

# A Semiotic and Social Network Analysis of the Bacchic Gold Tablets

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## Introduction

Ancient Greek religious worship left behind many physical remnants that modern scholars have used to piece together an image of ancient life. Because of the great temporal distance between the scholars and the ancients, it is often difficult to accurately understand the full breadth of ancient life solely from these ancient remnants. Particularly, scholars have extreme difficulty when trying to study an ancient's personal understanding of the world around him. Ancient Greek literature and myth create a starting point for modern examinations of this subject. However, it is problematic to accept the personal opinions of mythic individuals as fact. Scholars cannot rely upon the hyperboles that are abundant in myth for factual information about ancient life. Particularly in a religious context, the line between myth and reality is often ambiguous. In the writings of countless ancient philosophers, playwrights, and politicians, we often see references to how the gods influence lives. As we will examine later, these references can often be understood as the cultural effort to understand the ancient world. In order to clarify these literary references and understand the true connection that ancient individuals perceived between themselves and the gods, this piece shall take into account modern methodologies and theories. This examination will ultimately yield support for the argument that semiotic theory, the modern theory of signs, aligns most thoroughly to ancient perspectives on religious accessories.

The term "accessories" will be used in this essay to refer to the objects that were involved in ancient Greek religious rituals and practices. This can take the form of statues, altars, tablets, or even a temple itself. In this investigation, the subject matter will be limited to the cult statues involved in state religions and the golden

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tablets used in the Bacchic mysteries. The application of semiotic theory to these statues reveals the mode by which many Greeks viewed the statues: as indices to far off deities. This application reflects the structure of Greek life, which was heavily influenced by the limits of ancient Greek geography, science, and history. These limits created a void that was necessarily filled with the realm of the myth—a far distant past recorded in Homeric works.

Verity Platt, Deborah Steiner, and Adria Haluszka endeavor to explain the Greek treatment of state and mystery cult accessories. Haluszka's semiotic approach aligns with the themes that constantly arise when studying Greek religion; namely, abstraction and ambiguity. Both Platt's and Steiner's main arguments break from these themes. Their theories are based on a certainty that is somewhat anachronistic when compared to the uncertainty of ancient life. Platt argues that a cult statue was the physical embodiment of the deity, whereas Steiner argues that the cult statue acted as a vessel into which the deity could enter. For ease of understanding, this paper labels Platt's and Steiner's theories as the "embodiment theory" and the "vessel theory," respectively. As will be made apparent, in the realm of Greek religion nothing was guaranteed or certain—not even the presence of the deity. Semiotic theory attains its value not only from its logical connections forged from man to deity, but also from the void it leaves for the inexplicable and uncertain.

The application of semiotic theory to ancient Greek religious accessories is relatively new. For centuries, art historical analysis was the primary mode of examination for ancient religious accessories. This method examines the ancient piece completely on its own, with no reference to its cultural context. It is only when literary evidence is combined with this examination that scholars are able to explain the ancient perception of these religious pieces, as we see with Platt and Steiner. A modern theory, semiotics has primarily been used to define logic and language, as will be seen below. Semiotics uses both the aforementioned artistic and literary examination as a basis for further abstract analysis, delving into modern understandings of thought and communication. Semiotic theory's application to the Bacchic gold tablets is especially untried largely because modern scholars rarely acknowledge mystery cults as ancient religions. By broadening the types of research materials referenced and expanding the definition of "ancient religion," we are able to minutely examine ancient man's perception of the accessory-deity connection. This connection is explained through semiotic theory, which yields concrete vocabulary for this somewhat abstract idea. The basic idea behind this theory is that the accessory functions as a memento, which is an object that brings to mind a far off being.

Charles Peirce, often referred to as the father of semiotics, breaks down this relationship to three parts. The statue or temple functions as the *representamen*, a symbol for an *object* or being.<sup>1</sup> This outside *representamen* then inspires an inner *interpretant*, or idea, of the object in the mind of the viewer. With cult statues, this would be the idea of the deity, heavily influenced by myth. Finally, this *interpretant* coincides with the *object* proper—the actual deity that exists outside of the human realm.

Whereas Peirce wanted to use semiotics to define logic, Ferdinand de Saussure, another founder of modern semiotics, thought that semiotics defined language. As such, Saussure labeled his work on signs “semiology.”<sup>2</sup> Saussure believed that noises only functioned as language when they communicated ideas, relying on a system of signs to do so.<sup>3</sup> Saussure’s theory is very similar to Peirce’s, but Saussure’s theory only defines two parts of the loop. The *significant* (signifier) is the sign itself, which we can understand as equivalent to Peirce’s *representamen*. The *signifié* (signified) is the meaning of the sign, parallel to Peirce’s *interpretant*. The *signifié* is an individual’s inner concept of the *object*, not the *object* itself.<sup>4</sup> In fact, Saussure does not label the absent object at all, though he does recognize its existence.

Adria Haluszka seeks to combine Peirce’s theories with her own examination of rituals outlined in the *Greek Magical Papyri* (*PGM*). She references the many practices that were used to create a connection between the deity and the religious accessory, primarily focusing on statuary and engraved pieces. The distinction between these two types of religious accessories is based both on the methods by which they are “consecrate[d]” and on how they function.<sup>5</sup> The spells in the *PGM* endow the religious accessories with a power Haluszka labels as “divine efficacy.”<sup>6</sup> The *PGM* notes that this connection is fostered by placing papyri inside the object with written spells or names inscribed on them. Additionally, the *PGM* calls for statues to be crafted from particular materials to further enhance the connection between statue and god.<sup>7</sup> Despite all of these intricate directions, however, Haluszka notes there are no direct references to these spells animating a statue or filling it with the deity.<sup>8</sup> Instead, Haluszka argues that these materials and pieces of papyri each function as an *ousia*. The *ousia* is the “essence” of an absent object, not to be confused with the object proper. This can function as, “a pointer which establishes a symbolic relationship between two points, of which one is the object referred to and the other is the sign.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, Haluszka draws a parallel between the *ousia* embedded in a religious accessory and the *significant*. These indices point to an absent deity who is being represented by the statue, engraving, or other accessory without

“specifying the exact nature of the relationship between the entity and its representation.”<sup>10</sup> This ambiguous connection, as mentioned by Peirce’s theory, allows for a great degree of uncertainty within man’s interaction with the statue.

**Table 1:** Alignment of the Semiotic Vocabulary of Peirce, Saussure, and Haluszka. Included is my choice of terms used (far right column) for the sake of simplicity.

Meaning:	Peirce	Saussure	Haluszka	Van Arsdale
The sign, or religious accessory.	Representamen	Significant	Signifier	Significant
Thin inner idea of the absent reality; one’s mental concept of the deity.	Interpretant	Signifié	(Neither acknowledged nor labeled.)	Signifié
The deity proper.	Object	(Acknowledged but not labeled.)	Signified	Object

### The Bacchic Gold Tablets

When comparing the differing perspectives on ancient religious accessories, all three theories—embodiment theory, vessel theory, and semiotic theory—gain support from ancient myth, historic accounts, and the archaeological record. However, the former two theories function primarily in the area of state cult statues, leaving out of their consideration the roles of alternative religious accessories. As a result, further support for semiotic theory arises from its applicability to the realm of mystery cult accessories.

Ancient mystery cults, often overlooked because of their “mystic” and “magical” associations, did not function as alternatives to the state cults of antiquity. This dismissal of mystery cults perhaps stems from the more modern monotheistic necessity to choose one mode of religion over another. Rather, as we shall see, the rituals of mystery cults simply provided benefits for different parts of ancient life that state cults did not offer. As such, the religious accessories associated with these rituals do not exist in a realm of their own, but in the same category as state cult statues.

Among the many ancient mystery cults, the Bacchic mysteries stand out because of the form that their religious accessories took: small, inscribed, gold tablets.<sup>11</sup> These tablets functioned as indicators, marking individuals as initiates of this

mystery. In this way, an initiate was believed to have achieved a happier afterlife, a benefit of the *katabasis* of the god Bacchus, or Dionysus.<sup>12</sup>

Through examination of the inscriptions on the Bacchic gold tablets in depth, this study will undermine the popular scholarly opinion that mystery cults were disorganized, local, or magical practices. Additionally, this will underscore the gold tablets' legitimate place in the arena of religious accessories, which has been previously limited to statuary. This will be done primarily through the use of social network analysis (SNA). This method will assess the widespread canonical stories attached to this cult and thereby emphasize its prevalence in ancient society. These analyses will reveal the concrete and canonical nature of the Bacchic mystery cult that spread over great geographic and temporal distances. Additionally, we will examine the historic events that occurred at the time when these gold tablets began to appear. This will provide valuable insight into the harmonious relationship between the state cults and the mystery cults of antiquity. In this way, the necessity of using a theoretical viewpoint that does not draw distinctions between these two areas of Greek religion will be highlighted. This need is fulfilled by semiotic theory.

### **Mystery Cults**

Mystery cults in the ancient world were by no means particular to fifth-century Greece, the time in which the Bacchic mysteries became increasingly popular. We find such mysteries of Isis, Mithras, and Magna Mater all throughout the ancient world, from Egypt to the Near East and over to Rome.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, these mystery cults were by no means relegated to one specific time period, but continued to develop and grow in influence for centuries. Although these mystery cults were very organized in their rites, rituals, and beliefs, they continued to evolve as they came into contact with different cultures. This in particular holds true to the development of the Bacchic mysteries, which is discussed below.

Throughout all mysteries, a few central facts seem to hold true. Mystery cults require participatory events, which affect the initiate directly.<sup>14</sup> Most people are familiar with rites of passage, which permanently alter an individual's relationship with society. Initiations and rites in mystery cults similarly altered the individual.<sup>15</sup> Instead of affecting one's relation to society, these events strictly altered an individual's relationship with a deity and offered whatever benefits this close connection may afford.<sup>16</sup> Another facet that mysteries share is secrecy. Unlike the events of a state cult, which were all open to public view, the events of a mystery cult were purposefully kept secret. Additionally, mysteries offer some connection to the

realm or gods of death so as to ensure a more favorable afterlife. Ancients desired to understand and better their afterlife, a state of being that can be menacing primarily because of its mystery. While state cults sometimes ensured a happy life, they were not designed to affect one's shade in the underworld. Plutarch noted that when faced with death, many people "think that some sort of initiations and purifications will help: once purified, they believe, they will go on playing and dancing in Hades in places full of brightness, pure air and light."<sup>17</sup> Reflecting this idea, the rites of mystery cults were often held at night or in dark, secluded areas like caves.<sup>18</sup>

Because of the secrecy surrounding mystery cults, it is often difficult to assess the particular effects the rituals had on the ancient psyche. However, it appears that there was an overall desire to understand death, though not necessarily in a linear way. When examining the sporadic developments of mystery cults, one must ask exactly what was fostering this desire to understand death in a different way than was already provided by earlier mystery cults. Some religious theorists, such as E.B. Tylor might posit that this is an organic religious ascension—that it is natural for man to question life and death and further the development of religion as time goes on.<sup>19</sup> However, with these theories men such as Tylor are attempting to push the origins of Christianity deeper into history. Inspection of the historical events and the cultural context surrounding the development of the mystery cult will provide an unbiased position from which to examine this form of religion.

### **The Eleusinian Mysteries**

To better comprehend the Bacchic mysteries, we must first understand its distant forbearer, the Eleusinian mysteries. Although the Eleusinian mystery cult did not directly lead to the creation of the Bacchic mysteries, we shall see that the many similarities between the two suggests that the latter had integrated certain facets from the older, more establish mystery cult. According to the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, this mystery cult is revealed to the people of Eleusis when Demeter finally finds her daughter, Persephone, who had been abducted by Hades.<sup>20</sup> When Demeter locates Persephone and an agreement is made between Demeter and Hades, Demeter grants the mortals a gift. In addition to allowing the crops to finally grow, she also:

taught [the lawgiver kings] the sacred service, and showed them the beautiful mysteries...the solemn mysteries which one cannot depart from or enquire about or broadcast, for great awe of the gods restrains us from speaking. Blessed is he of men on earth who has beheld them,

whereas he that is uninitiated in the rites, or he that has had no part in them, never enjoys a similar lot down in the musty dark when he is dead.<sup>21</sup>

Persephone's eventual return to the realm of the living pleases Demeter so much that she decides to make the curse of mortality less formidable. Persephone becomes the queen of the underworld, yet returns to the celestial divine realm for part of every year. Her position as one of the rulers of the underworld denotes a certain amount of knowledge and familiarity with death. The cult that was created out of this mythic experience would thus impart some of this knowledge to initiates and foster a connection to Persephone. These "blessed" individuals, in order to gain this more enjoyable afterlife, have to take part in the initiation and rites of the cult.

Because of the secrecy surrounding the mystery cult, the literary evidence documenting the cult's practices is scarce.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, the modern research on the rituals of this mystery cult is mostly based on conjecture. Some believe that the rituals symbolized the mythic trials of Persephone. Such acts may have included a ritualized searching for Persephone—played by a priestess impersonating the goddess.<sup>23</sup> Physical wanderings or circling through a darkened area were also part of the mystery cult's practices, which were meant to imitate the lost and disorienting feelings believed to be a part of a shade's existence in the underworld.<sup>24</sup> In this way, initiates were symbolically experiencing death in order to receive knowledge and favor when they had to face it in actuality. Although we cannot argue specifics about the rituals of this mystery cult, we do know that there was an initiation process, or *teletai*. This practice, which state cults do not include, allowed those who took part in them to gain the special privileges of Demeter and Persephone's knowledge. Information on these secret rites can be gleaned both from the architecture of the Eleusinian sanctuary and from literary hints. For example, the main building of the complex included seating on three sides, similar to a theatre. Thus the ritualized area perhaps took on the same dramatic function.

Literary evidence also suggests that the mystery cult's rituals consisted of three parts: things done (*dromena*), things shown (*deiknumena*), and things spoken (*legomena*).<sup>25</sup> In addition to the references of *deiknumena*, small vessels have been found in the sanctuary that were perhaps filled with ceremonial objects—perhaps the "things shown."<sup>26</sup> There are also accounts that describe the festival's procession of the *hiera*, or sacred objects, from the Athens to Eleusis, and then back again at the end of the festival.<sup>27</sup> Although there is debate about the time frame of this procession, we find evidence to support that the new initiates accompanied these *hiera*

on their journey.<sup>28</sup> In both cases, these physical objects functioned as *significants*, pieces that facilitated connections between man and deity through mental *signifié*.

The Eleusinian mystery's clear connection to Athens, already noted by the procession of *hiera* between the two cities, suggests that this mystery cult was perhaps a hybrid of traditional state and mystery cult practices. Pausanias wrote about the ancient—and perhaps partially mythical—war between the Eleusinians and Athenians. He recounts the reconciling agreement, writing, “the Eleusinians were to have independent control of the mysteries, but in all things else were to be subject to the Athenians.”<sup>29</sup> As Eleusis was governed by Athens until the conquest Philip II of Macedon, the Eleusinian mystery cult was arguably analogous to a state cult of Athens. Held at Eleusis every year, the Eleusinian festival was the most popular pan-hellenic festival until emperor Theodosius disbanded it in the fourth century CE.<sup>30</sup> Although large in scale, this mystery cult was fixed in location. The Eleusinian mysteries could not be worshipped in any other city. Therefore, if an individual wanted to reap the benefits of Persephone's experience, they had to journey to Eleusis. The Eleusinian mysteries combined its otherworldly concerns and benefits with the typical city-state oversight that we see in state cults. Additionally, the festival included both the private *teletai* and a public festival. During this time, non-initiates could make the usual offerings and sacrifices seen in state cult practices. This amalgamation can arguably suggest that the Eleusinian mystery cult was intermediate between state cults and the Bacchic mysteries, which were not subject to a city-state. This breakdown of the traditional dichotomy of state cults and mystery cults even further emphasizes the necessity of a theory that bridges all of these gaps.

### **The Bacchic Mysteries**

The Bacchic mysteries were based on a variation of the ancient myth of Dionysus. Dionysus' connection to the underworld is strong because of his mythic journey to retrieve his mother, Semele, from Hades.<sup>31</sup> Thus, he was already considered somewhat of an advocate of the dead before the variant myth came into existence. This myth bares the mark of a potential mystery cult. However, his exposure and connection to the underworld was perhaps too brief to warrant a true, deep understanding of Hades that could be passed on to initiates. The originators of this cult perhaps recognized the importance of connecting the Bacchic cult's mythic cycle to that of the Eleusinian cult.

In this way, an alternative myth of Dionysus came about, connecting Dionysus to the myth of Demeter and Kore. In this alternative myth, Dionysus is the son of

Persephone and Zeus, and often referred to as Zagreus.<sup>32</sup> This mother-child relationship mimicked that of Demeter and Persephone, giving the myth a familiar structure and therefore more credibility.<sup>33</sup> The Eleusinian story was then pulled into the next generation of gods. According to this myth, Zeus decides to pass the throne on to Dionysus. However, the Titans grow angry at this choice, capture Dionysus, and dismember him.<sup>34</sup> Here the creators of the myth decided to alter Dionysus' connection to the underworld, sending him there as one of the dead. But in order for the myth to be successful, Dionysus had to return. There are many differing accounts of how Dionysus was reborn, the most compelling of which is through the help of Semele.<sup>35</sup> After Dionysus was dismembered, Athena rescues his still-beating heart. Zeus places this within Semele and the god is reborn.<sup>36</sup> In addition to this, Zeus incinerates the Titans for their deeds and from their ash humanity is born.<sup>37</sup> Because of this, humankind is tainted by the actions of the Titans—perhaps explaining why human existence could be so difficult.<sup>38</sup> Despite the often bleak prospects of life, mortals could reap the benefits of Dionysus's underworld experience.

### **Time and Context**

The next question to address is when this mythic variation came about. According to W.C.K. Guthrie, fifth-century Greece was “an age in which the established beliefs were being called in question.”<sup>39</sup> The “established beliefs” refer to the Homeric myths of tradition, which support the state cults of the time. This is not to say that mystery cults made state cults obsolete by any means, merely that Greeks began filling in the gaps that the state cults left untouched—like the afterlife. We find examples of just such questioning in the third book of Plato's *Republic*.

In his work, Plato records the theorizing of Socrates, who questions the bleak outlook perpetuated by Homer's works. Plato notes: “And again if he believes in the reality of the underworld and its terrors, do you think that any man will be fearless of death and in battle will prefer death to defeat and slavery?”<sup>40</sup> Socrates disagrees with the propagation of this depressing view of death, saying it would cause the warriors of the future to submit dishonorably to slavery rather than to die nobly in battle.<sup>41</sup> This sort of questioning is at the core of fifth-century philosophical developments. The Homeric tradition represented the canon of Olympic deities' effects on man for centuries.

As noted earlier, epiphanies in myth rarely herald blessings for the average man, but rather visit some sort of harm on them instead. Not only do we see this in the above-mentioned *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, but we see similar instances in

the myths surrounding Dionysus. In Euripides' *Bacchae*, we see the god testing the mortals of Thebes. For Pentheus, King of Thebes, his lack of participation in the deity's festival leads to disastrous results.<sup>42</sup> Even if a deity wanted to intervene to help a mortal, Zeus or the Fates often prohibited them.<sup>43</sup> The scarcity of their interference in life was even more pronounced in death. Even Achilles, one of the most famous warriors of myth, does not enjoy his afterlife. In the Homeric tradition, the gods only worked to affect the afterlives of the serious blasphemers.<sup>44</sup>

Sarah Iles Johnston specifically addresses the Bacchic mysteries' time of creation by searching for the first appearances of the altered version of the Dionysian myth. This comes in the form of Plato's mid-fifth century recording of Pindar's threnodies, in which he writes, "Persephone accepts the atonement for ancient grief."<sup>45</sup> This can be inferred to mean that the mysteries are used to appease Persephone's loss of Dionysus. On top of this, Bacchic gold tablets mark the graves of Bacchic initiates beginning ca. 400 BCE. Taking into account that the mythic cycle and mysteries were around in a less predominate form before this, Fritz Graf and Sarah Iles Johnston assert that the early fifth century was the date of the cult's inception.<sup>46</sup> Accepting the early fifth century as the time when the mystery began and seeing physical evidence of it appear in the late fifth century, one fact becomes clear: there was somewhat of a gap between the creation of the Bacchic mysteries and the beginning of the large-scale popularization of the tradition.<sup>47</sup> With this in mind, the next step is to examine the historical events of the time between the two aforementioned occurrences. This will reveal important information about the cause of the widespread increase in Bacchic mystery initiates beginning in the end of the fifth century. With this in mind, when addressing fifth-century Greece, scholars must consider war: both the Persian and the Peloponnesian.

The Persian Wars included two main invasions: the first by Darius on Marathon, and the second by Xerxes on Salamis, Plataea, and Mycale.<sup>48</sup> The Athenians largely repelled the Persian forces at the battle of Marathon in 490 BCE, with some help from Plataea.<sup>49</sup> Herodotus recounts the huge victory the Athenians achieved over this massive foreign army, claiming that the Athenians lost a small number of men, whereas the Persians lost thousands.<sup>50</sup> This was a great bolstering moment for the Athenians, establishing their might on a grand scale. When Xerxes launched the next wave of battles, most of the Greek mainland united to fight off the invading "barbarians." During these battles, the Greek martial tactics proved to make the Persian numbers somewhat obsolete.<sup>51</sup> In this way, the Persians were eventually repelled, and once again the Greeks were victorious.

The Persian Wars ushered in a time of pseudo-imperialism, particularly on the part of Athens. Although Sparta played a large role in the wars, Athens gained power afterwards because of the formation of the Delian League. Originally intended to build up funds in order to create a navy, Athens gained most of the profits from this league, as they were the primary shipbuilders of the mainland.<sup>52</sup> As such, Athenian power grew immensely. Although the city-state was a creation of Archaic Greece, the imperialistic trends of the larger Classical city-states undoubtedly put even more emphasis on state cult participation. Indeed, the entire Athenian Acropolis, which was sacked by the Persians during the war, was restored during this time period—mostly funded by the Delian League’s money. Pericles, who was in charge of this massive restoration project, also extended this refurbishment to the sanctuary of Eleusis, further emphasizing Athenian control of the cult there.<sup>53</sup> If we contend that mystery cults and state cults were two sides to the same coin, an increase in state cult grandeur could arguably usher in an increase in mystery-cult popularity as well. Additionally, the increased death toll of war undeniably put the inevitability and mystery of death at the forefront of the ancient mind. This perhaps caused individuals to turn to salvation—if not in this life, then the next.

However, it can be argued that the Persian Wars were not as spiritually scarring for the Greeks as the Peloponnesian Wars, for one critical reason: in the Persian Wars, Greeks were fighting foreigners. There was a clear demarcation of “us” and “them.” As shown above, in the years after the Persian wars, Athens began to abuse its fiscal and hegemonic position that it procured during the wars. Sparta, and many smaller city-states, soon took issue with this. Thucydides recounts much of the war in detail in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*. His history recounts gruesome tales of life and death throughout the wars. He tells stories of people being thrown off walls, prisoners being put to death, and more. Particularly devastating was the plague that hit Athens. He states that this sickness exceeded all previous cruelties that had been visited on the Athenians.<sup>54</sup> Between 430-427 BCE, Athens lost one-third of its population due to this plague.<sup>55</sup> Classical Athens’ imperial status clearly began to crumble during this time of great war. As such, its state cults no doubt suffered as well. We can also infer that the amount of horror and devastation felt by both sides would have had a significant impact on afterlife beliefs. Indeed, scholars who study Thucydides’ writing note that even his language carries the mark of trauma similar to that of the soldiers who fought in the great modern wars.<sup>56</sup>

The events of the war were devastating for both sides, and with constantly switching allies, there was no firm distinction between “us” and “them” among the

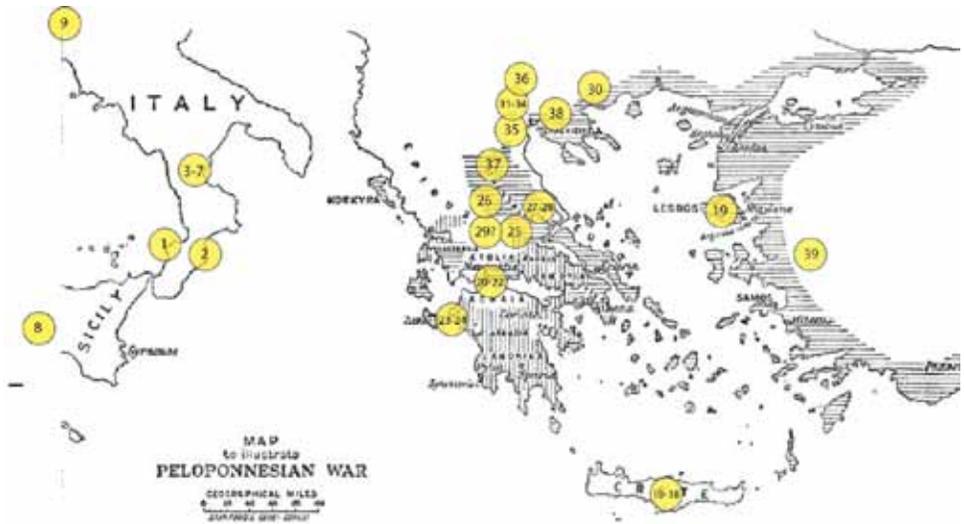
smaller allies of Sparta and Athens.<sup>57</sup> Every battle was killing men from city-states that had once been allied in the fight against Persia. Arguably the trauma that this war inflicted on the Greek people resounded into every part of their lives. This increased contact with death correlates with the increase in membership of the Bacchic mysteries. This is perhaps due to the fact that the Bacchic mystery cult was not fixed to a single geographic location nor governed by a specific city-state, as was the case for the Eleusinian mystery cult. As such, the widespread victims of the war-time tragedies could observe a religion in their own cities which would help assure a happier life after death.

### **The Gold Tablets: Measuring the Prevalence of the Bacchic Mysteries**

The previously mentioned Bacchic gold tablets have been found in graves from Rome to Asia Minor, all with carved messages or names on them and marking the individual as an initiate of the Bacchic mysteries. If large scale acceptance and participation in the Bacchic mysteries was occurring because of the horror the Greeks witnessed during the fifth century, then we would expect to find a widespread distribution of these tablets. This large spread of Bacchic mystery initiates was also facilitated by the fact that, unlike the Eleusinian mysteries, this cult did not exist solely in one location. Despite the great distances that separate these gold tablets, the Bacchic mysteries were not a loose connection of beliefs shared throughout the ancient world. Instead, this was a canonical religious cult that had a set of rites, rituals, and recitations. This mystery cult was just as influential in the religious lives of certain Greeks as state cults were. As this contradicts the usual interpretation of Greek mystery cults, strong support for this claim is needed.

At this point, we can visually compare maps of the Peloponnesian War's battles and sites of the Bacchic gold tablets and see strong similarities (Figure 1). This supports the idea that the Bacchic mystery cult traveled around much of the ancient Greek world due to war-time panic, bringing with it a uniform set of rituals wherever it went. The geographic outliers can be explained by the difficulty of travel to these far off places, such as Crete, which would naturally take time to reach. For more powerful, quantifiable support for this interpretation, we will employ social network analysis on these gold tablets based on phrases they share in order to evaluate the strength of their similarities.

The first step in this process is to catalogue the amount, locations, and dates of the 39 gold tablets listed by Graf and Johnston (Appendix, Table 2). Though there are only a small number of gold tablets, their reoccurrence suggests that initiates



**Figure 1.** Adapted from “Battles of the Peloponnesian War” in Fred T. Jane, *Heracles of Sea Power* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co. 1906), 27, with locations of tablets added in yellow circles, based upon a map appearing in Graf and Johnston, *Ritual Texts*, 5.

of the Bacchic mysteries regularly carried and were buried with such tablets, and therefore, we can expect that many of these tablets are undiscovered or were looted for their material. Because of this importance, we once again find the need for a theory that can explain the connection between man and god via religious artifacts without excluding any abnormal finds, such as these gold tablets. Of the 39 tablets, 18 date to the early fourth century BCE, just after the Peloponnesian War ended. The other half of the tablets are scattered all around the ancient world and date to as late as the third century CE. As mystery cults were popular until the Christian emperors disbanded them, the breadth of time to which these tablets are dated is not unusual. Though the amount of tablets dating to the fourth century suggests that there was a definite initial surge in the Bacchic mysteries’ popularity at this time, death and warfare were never truly removed from this civilization as different empires struggled for supremacy.

Social network analysis (SNA) provides measurable connections, or ties, between objects sharing similar characteristics, or nodes. When applying SNA to these objects, a graph is rendered that provides visual interpretation to the strength of the ties. This strength can be evaluated by the thickness of the line. If a line is

very thick between two nodes, this means that they share many similarities. In this study, the similarities we are examining among the Bacchic gold tablets are based on shared phrases inscribed on their surfaces. As the Bacchic mystery cult was designed to impart knowledge to the initiate that had been given to mortals by Dionysus, it would logically follow that these lessons would be composed of a fixed set of facts or blessings. As a result, we shall find strong, quantifiable connections among the Bacchic gold tablets despite their geographic and temporal distances. This supports the notion that this mystery cult was as developed and canonical as a state cult.

The inscriptions on the Bacchic gold tablets consist of either mnemonics or proxies. Mnemonic tablets were those that helped the dead remember the information the cult had given them about the underworld. Most of the time, this takes the form of a map of the underworld. In order to retain one's memory and avoid becoming another listless, wandering shade, one had to avoid certain lakes, take certain routes, and introduce oneself to the deities of the underworld. A prime example, Tablet 2, is from a grave in Petelia:

You will find to the left of the house of Hades a spring  
 And standing by it a white cypress.  
 Do not even approach this spring!,  
 You will find another, from the Lake of Memory,  
 Cold water pouring forth; there are guards before it  
 Say, "I am a child of Earth and starry Sky,  
 But my race is heavenly. You yourselves know this.  
 I am parched with thirst and am dying; but quickly  
 Grant me  
 Cold water flowing from the Lake of Memory."  
 And they themselves will grant you to drink from the sacred spring.  
 And thereafter you will rule among the other heroes.  
 This is the work of Memory. When you are about to die  
 To die ...write this  
 ...enwrapped...darkness.<sup>58</sup>

Proxies, on the other hand, took the form of introductions to the rulers of Hades, marking the deceased as initiates in a much more concise way. These tablets thereby functioned to garner the benefits promised by the mystery cult without directly stating what the shade should or should not do. These take the simple form

similar to this: “Dexilaos initiate” (Tablet 21).<sup>59</sup> Though these messages took different forms, their functions were the same. Additionally, as both types of tablets are found at the beginning and the end of the mystery cult’s existence, we can conclude that both types were part of the cult’s established structure.

The first step to analyzing the connections among tablets is to catalogue all of the known gold tablets by noting their location, time period, and messages (Appendix, Table 2). To analyze the connections among the tablets based on shared phrases, an additional table highlights those that display those messages (Appendix, Table 3). Because Proxies usually just list the name of the deceased, they are considered a shared phrase within themselves. This information is then entered into the social network analysis software (using Gephi Graph Visualization and Manipulation software 0.8.1 beta). This software then produces the visual network mentioned above, giving important information on the tablets’ similarities just by the general appearance of the mass (Appendix, Figure 2). Here, we can estimate by a glance that there is high connectivity among tablets. The graph does not have a specific center to which the majority of the nodes connect, indicating that there is no main tablet that the other tablets imitate. Rather, the inscriptions on the tablets all developed from a relatively even and similar communication of Bacchic teachings, crossing great distances in both space and time. The increase of line thickness connecting some of the nodes, indicating that some tablets are more similar than others, unsurprisingly occurs most often when the tablets are found in the same cities like those from Thuri (Tablets 3-7), Eleutherna (Tablets 10-15), and Aigion (Tablets 20-22). The ties to examine carefully are those between tablets with great geographic distance between them yet a high degree of connectivity. For example, the tablets from Pharsalos (Tablet 25), Entella (Tablet 8), Petelia (Tablet 2), and Hipponion (Tablet 1) share equally strong degrees of connectivity. More than 500 miles separates Pharsalos from Entella, the two most distant sites. Thus we find that strong canonical structures are seen throughout the Bacchic tablets despite great distances.

Social network analysis allows us to quantify the strength of these connections. The amount of connections each tablet has is quantified by running a weighted degree distribution test (Appendix, Figure 3). The average weighted degree is 14.588, which suggests a high level of connectivity among the 39 nodes. From this, we find further support for the canonical aspects of the Bacchic mysteries. We see that the canonical structure of the tablets’ messages are also preserved over several centuries (from the 4C BCE- 2C CE), suggesting that the messages and the benefits of the

Bacchic mysteries appealed to many over the course of Greek history.

### **The Gold Tablets: Application of Semiotic Theory**

All of this analysis supports the argument that the Bacchic mysteries functioned in the same religious arena as state cults. As such, the Bacchic gold tablets were as important to cult worship as statues were. Therefore, theorists must make the break from the usual modern dichotomy between mystery and state cults and accept a theory that encompasses accessories involved in either form of worship. It is both unnecessarily complicated and anachronistic to assume that the ancients regarded the physical accessories of state cults and mystery cults differently. Both a statue of a deity and a tablet ritualistically inscribed with the deity's knowledge function to foster a connection between man and deity, simply for differing purposes. The function and purpose of a religious accessory must then remain necessarily separate in the mind of modern scholars in order to understand the mindset of the ancients.

Nowhere in the study of these tablets is there evidence to support that ancient man viewed these tablets either as an embodiment of a deity or as a vessel for one. It is easy to understand how these two theories might apply to anthropomorphic or semi-anthropomorphic statuary because of our willingness to ascribe a "presence" to the human form. Indeed, these two theories can even be reasonably applied to aniconic statuary because a connection fostered between the deity's myth and the material used for the statue. However, when approaching religious accessories that deviate from statuary, we find that both the vessel theory and the embodiment theory have no foundation for applicability.

From what has been presented of the Bacchic gold tablets, we find that the value of an initiate's tablet exists both in its inscription as well as in its connection to the deity. The mnemonic tablets record knowledge of the underworld provided by Bacchus, affording a constant connection between man and deity because of this communication. Proxy tablets further emphasize this point, as their only purpose is to mark the individual as an initiate. This individual is granted a continuous connection to the deity, which does not disappear once the ritual is over—as is the case of state cults. Though a cult statue functions as a conduit for communication between man and deity, this connection is severed once the individual leaves and travels away from the statue. A gold tablet that is carried by an initiate in both life and death provides the same connection to the deity, but with a higher degree of constancy.

Semiotic theory easily applies to both cult statuary and Bacchic gold tablets. We find that the *object* for both accessories is the distant god to which the accessory points. For the Bacchic gold tablets, this is Dionysus. The term *significant* then aligns with the cult statue and gold tablet themselves. Thus every religious accessory that endeavors to connect man to deity can be classified under this term. Again, the *signifié* is the personal idea of the deity to which the accessory connects. Though this term's application to the Bacchic gold tablets is not as straightforward as it is with cult statues, it does adequately relate if we keep in mind that the semiotic triadic relationship only activates when the individual perceives the religious accessory. For the individual observing a cult statue, an immediate idea of the deity comes to mind and fosters the connection between man and god yet disappears once he departs from the statue. Any thoughts this individual may have of the deity once he leaves the ritualized area of the temple and its statue no longer function as a *signifié* because the *significant* is absent. For the man carrying a Bacchic gold tablet, any time the individual contemplates his connection between himself and Dionysus the semiotic cycle progresses because the *significant* is always near him. When this individual dies and has the tablet buried with him, it was believed that the purpose of this connection comes to fruition. In this way we find that the physical and mental processes involved in relating oneself to a deity through a statue or a tablet differs not in form or function, but in continuity. Despite this constant connectivity within the semiotic approach, there is no outward indication as to whether the deity is present with man. This once again aligns with the ambiguity of ancient life, for the confirmation of this communication exists only after death.

### Conclusion

Past scholarship on ancient Greek religious accessories has laid the groundwork for the increased understanding of such accessories that semiotic theory provides. Each methodology and theory provides another layer of understanding. As such, scholars are able to understand the artistic, cultural, and personal dimensions of an ancient Greek religious accessory.

Scholars such as Deborah Steiner and Verity Platt endeavor to define ancient man's perception of these pieces by integrating the literary evidence of the time. By applying myth and literature to these art pieces, we can understand their function and role in ancient Greek life. Despite this firm evidentiary basis, both theories define man's connection to the god as a definite, understandable, and direct relationship. During a time when technology limited popular understanding of the world,

it is unlikely that ancient man would be certain that a god was present within or as the statue in front of him.

Semiotic theory insists on an increase in distance between the ancient individual and the deity. Proponents of this theory also integrate myth into their analysis in order to understand the full scope of the ancient man's experience of the gods. As this theory is based on the idea that ancient man connected to the deities by way of signs, it is much more similar to the distant human-deity relationship that we see in myth and literature. The epiphanies that are noted in the Homeric tradition did not represent reality to those living during the Archaic, Classical, or Hellenistic periods. These events were understood to be singular to the heroic past. Additionally, as mentioned, the high degree of unexplained voids in ancient Greek life necessitated a religious belief that endeavored to fill some of them—yet could not fill all of them. In other words, the ambiguity of the human-deity connection that is created by the distance between the two aligns with the ambiguity of ancient Greek life as whole. The degree of certainty that Steiner and Platt apply in their theories contradicts the worshippers' indefinite structure of life. Steiner's and Platt's arguments are also weakened by their exclusion of religious accessories other than cult statues. As any object or building that helps foster a connection to the divine is defined as a religious accessory in this paper, the turn toward semiotics was necessary.

This is especially true when we consider the Bacchic gold tablets. Though many scholars have addressed the purpose of these pieces, it is hard to understand how their ancient owners perceived them. An ancient Greek man clearly felt some sort of connection from himself to the deity when he was wearing this piece; otherwise there would be no reason to keep the object on his person instead of in a shrine. The individual only received this tablet when he became an initiate of the Bacchic mysteries. This mystery cult provided a deep relationship to the god Bacchus and his mother Persephone, Queen of the Underworld.

When examining all of the details of this mystery cult and its practices, we find that there are strong parallels between state and mystery cults. As such, it is evident that the dichotomy of these two types of religious worship is unnecessarily distinct. Semiotic theory interprets the religious accessories of both cults in the same way. The only difference is the level of exposure a mortal has to the accessory.

Semiotic theory as it applies to ancient Greek religious accessories does not include the certainty that the god is sharing a physical space with a mortal. The entire process of viewing an accessory by way of this theory is based off of the individual's desire to communicate with the distant deity, and their hope that the message gets

through. Through recognizing the statue as a *significant* of the deity, the individual is able to connect the deity by way of an inner, mental connection—or the *signifié*. This process then incorporates the individual man’s psychological process into the experience. As Saussure mentions, each of these psychological processes is different based on the cultural disposition of the viewer. Semiotic theory then attempts to bridge the gap between modern and ancient viewers of religious accessories in order to understand how these pieces can connect two distant beings.

### Notes

Alice Van Arsdale graduated from the Honors College at the College of Charleston in 2013 *summa cum laude* with a BA in Classics. As she also holds minors in Theatre and Art History, Alice wanted to combine all of these interests in her senior Bachelor’s Essay entitled “A Semiotic Approach to Ancient Greek Religious Accessories.” The section here, “The Bacchic Gold Tablets,” is one of the chapters in this thesis. Dr. Kristen Gentile provided instrumental support and guidance in this project. After graduation, Alice hopes to pursue a career in museum education at a facility with a Classical art collection.

1. Charles Peirce, “Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs,” in *The Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. Justus Buchler. (New York: Dover Publications, 1955), 99.
2. Jack Solomon, *The Signs of Our Time* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 14.
3. Jonathan Culler, *Ferdinand de Saussure* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 28.
4. *Ibid.*, 28.
5. Adria Haluszka, “Sacred Signified: The Semiotics of Statues in the Greek Magical Papyri,” *Arethusa* 41, no. 3 (2008): 481.
6. *Ibid.*, 483.
7. *Ibid.*, 484.
8. *Ibid.*, 487.
9. Fritz Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World*, trans. Franklin Philip (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 140.
10. Haluszka, 489.
11. For the sake of simplicity, the term “Bacchic” denotes this mystery cult. The cult is also referred to as the Orphic mysteries and the Dionysian mysteries. See Fritz Graf, “Dionysian and Orphic Eschatology: New Texts and Old Questions,” in *The Masks of Dionysus* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), ed. Thomas

- A. Carpenter and Christopher A. Faraone, 239-58 and Walter Burkert and Wilhelm H. Wuellner, *Orphism and Bacchic Mysteries: New Evidence and Old Problems of Interpretation* (Berkeley: The Center, 1977).
12. *Katabasis* is the word for a hero's or god's journey to the underworld, usually a round-trip visit involving the visitor's desire to save a dead loved one or gain some knowledge from the deceased, for example, when Odysseus travels to the underworld to see Tiresias in *Ody.* XI.
  13. Whereas the Mithraic mysteries date to the first few centuries AD, the cult of Magna Mater dates all the way back to the Neolithic period. See Burkert, 6.
  14. Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 7.
  15. Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Solon T. Kimball (London: Routledge, 1960), 2-3.
  16. Burkert, 7.
  17. *Non Posse* 1105b. qtd. in Burkert, 23.
  18. Burkert, 8.
  19. Daniel Pals, *Eight Theories of Religion*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 23.
  20. There is a debate among scholars about the relationship between the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* and the Eleusinian mysteries. Though this debate will not be examined further, see N. J. Richardson, ed., *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974); Larry J. Alderink, "Mythical and Cosmological Structure in the Homeric Hymn to Demeter," *Numen* 29 (1982): 1-16; and Kevin Clinton, "The Author of the Homeric Hymn to Demeter," *Opuscula Atheniensia* 16 (1986): 43-49.
  21. Homer, *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, ed. H.P. Foley (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 474-482.
  22. Even in his *Description of Greece*, Pausanias writes, "My dream forbade the description of the things within the wall of the sanctuary, and the uninitiated are of course not permitted to learn that which they are prevented from seeing" (1.38.7).
  23. Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, "Festivals and Mysteries: Aspects of the Eleusinian Cult," in *Greek Mysteries*, ed. Michael B. Cosmopoulos (New York: Routledge, 2003), 29.
  24. *Ibid.*, 33.
  25. Nancy A. Evans, "Sanctuaries, Sacrifices, and the Eleusinian Mysteries," *Nu-*

- men* 49, no. 3 (2002): 246
26. *Ibid.*, 246.
  27. *Ibid.*, 239.
  28. Noel D. Robertson, "The Two Processions to Eleusis and the Program of the Mysteries," *The American Journal of Philology* 119, no. 4 (Winter, 1998): 595.
  29. *Paus.* 1.38.3.
  30. Evans, 230.
  31. Fritz Graf and Sarah Iles Johnston, *Ritual Texts for the Afterlife* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 74.
  32. Radcliff Edmonds, "Tearing Apart the Zagreus Myth: A Few Disparaging Remarks on Orphism and Original Sin," *Classical Antiquity* 18, no. 1 (1999): 36.
  33. Graf and Johnston, 75.
  34. *Ibid.*, 69.
  35. This version of the myth perhaps gains some credibility because of Dionysus' previous reputation as the "twice born" god: once from Semele, and again from the leg of Zeus. In the new version of the myth, Dionysus being born first from Persephone and again from Semele diminishes the differences between the old myth and the new. Alternate recorded versions of this "rebirth" involved aid from Rhea, Demeter, or Apollo. See Graf and Johnston, 75-80.
  36. Graf and Johnston, 78.
  37. *Ibid.*, 86.
  38. As noted in discussion of E.B. Tylor, this paper is seeking to avoid any discussion of proto-Christianity in the Bacchic Mysteries; the "original sin" that is implied in this myth will not be further discussed. See Edmonds, 1999.
  39. Guthrie, W.C.K. *The Greeks and Their Gods* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1950), 256.
  40. Plato, *Rep.*, 3.386b.
  41. Here Plato is referencing the lamentation of Achilles to Odysseus, who would prefer to be the lowest servant on earth rather than the king of the dead (*Hom. Od.* 11.488-492).
  42. In the midst of the Bacchic frenzy, Pentheus' mother thinks that Pentheus is a wild animal and tears him apart (*Euri. Bacchae* 1301-1420).
  43. We see this when Zeus wants to save his son Sarpedon from battle during the Trojan War, but is reminded by Hera that he should not go against the Fates (*Hom. Il.* XVI 426-461).
  44. We see in the *Odyssey* that Tantalus is cursed with eternal hunger and thirst, with water and fruit perpetually out of his reach (*Hom. Od.* 11.583 ff.).

45. Plato *Meno*. 81b in Graf and Johnston, 68-69.
46. Graf and Johnston, 69.
47. Some scholars believe that the myth had been around for centuries before this, streaming into Greece from Thrace. However, the lack of archaeological evidence to support this claim makes it difficult to accept these scholars' arguments. Additionally, it is hard to believe that this mythic variation existed for so long without permeating into the art or Homeric or Hesiodic writings, as is the case for many other gods such as Hephaestus and Aphrodite. See Cornford, 52; Graf and Johnston, 69.
48. Jon D. Mikalson, *Herodotus and Religion in the Persian Wars* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 5.
49. John Claughton, *Herodotus and the Persian Wars* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 38.
50. *Ibid.*, 47; *Hdt. Hist.* 6.117.
51. *Ibid.*, 87; *Hdt. Hist.* 7.211.
52. Lawrence Tritle, *The Peloponnesian War* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2004), 1.
53. Mara Lynn Keller, "The Eleusinian Mysteries of Demeter and Persephone: Fertility, Sexuality, and Rebirth," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 4, no. 1 (Spring, 1988): 30,
54. *Thuc. Hist.* ii. 50.
55. Tritle, 5.
56. *Ibid.*, 22.
57. *Ibid.*, 11.
58. Graf and Johnston, 7.
59. *Ibid.*, 31.

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## Appendix

**Table 2:** Numbers, Locations and Approximate Dates for Tablets

Tablet number	Region	City, all in graves unless noted diff.	Approx. Date
1	Magna Graecia	Hipponion	400 BCE
2	Magna Graecia	Petelia	4C BCE
3	Magna Graecia	Thurii 1	4C BCE
4	Magna Graecia	Thurii 2	4C BCE
5	Magna Graecia	Thurii 3	4C BCE
6	Magna Graecia	Thurii 4	4C BCE
7	Magna Graecia	Thurii 5	4C BCE
8	Sicily	Entella; in field but pos. once a cemetery	3C BCE
9	Italy	Rome	2-3 C CE
10	Crete	Eleutherna 1	2-1 C BCE
11	Crete	Eleutherna 2	2-1 C BCE
12	Crete	Eleutherna 3	2-1 C BCE
13	Crete	Eleutherna 4	2-1 C BCE
14	Crete	Eleutherna 5	2-1 C BCE
15	Crete	Eleutherna 6	2-1 C BCE
16	Crete	Mylopotamos	2C BCE
17	Crete	Rethymnon 1	25BCE-40CE
18	Crete	Rethymnon 2	2-1C BCE
19	Lesbos	--	--
20	Mainland Greece	Aigion 1	--
21	Mainland Greece	Aigion 2	--
22	Mainland Greece	Aigion 3	--
23	Mainland Greece	Elis 1	--
24	Mainland Greece	Elis 2	--
25	Mainland Greece	Pharsalos	350-300 BCE

**Table 2:** Numbers, Locations and Approximate Dates for Tablets

Tablet number	Region	City, all in graves unless noted diff.	Approx. Date
26 A	Mainland Greece	Pelinna	4C BCE
26 B	Mainland Greece	Pelinna	4C BCE
27	Mainland Greece	Pherae 1	350-300 BCE
28	Mainland Greece	Pherae 2	4-3 C BCE
29	Mainland Greece	Thessaly, unknown	4C BCE
30	Mainland Greece	Amphipolis	4-3C BCE
31	Mainland Greece	Pella/Dion 1	4C BCE
32	Mainland Greece	Pella/Dion 2	4-3C BCE
33	Mainland Greece	Pella/Dion 3	4-3C BCE
34	Mainland Greece	Pella/Dion 4	4C BCE
35	Mainland Greece	Methone	4C BCE
36	Mainland Greece	Europos	Unknown
37	Mainland Greece	Vergina (Aigai)	Hellenistic
38	Mainland Greece	Hagios Athanasios (near Thessalonike)	Hellenistic, looted from grave
39	Uncertain location; Asian Minor		Unknown

**Table 3:** Shared Phrases

Phrase	Tablets that have it
Bodies of water and their markers	1,2,8,25
White Cypress near lake not to drink from	1,2,8,25
White Cypress near lake to drink from	10,11,12,13,14,16,18,29
Guards asking questions	1,2,8,25
"Eucles and Eubouleus"	5,6,7,9
Joining the gods	5,6,7
"Lightning"	5,6,7
Proxies	15,17,20, 21, 22,23,24,28,30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37
"I am son of Earth and Starry Sky"	1,2, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 18, 25, 29
"innitiates"	1, 28,
"fell into milk"	3,5, 26,

Figure 2: Connections between Tablets based on Shared Phrases

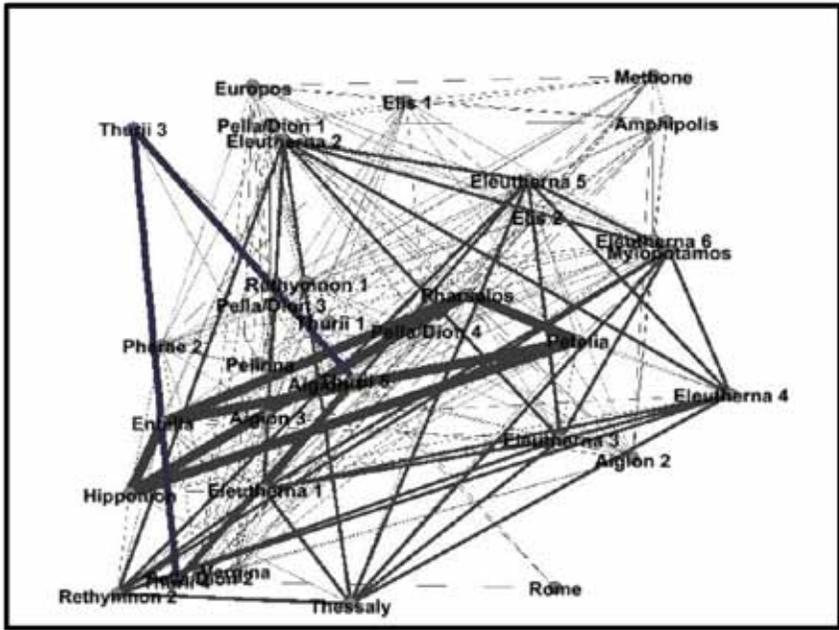


Figure 3: Weighted Degree Distribution

