a narrower left or right half).

**Commentary.** These new *epistomia* are the only ones unearthed during systematic excavations in the site Mnemata to the north of Eleutherna and therefore confirm the proposed date for the already published ones, namely that the ten deceased in this necropolis buried with an *epistomion* (B3–8, B13,<sup>7</sup> E1, and the new ones B14–15) were active in this part of Crete from the 3rd to the early 1st centuries BCE (fig. 14). The new additions bring the Cretan *epistomia* to a total of fifteen (15): ten (10) from the site Mnemata and five (5) from the cemetery at Sfakaki/Stavromenos (E4, B12, and the unincised G2–4).

The very thin incised gold *epistomia* were apparently placed either on the lips, chest or hand of the deceased, as the unfolded B15 from grave 56 above indicates, or inside the mouth, as the folded B14 from grave 84 above illuminates. Either way, the intended goal was to reveal to the gods of the Underworld the true identity of the deceased, as the *epistomia* were the undeniable proof that the deceased was a mystes. Both bear short texts whose meaning and context would have been enigmatic, if it were not for the more extensive versions of this category (B1–2, B10–11). These longer versions, which contribute decisively to the understanding of the short, synoptic texts, include information, such as instructions for the mystes regarding the topography of Underworld and also a brief recognition-dialogue which seals the mystes' fate and afterlife. Apparently, the full text used during initiation was understood only as an oral guide which need not always be engraved *in toto* but smaller or larger portions of it could also achieve the intended goal: the rebirth of the mystes as a hero, bacchus, star, and god, and his/her entrance in the paradisiac place allotted for the mystes in the Underworld. And yet, it still remains unclear who and why chose for incision a short or long version or nothing at all.<sup>8</sup> In fact, even the longer versions of category B from Petelia (B1), Pharsalos (B2), Hipponion (B10), Entella (B11) are in all probability extracts of the oral(?) text performed during initiation which still remains elusive, despite ingenious attempts at an archetype.<sup>9</sup>

What is also remarkable is that the texts in both cemeteries are not homogeneous. Two chose the chaire-formula in addressing the Underworld deities (E1 most

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<sup>7</sup> Tzifopoulos 2010–2013 (SEG 62.644).

<sup>8</sup> For the editions and interpretations of these intriguing texts with extensive previous bibliography, see: Bernabé/Jiménez San Cristóbal 2008, Tzifopoulos 2010, Edmonds 2011, and Graf/Johnston 2013; for the relation of these texts to Orphic tradition and literature, see Edmonds 2013, Meisner 2018, and Chrysanthou 2020; and Gee 2020, 15–38 for Heracles' dual afterlife, and 218–242 for afterlife as a revelatory journey in the *epistomia* and Plato's 'more scientific' *Phaedrus*.

<sup>9</sup> Janko 2016 presents an ingenious and very helpful updated attempt for an archetype of the surviving texts on *epistomia* of category B, which brings to the fore the pros and cons; see also Santamaría Álvarez 2017.

likely from Mnemata and E4 from Sfakaki); nine chose extracts of the so-called ‘Mnemosyne’ – or Underworld – topography-texts (B3–8, B13–15 from Mnemata and B12 from Sfakaki); and the remaining three from Sfakaki incised nothing at all (G2–4). Even so, even the two *epistomia* incised with the chaire-formula (E1 and E4) betray a different spelling in Persephone’s name which may or may not be of significance, as one is from a grave in Mnemata and the other from a grave in Sfakaki.

Likewise, the Underworld-topography texts of category B also present differences. Although the new folded B14 from grave 84 may have caused some ‘reading problems’ to the mystes when in the Underworld, its text is identical to that incised on B3–5, B7–8, and the concise B13: parched by thirst, the deceased asks to drink from the ever-flowing spring to the right; a cypress is mentioned as signpost, which is totally omitted in B13, followed by the questions and answers through which the deceased is recognised as a mystes in the Underworld.

If B13, in all likelihood from Mnemata as well, is yet another example of abbreviating even further the already short extract of a long version, B15 from grave 56 in Mnemata presents a slightly different version, not unlike the versions of *epistomia* B12 (SEG 60.999) from Sfakaki but also B6 purportedly also from Mnemata. These three texts comprise a subgroup within category B, as they betray differences in the spring and the recognition dialogue. B15 from Mnemata is only the second example – B12 from Sfakaki being the first – where the spring and the cypress are syntactically connected, as the spring is to the left of the cypress (ἐπ’ ἀριστερά).<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the attribute of the spring presents variants (B12: κράνας ΑΥΡΟΥ; B15: κράνας ΑΙΡΟ[.]; but in B6 κράνας ΑΙΓΙΔΔΩ ἐπὶ δεξιᾷ), which have been understood – and accordingly emended – as failed attempts to incise the spring’s epithet *ἀείπουος* or *ἀένναος* (*everflowing*). Nevertheless, the possibility that in these three *epistomia* what was intended for incision may have been a local name of a particular spring cannot be ruled out completely (the spring of Aigiros?, *poplar*, of (S)aurus? of AIRO?). In fact, in B13 there is no need for any detail either of the spring’s location or of its condition; it is simply a spring (κράνας ἄπτο) with no further qualification.

The left/right direction presents another puzzle. In B1 from Petelia in Italy, the spring to the left with a white cypress near is not to be approached at all. On the contrary, in B12 and B15, only a spring to the left of the cypress is recorded wherefrom the mystes will quench his/her thirst. If not necessitated by local considerations and the topography of the actual location where initiation took place,

<sup>10</sup> Graf/Johnston (2013, 109–111) explain the topographical divergence in B12 as a probable innovation by an *orpheotelestes*, who claims he alone possesses the only true knowledge of the Underworld topography; this however does not preclude local sensitivities. For afterlife topographies see also Gee 2020, 39–65.

then the simplest solution would be to disassociate the direction to the right in the other texts from the cypress by changing the punctuation: κρόνας ἀειρούου ἐπὶ δεξιά. τῆ, κυφάριζος!, *from the spring to the right. There it is! the cypress!* (instead of τῆ, the adverb of place always with iota subscript in literary texts, τῆ may also have been intended, the old epic interjection as Kyriakos Tsantsanoglou has suggested). In this way, the description may not confuse the topography, but the spring to the right and the cypress farther to the right may coincide with the wording in B15 and B12, the spring being to the left of the cypress.

Be that as it may, B15 from grave 56 betrays more similarities with *epistomia* B12 and B6 in the recognition dialogue that cannot be easily resolved. Instead of the expected formulaic reply: Γῶς υἱός εἰμι etc. in the question-and-answer dialogue (B15 lines 5–6; B12 lines 4–5; B6 line 4),<sup>11</sup> another *symbolon*-formula that remains elusive was in all probability employed which articulated Earth as the Mother of all and/or as the mystes' mother.

Even so, the deviant reading in the *symbola* of B6, B12, and B15 – or for that matter the divergent location of the spring – do not create any serious obstacles in understanding the gist of what was intended. The different choices of text for incision on the *epistomia* may simply highlight a more personal attitude towards death even within the same otherwise homogeneous category.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, as the reasons are intrinsic to each mystes, the choices made for incision lie beyond our grasp.



Figure 1. Map of Crete and excavation area (after Tzifopoulos 2010)

<sup>11</sup> Janko 2016, 116–117, as previous editors, suspects corruption and emends the text accordingly to θυγάτηρ in both B6 and B12.

<sup>12</sup> Tzifopoulos 2010, 232–235; Herrero de Jáuregui 2015 for sacred space as metaphor for esoteric religious experience; and Bremmer 2016 for the construction of personalized eschatology. For space in afterlife(s) in general see especially Gee 2020.





**Figure 2.** Mnemata archaeological site, Eleutherna/Alfá, section 5



**Figure 3.** Mnemata archaeological site, Eleutherna/Alfá, view from the north



**Figure 4.** Mnemata, Graves cut in the rock on top of the hill



**Figure 5.** Mnemata, Larnakes inside a chamber-tomb cut into the rock of the hillside





Figure 6. Grave 84



Figure 7. Grave 84, ostraca of two unguentaria



Figure 8. Tooth and folded *epistomion* of Grave 84



Figure 9a. The *epistomion* of Grave 84



b



c



d

Figure 9bcd. Grave 84, the *epistomion* unfolded





Figure 10. Grave 56



Figure 11abcdefg. Grave 56, seven unguentaria



Figure 12. Grave 56, the small hydria



Figure 13. The *epistomion* of Grave 56





Figure 14. *Epistomia* in Rethymno Museum: left the four incised, right the three unincised

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