

# ‘This Place Is Called “Life”’.

## On the Boundaries of Ekphrasis in the *Tabula Ceбетis*

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**Abstract:** A distinguishing characteristic of the *Tabula Ceбетis* is the subject of its ekphrasis; the whole topography of the described picture (γραφή) is pointedly and – at first sight –paradoxically referred to as ‘Life’ (Βίος). Texts περὶ βίου principally display a narrative model based on a chronological sequence, which depicts the temporal arrangement of a particular life. The schematic representation of the depicted space, however, speaks of a meta-narrative accumulation of coexisting perspectives, which is not offered by any concrete περὶ βίου text. The continuous oscillation between the coherent perspective of the narrative exegesis and its deictic frame on the one hand, and the multiplicity of individual perspectives on the described actions and events on the other, contributes to the particular tension in the text. As a kind of meta-ekphrasis, the *Tabula* playfully negotiates the gap between the illusory spatiality of the picture and the linear narrative sequence of the pictorial representation.

### 1. The *Tabula Ceбетis*

The *Tabula Ceбетis* (Κέβητος πίναξ), an extremely popular text throughout antiquity and again since the *editio princeps* of Florence circa 1494–1496,<sup>1</sup> has considerably lost its ability to attract scholars in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> Recent publications, however, have shed new light on the text’s challenging

rhetorical and aesthetic dimensions, indicating a reawakened interest in the *Tabula*.<sup>3</sup> The text – most probably written in the first century CE by a pseudonymous author<sup>4</sup> –was validated by the attribution of its authorship to a certain ‘Ceбетes’, presumably the Theban follower of Socrates who had been mentioned in the writings of Plato and Xenophon, and to whom Diogenes Laertius assigned

<sup>1</sup> Tucker 2003, 109. On the textual transmission see Nesselrath 2005.

<sup>2</sup> On the influence of the text in antiquity and on the further *fatum libelli*, cf. Fitzgerald – White 1983, 1–8; Squire – Grethlein 2014, 285–288. For a detailed overview of bibliography, cf. Fitzgerald – White 1983, 20–27; Hirsch-Luipold 2005a, 23–29; Pesce 1982, 9–37.

<sup>3</sup> On the strong impact of rhetoric on the *Tabula Ceбетis*, cf. Hafner 2013; cf. Squire – Grethlein 2014 on the text as a highly enigmatic and self-reflective work evoking aesthetic immersion as well as reflection. Elsner 1995, 39–48 discusses the work’s mimetic *mise en abîme* of visual and textual frames and relates this to the contemporary Roman culture of viewing and visibility.

See also Hirsch-Luipold 2005a, 30–34; Trapp 1997, 167–168; Tucker 2003, 113–114. Hirsch-Luipold et al. 2005 offer a comprehensive general introduction, the Greek text with a German translation and several contributions.

<sup>4</sup> In the second century CE, the text’s authorship was anachronistically attributed to the philosopher Ceбетes of Thebes: ὁ Κέβης is mentioned as author of the *Tabula* in Lucian. *Merc. Cond.* 42, *Rhet. Praec.* 6; Jun. Pol. 3,95. Cf. Nesselrath 2005; Seddon 2005, 177–180. This bestowal of authority seemed to have originally followed a strategy to make sure that the text was taken seriously.

several writings, among them the Πίναξ.<sup>5</sup> In this article, I shall consider this recent scholarly development and try to extend the existing knowledge about the aesthetic and narratological aspects of this text, which is still awaiting complete rehabilitation. My contribution focuses on the interesting entanglement of spatiality and temporality in the ekphrasis, which suggests the delivery of a representation of a pictorial space (or place: τόπος) named 'Life' (Βίος) – a nomenclature which would surely constitute an interesting combinatory challenge for contemporaries familiar with the narrative texts περιβίου based on a chronological or otherwise meaningful sequence. My central question is: How does the text manage to fuse a set of multiple perspectives into a single perspective on the pictorial space that predominates the exegesis and its, at first sight, coherent sequentiality? Before trying to address this question, I shall begin with a brief introduction to the *Tabula*.

The text first offers a narrative frame (1,1–4,1) in which the narrator explains how, along with some other unnamed people, he once 'happened to be strolling in the temple of Cronus, looking at the many votive offerings in it.'<sup>6</sup> In front of the temple's shrine, the visitors to the sacred place find an enigmatic votive tablet bearing a picture with certain stories (γραφή ξένη τις καὶ μύθους ἔχουσα ἰδίους), whose meaning the puzzled beholders are unable to decipher. Suddenly, a venerable old man enters the stage. He agrees to explain the picture; his knowledge is derived from a time when he – himself a young boy then – met by chance an old philosopher who

delivered an exegesis of the picture to him, the same exegesis that he is about to recount to the group, including the narrator. After his warning to not misunderstand the exegesis of the picture, the old man starts describing and explaining the picture, called Βίος, by pointing at it with his staff (4,2–33,1, which is the text's longest and most essential section). From the beginning, this prefigures the combination of pictorial description and the allegorically as well as metaphorically loaded meanings of the described figures and events. The various details of the description are topographically divided into different enclosures, through which the numerous human figures in the picture have to pass.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the place is populated by all sorts of personifications that guard the different entrances. Before the wanderers enter Βίος, they meet the so-called Δαίμων, who points the way to them. But at the 'reception', they are received by Ἀπάτη ('Deception', 4,2–6,1), who hands them a potion that causes all those who pass through to wander after Δόξαι ('Opinions'), Ἐπιθυμῖαι ('Desires'), and Ἡδοναί ('Pleasures'). In the first enclosure, the wanderers pass over to the power of Τύχη—who provides them with ambivalent gifts—after which they are turned over to Τιμωρία ('Punishment'), Λύπη ('Grief'), and Ὀδύνη ('Sorrow'). But a reorientation is possible through Μετάνοια ('Repentance'), by which the travellers are led to either Ἀληθινὴ Παιδεία or Ψευδοπαιδεία, whose realms they have to pass. Only via a precipitous path can one reach Παιδεία. Finally, after purification and safe conduct by Ἐπιστήμη ('Knowledge') and the Ἀρεταί

<sup>5</sup> Cf. the useful overview of the text's authorship, date, and reception in Squire – Grethlein 2014, 287–288.

<sup>6</sup> *Tab.Ceb.* 1,1 Ἐτυγχάνομεν περιπατοῦντες ἐν τῷ τοῦ Κρόνου ἱερῷ, ἐν ᾧ πολλὰ μὲν καὶ ἄλλα ἀναθήματα ἔθεωροῦμεν κτλ. All translations of the text are quoted from Fitzgerald – White

1983, 61–131, whereas the text of the *Tabula* itself is quoted following the standard edition from Praechter 1893. For corrections and supplements to Praechter's critical apparatus, see Fitzgerald – White 1983, 169–181.

<sup>7</sup> On their exact number, see especially the discussion in Squire – Grethlein 2014, 318–320.

(‘Virtues’), they reach the dwelling place of Εὐδαιμονία (‘Happiness’), who sits enthroned at the entrance of a citadel and crowns the wanderers, as if they are the winners in some great game. Afterwards, the Ἀρεταί take the wanderers back to the first enclosure to demonstrate to them the wretched state they were in—the people in this stage of ‘Life’ do not persevere to reach Παιδεία and live a miserable life. Now, the educated and virtuous humans can go wherever they wish, safe from evil and with the power to heal suffering. The text concludes with a discourse on the words of the Δαίμων regarding the journey to Παιδεία (30–32) and general discussions on the meaning of the picture (33–41), arising from the preceding interpretation and especially touching upon the value of the area of knowledge learned from Ψευδοπαιδεία (33–35) as well as the gifts of Τύχη (36–41,4). Emulating a dialogue in Socratic style, the questions of life, wealth, and the correct attitude towards goods and evils are discussed. The essential moral point that can be drawn is that whoever trusts in Ἀληθινὴ Παιδεία and is not distracted from her or his way by either Ἀπάτη or the various forms of false education, is able to arrive at the height of Εὐδαιμονία. This allegorical life story corresponds to a path leading through a city-like topography (which is initially supposed to be a ‘city’ or

‘camp’: πόλις [...] στρατόπεδον, 1,2) within an imaginary scenery.

This chapter argues that the *Tabula Ceбетis* as a highly ‘space oriented’ text, including routes, movement, directions, and simultaneity, in its central ekphrasis suggests embracing a plurality of ‘branch lines’ or life stories respectively, which come near the impression of a simultaneity of coexisting forms of life or (on the spatio-pictorial level) depicted sceneries. It is the task of the exegesis to reconcile these various perspectives through the narrative. This article does, on the contrary, *not* deal with the moralizing or philosophical ‘message’ of the text. It rather tries to engage with the special aesthetic arrangement of the *Tabula Ceбетis*. As a first step, light is shed on the special characteristic of the ekphrasis of the tablet, which deals playfully with the temporal dimension (Section 2).<sup>8</sup> In the following step, these insights in the nature of the tablet’s ekphrasis lead to further considerations about the relation of the single perspective of the (unilinear) narrative text, in which only one action can be represented at any given moment or any given textual segment, and about the imaginary simultaneity of different actions (all narrated in present tense)<sup>9</sup> and perspectives of the fictitious spatial organization or ‘suprasegmentality’<sup>10</sup> of the picture (Section 3).

<sup>8</sup> By temporality in this article I mean the narrative sequentiality in which events are presented (discourse). In biographical writings, this often corresponds to the sequence of narrated events in the real or imagined world (story). Cf. on this Grabes 2013/2014.

<sup>9</sup> By simultaneous actions, I mean pictorially represented actions that are isochronous or occupy exactly the same temporal interval. Within the fiction of the text, the tablet shows several chains of events involving different groups of ‘people’ who act in diverse constellations (e.g. the apparently educated people in the realm of Ψευδοπαιδεία 12,1–14,4, the blissful in the realm of Εὐδαιμονία 17,1–20,4, or the failed or

shipwrecked people abandoned by Παιδεία 27,1–28,3). The continual deployment of present tense narration in the *Tabula Ceбетis* enhances this impression. Isochronous strands of events occurring in several parts of the tablet with different agents are presented point-by-point and result in a ‘spatial’ distribution, thus giving an impression of simultaneity: cf. on this Harweg 2011, 159. On simultaneity in narrative, which has been a major challenge for writers from Homer to postmodernist narratives, cf. Margolin 2013/2014.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Sternberg 1990 and 1992 on the different options of depicting simultaneity in narrative.

## 2. In the realm of C(h)ronus—ekphrasis engaging with temporality

According to rhetorical handbooks dating from the Imperial Age, the term 'ekphrasis' subsumes any verbal description of visual phenomena, e.g. battles, cities, plagues, fortifications, assemblies, and artefacts. In one of these handbooks, the third century CE rhetorician Theon states that ekphrasis brings 'what is illustrated vividly before one's sight.' Its virtues are 'clarity and vividness, such that one can almost see what is narrated' (2,118–119 Spengel; trans. Bartsch 1989).<sup>11</sup> The *Tabula Cebetis* demonstrates this concept very well, provoking a rhetorically effective illusion of spatiality, by which the described τόπος is reproduced as a 'hodological' route<sup>12</sup> passing over several stages.<sup>13</sup> The local cohesion between the adjacent actions is thereby established through a sequence of different actions and its additive, paratactic quality. The rhetorically effective mapping of the scenery in words (by means of ἐνάργεια), however, generates an impression of a 'patchwork' spatiality rather than a 'bounded whole', i.e. an organically coherent

and complete representation in the readers' minds.<sup>14</sup> It is worth remarking in this context that representations of pictures or, on a more general level, space within texts,<sup>15</sup> as can also be observed in the case of the *Tabula*, due to their very structure necessarily bear a highly self-reflexive potential. Textual ekphrasis thus mainly touches two questions: 1) What are the limits of word and image or space? 2) What are the respective limits of art and nature, i.e. how does an ekphrasis distinguish between representation and non-representation?<sup>16</sup> These dichotomies lie at the heart of every ekphrasis. A central problem within this context is how a spatial (albeit imaginary) medium can be appropriately represented within the verbal medium of a text.<sup>17</sup> Regarding the representation of pictures in texts from the year 1800 onwards, Helmut Pfotenhauer draws attention to the phenomenon of a picture evoked through language or texts ('Sprachbild') as a linguistic problem: Wherever pictures (paintings, statues, cities, houses, and, generally, *tableaux vivants*) are mediated by language, they are presented through the unilinear medium of gradual narrative succession. Pfotenhauer considers the

<sup>11</sup> On ekphrasis in ancient texts cf., *inter multa alia*, Bartsch – Elsner 2007; Becker 1995; Elsner 2002; Fowler 1991; Graf 1995; Webb 2009. On ekphrasis in general, see the concise lexicon article by Klarer 2005.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. *Tab. Ceb.* 15,3 (Αὕτη τοίνυν ἐστὶν ἡ ὁδός, ἔφη, ἡ ἄγουσα πρὸς τὴν ἀληθινὴν Παιδείαν). Already in Isoc. *Or.* 1,5 (*Ad Demonicum*), we come across a figurative representation of 'Life' (βίος) as a route or journey (ὁδός): Ὅσοι γὰρ τοῦ βίου ταύτην τὴν ὁδὸν ἐπορεύθησαν, οὗτοι μόνοι τῆς ἀρετῆς ἐφικέσθαι γνησίως ἠδυνήθησαν, ἧς οὐδὲν κτῆμα σεμνότερον οὐδὲ βεβαιότερόν ἐστιν.

<sup>13</sup> On the illusion of space in the *Tabula* cf. Hafner 2013. The category of space in ancient narrative is comprehensively treated in de Jong 2012.

<sup>14</sup> Zoran 1984, 320 stressed the point that, as language is not able 'to give a complete and continuous report on space', the reader is offered to fill in the gaps on the narrative plane which reproduces space only selectively.

<sup>15</sup> In the following discussion, I will concentrate mainly – with regard to the *Tabula Cebetis* – on pictures and pictorial representations in texts, without losing sight, though, of the more general concept of space in narrative.

<sup>16</sup> Klarer 2005, 133. In their rhetorical set-pieces, authors of the so-called Second Sophistic usually reflected upon this question, and especially on how the educated Greek should adequately deal with it. Cf. e.g. on Lucian of Samosata's innovative and subverting approach to visual (esp. pictorial and sculptural) media and verbal ekphraseis, as well as to their interrelation: Newby 2002; Pretzler 2009. For formal and conceptual possibilities, many of Lucian's writings reach across the line into the fields of painting and sculpture.

<sup>17</sup> On this cf. the principal points discussed in Zoran 1984, e.g. 320–321 on the selectivity of language.



deployment of pictures in texts as a medial change and draws attention to the agonistic relationship between pictorial simultaneity and narrative succession.<sup>18</sup> Pictures, according to him, interrupt this narrative succession; continuity becomes discontinuity—what was formerly embedded in a process comes to an abrupt and sudden halt.<sup>19</sup> This is why he regards pictures in texts as ‘the other of language in language’.<sup>20</sup> As Pfothauer states, pictorial representations and optical arrangements within texts are ‘scenes of imagination’, i.e. they stimulate the imagination of the reader. Using iconic markers like frames or perspectives, they contrast the narrative of the text.<sup>21</sup> Ekphrasis thus serves as paradigm example of a ‘narrative pause’ or textual passage with no or only loose nexus to the story.<sup>22</sup> Here, pictorial simultaneity

and narrative sequentiality seem to clash with each other.

The problem arising from this view of pictorial representation in texts as ‘the other of language in language’ is, among other things, the discovery that literary ekphraseis are often and in many different ways—through correlations such as analogies or contrasts—interwoven with the narrative context. From the very beginning of ancient literature, from the action-oriented character of Homeric poetry onwards, texts tend not to represent objects so much through description as they do via narration, thus making the reader forget the materiality of the described object.<sup>23</sup> Ekphraseis do not aim at framing an exact *punctum temporis* or ‘most pregnant moment’ of an action represented in a (real or imagined)

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Pfothauer 2000, 8–9: ‘Interessant werden Bilder, die das Andere der Sprache in der Sprache insinuieren, – eigene, deutlich markierte konfigurative Räume, welche einen Medienwechsel signalisieren: von der sprachlichen Sukzession hin zur ikonischen Simultaneität. Dem wird zunächst die Aufmerksamkeit gelten – Bilder, die die Zeit stillstellen, verräumlichen, das Nacheinander zum Nebeneinander und Ineinander eines *tableaus* verwandeln.’

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 9. On description defined as ‘a narrative pause interrupting the presentation of the chain of events’, cf. Pflugmacher 2005, 101. On further reflections on description, see Wolf and Bernhart 2007.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 8 (my translation).

<sup>21</sup> Pfothauer’s systematic distinction refers back to Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s famous 18<sup>th</sup> century essay ‘Laokoon oder über die Grenzen der Mahlerey und Poesie’ (1766), or ‘Laocoon: An essay upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry’. Cf. Lessing 2005. In its 16th section, Lessing underscores that poetry organizes words in a successive order (i.e. in time), whereas painting or sculpture arranges its objects by means of colours and forms next to each other (i.e. in space). Following this antinomy or *paragone* (rivalry) between poetry and visual representation, the plastic arts can only portray objects (that simultaneously exist next to each other), whereas the domain of poetry, from a mimetic point of view, is the rendering of actions occurring alongside a temporal scale. Painting or sculpture is able to

imitate actions too, but only as they are suggested through bodies. Poetry, on the other hand, is able to describe bodies, but only indirectly – through actions: ‘Painting, in its coexistent compositions, can use but a single moment of an action, and must therefore choose the most pregnant one, the one most suggestive of what has gone before and what is to follow. By contrast, poetry, in its progressive imitations, can use but a single attribute of bodies, and must choose that one which gives the most vivid picture of the body as exercised in this particular action.’ (Transl. Ellen Frothingham). Gombrich 1964 famously criticized the systematic distinction between the arts of time and the arts of space, or succession and simultaneity respectively, that Shaftesbury, Harris, and Lessing had made; they had claimed that art has to select the ‘most pregnant moment’ or the ideal *punctum temporis* to justly depict an action. Gombrich countered that visual as well as auditory (e.g. of music) perception is itself necessarily a process in time: ‘we gather up successions of movements, and never see static configurations as such’ (p. 301). His discoveries concerning the inherent psychological impression of movement and the illusion of space are most relevant for the study of, among other things, pictorial representation in texts.

<sup>22</sup> Fowler 1991 argued persuasively against separating ekphraseis from their context or reducing them to it.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Becker 1995, 21. 56. 80. *passim*.

picture; rather, they evoke the impression of movement, linear succession, or even an illusion of spatiality. Correspondingly, several functions or effects of textual ekphrasis, observed in the context of Greek fictional literature of the Imperial Age, can be singled out.<sup>24</sup> Ekphraseis can thus anticipate parts of the story ('Handlungsvorwegnahme'),<sup>25</sup> prepare the atmosphere ('Stimmungsvorbereitung'), or display a mirror reflection ('Spiegelungseffekt'), in which a literary description of real or imagined pieces of visual art appears as if in a convex mirror.<sup>26</sup> A similar thing happens in the *Tabula Cebetis*. As has been observed, there are salient echoes between the pictorial world of the tablet and the narrative frame of the text. In other words, the text subtly posits parallelisms between the constellation comprising the wise interpreter of the picture and his listeners, among them the narrator of the text, on the one hand, and the figure called Δαίμων and the wanderers within the picture on the other.<sup>27</sup> More explicitly, the exegete evokes and repeats the words of the Δαίμων in the context of his interpretation of the picture (cf. 30,2, where the words are included into the interpreter's dialogue with the narrator: θαρρεῖν, ἔφη, διὸ καὶ ὑμεῖς θαρρεῖτε). Furthermore, in the passage 3,1–4, the old man's preliminary words appear as a brief proleptic reference to the subsequent exegesis of the picture (cf.

e.g. 3,3 and 9,4). The blurring of the medial boundaries of narrative frame and pictorial representation superficially evokes the immersion of internal (by means of inclusion) and external recipients 'into' the picture. Both are used to identify with the human travellers depicted at various stages on the tablet. This 'complex recession of frames generates a mimetic *mise en abîme* in which the representational world of the pictures slips and slides into that of the narrative framework containing it'.<sup>28</sup> Hence, the text proves to be highly self-reflexive about its own aesthetic mediations, as well as about the implicit involvements of both viewers and readers.

Another central element, which renders the pictorial exegesis an extension or even a prolongation of the narrative parts of the text and which in my view has not been previously observed, is the statement—paradoxical at first sight—that the place portrayed on the tablet is called 'Life' (4,2 καλεῖται οὗτος ὁ τόπος Βίος). The whole topography of the expounded picture (γραφὴ) is pointedly referred to as Βίος, i.e. what we read is actually a Βίου γραφή. Accordingly, the tablet at the centre of the *Tabula Cebetis* not only involves a spatial dimension as an illusion of a described place or topography; the tablet's very subject ('Life') sets the task of portraying a linear temporal interval<sup>29</sup> in the medium

<sup>24</sup> As was categorized by Zimmermann 1999, 69–71, based on a thorough analysis of ekphraseis in the Greek love novels written during the Imperial Age.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. on proleptic ekphraseis Harrison 2001.

<sup>26</sup> On this effect of ekphraseis cf. also Webb 1999.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Hafner 2013, 76–77; Hirsch-Luipold 2005a, 30–34; Squire – Grethlein 2014, 294–295.

<sup>28</sup> Squire – Grethlein 2014, 295, with evidences on pp. 294–298. Cf. on p. 296 the pointed remark on the collapsing of picture into narrative in the *Tabula*: 'the art of pictorial interpretation is rendered a figurative extension of the narrative frame, and the narrative frame a prefiguration of the text's pictorial interpretation.'

<sup>29</sup> Although the term βίος usually implies a qualitative dimension, meaning 'mode of life or manner of living' (which conforms to the various lifestyles portrayed on the tablet as well as to its moralizing message), the *Tabula* in my view brings out in relief the word's significance as a chronologically constituted 'lifetime' (cf. LSJ s.v. I.3, furthermore the more holistic dimension *ibid.* s.v. III: βίος as 'the world we live in', or the temporal phrase διὰ βίου) implying the span of time of an individual 'from the cradle to the grave'. A βίος fixed in a text corresponds to our modern concept of 'biography': the story of an individual's lifetime.

of verbal description, as a result of which spatial and temporal extensions seem to be intertwined throughout the text. Through the statement to represent a βίος, the *Tabula Cebe-tis* is superficially clothed as a text depicting a life or biography. Plutarchus (*Thes.* 1,2), for instance, undertakes the task to write parallel lives (περὶ τὴν τῶν βίων τῶν παραλλήλων γραφήν). Literature of the type περὶ βίου was associated by the contemporaries with texts that not only dealt with an exceptional way of life of an individual human (deeds and character, including virtues and vices), but was in principle a narrative model based on a chronology that depicted, as a rule, the sequential arrangement of a particular life. In other words, it was a sequential narrative that embraced the birth, deeds, and death of a certain person. For Arnaldo Momigliano, who figured prominently in highlighting the shared features of biographical texts and in defining the ‘genre’, biography is ‘an account of the life of a man from birth to death’.<sup>30</sup> This constitutes a useful least common denominator of most biographical texts. Thus, as Tomas Hägg puts it:

Biography is typically a narrative form: it relates the history of a person from birth to death. Even when much of the material is ordered systematically rather than chronologically, most biographers prefer to start with birth, childhood, and education, before the systematic treatment by topics begins, and to end with death.<sup>31</sup>

Hägg adds that the characteristic of biography is a (often spatial, i.e. from place to place) movement, development, or change, depicting a character dealing with a succession of occurrences and influences.<sup>32</sup> The *Tabula Cebe-tis* hints at this dimension of narrative sequence or chronological development through the exegesis of the pictorial representation, which is conceived as a route (‘Road of Life’) passing over several successively arranged stages. The proleptic references foreshadowing later events (e.g. the passage 3, 1–4 referring to the following description) correspond to a device favoured in ancient Lives.<sup>33</sup> Finally, the *Tabula* shares its quantitative aspects with the usually brief and succinct biographical texts, i.e.: ‘Much fabula time has to be covered in little story time.’<sup>34</sup>

By choosing Βίος as the very subject of its central ekphrasis, the *Tabula* sets itself the task of delivering a spatial arrangement within a narrative form *par excellence*. A βίος was usually presented via a chronological succession by ancient writers of Lives. Evidently, the *Tabula Cebe-tis* is by no means a biographical text; the schematic representation of the tablet and the abstract marking of the picture as ὁ Βίος (‘Life’ as generally conceived, without any attribute such as the ‘life of someone’) speak clearly for a meta-

<sup>30</sup> Momigliano 1971, 11.

<sup>31</sup> Hägg 2012, 4, quoting *ibid.* Terry Eagleton: ‘The structure of biography is biology’.

<sup>32</sup> Nonetheless, the description of a βίος may also form a stationary impression of a character portrait, for example. According to Hägg 2012, 5 a combination of the two – life story and serial portrait – may be said to constitute biography.

<sup>33</sup> A famous element according to Hägg 2012, 6 is a “proleptic” childhood description, giving to

the child the specific traits that are to characterize the subject as an adult’.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 7. On the issue of time in narratology cf. Genette 1988, 21–40 (on ‘order’, ‘speed’, and ‘frequency’) and the more recently published articles in the open access *living handbook of narratology* by Scheffel – Weixler – Werner 2013/2014, especially Grabes 2013/2014 and Margolin 2013/2014. On time in ancient narrative cf. the contributions in de Jong – Nünlist 2007.

narrative conception.<sup>35</sup> The description of a topography within the imaginary picture—suggesting the simultaneous presence of various perspectives—is nevertheless combined with an exegesis that is fashioned according to the pictorial subject—'Life' or, in other words, the story of a lifetime. But how is a temporally constituted interval to be presented graphically, unless an artist happens to be dedicated to portraying an abstract term in the form of a statuesque personification, such as Lysippus and possibly Polycleitus were in their plastic representations of *Καιρός*?<sup>36</sup> This also poses the question of whether a clash of incompatible perspectives is negotiated within the text. The *Tabula Cebetis*, as I shall argue in the following passage, acts as an aesthetical experiment, trying to get to the bottom of the problem presented by textual ekphrasis, thereby dealing with its own medial boundaries and limitations in a playful and innovative way. By referring to abstract *Βίος* portrayed in a text form, the ekphrasis proposes as its subject a story, which is, according to Forster, a 'narrative of events narrated in their time-sequence'.<sup>37</sup> Thus, the

*Tabula* tries to frame a picture constituted by an inherent sequentiality, or – to put it simply – by time, which is one of the most essential traits of a narrative. One should be aware that the whole setting is situated within a temple of the god Cronus who, in antiquity, was occasionally interpreted as Chronus – the personification of time (ὁ χρόνος).<sup>38</sup> Hence, the text clearly seems to problematize the central aesthetic mechanics of ekphrasis – the synapse between description and narration as well as its very constituents – space and time (as mediated through language).

### 3. The *Tabula's* narrative: dealing with co-existing perspectives

Right at the beginning of the text, the narrator and his fellows encounter, among other votive offerings (πολλὰ [...] καὶ ἄλλα ἀναθήματα, 1,1), 'a strange drawing with peculiar stories' (γραφὴ ξένη τις καὶ μύθους ἔχουσα ἰδίους), which the perplexed beholders are unable to understand (οὐκ ἠδυνάμεθα συμβαλεῖν, τίνες καὶ ποτε ᾗσαν, 1,1). These 'peculiar stories' (μῦθοι ἴδιοι)<sup>39</sup> obviously correspond to the different

<sup>35</sup> At least since Hellenistic times a variability of literature *περὶ βίου* is detectable: from the third century BCE onwards, we observe a coherent, if variable, genre of *βίου*: cf. Gallo 1975 and 1980. This is demonstrated by Dicaearchus's innovative adaptation of the concept: the *Βίος Ἑλλάδος* portrayed Greekness in its cultural development and evolution, referring to the analogy of a person's or individual's characteristics in developing from childhood onwards.

<sup>36</sup> *καιρός*—an important concept in art and philosophy—means 'the right moment', 'opportunity', 'advantage', 'the right measure', or 'proportion', and was in later times equated with Chronus or even (in Byzantium) with Bios. As an abstract quality or personification, Kairos (whose cult site was in Olympia according to Paus. 5,14,9) is winged, tiptoes or stands on his wheels, and balances scales on a razor's edge. He has a shock of hair on his forehead and none on the back of his head (*Anth. Pal.* 16,275). The fleeting moment (or opportunity) has to be grasped before it is gone, because once

*καιρός/Καιρός* has passed you by, there is nothing left to hold on to.

<sup>37</sup> As quoted in de Jong 2007, 1, with further references on the issue.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. on Cronus as identified with Chronus: Pherecyd. VS 7 B 1; Cratin. fr. 258 PCG; *schol. ad Apoll. Rhod.* 1,1098; Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 1,38; as a figurative name for Chronus: Cic. *Nat. D.* 2,64 (*Κρόνος enim dicitur, qui est idem χρόνος id est spatium temporis*); Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 363D (ch. 32). Cf. the considerations in Hirsch-Luipold 2005b, 116.

<sup>39</sup> On the division of works of art into single scenes (esp. in Hellenistic times), which in pictorial descriptions are rendered mostly via an accumulation of various extracts, cf. Hirsch 2005, 168. It is in general an interesting question how narrative, through discursive sequentiality, manages to build up more or less static objects in space to a multifarious imaginary spatiality. According to Grabes 2013/2014, this has not been sufficiently studied.



scenes that make up the whole tablet and that are structured by roughly outlined architecture (several enclosures which *in toto* form a kind of cityscape) and by configuration of depicted humans and personifications of abstract terms, who appear as if they were human beings. While the visitors to the temple are still in a state of puzzlement about the strange tablet, not being able to fuse the single stories depicted on it into one coherent narrative (Ἀπορούντων οὖν ἡμῶν περὶ τῆς μυθολογίας πρὸς ἀλλήλους πολὺν χρόνον), an old man – the exegete, as we soon learn – addresses the group (2,1) and tells them how the votive tablet had once been dedicated by a wise stranger, whose explanation of the picture he himself had often heard (τότε δὴ καὶ περὶ ταύτης τῆς μυθολογίας πολλάκις αὐτοῦ ἠκηκόειν διεξιόντος, 2,3). Considered *per se*, the tablet is not understandable for outsiders; it needs an interpreter who knows about its power and who can transform the single stories into a single coherent and continuous storyline (οὐδὲ γὰρ τῶν ἐπιχωρίων πολλοὶ οἶδασι, τί ποτε αὕτη ἡ μυθολογία δύναται, 2,1). Through the interpretation, the μῦθοι ἴδιοι are fused into one coherent story (i.e. a ‘narrative of events narrated in their time-sequence’, see above) or—as the text puts it—a μυθολογία, which the exegete will in turn narrate to the listeners after having been invited to do so by the narrator (διήγησαι, 3, 1). Several simultaneously existing scenes or

perspectives (according to the fiction of the text) are blended into the singular and coherent perspective of the pictorial exegesis or narration.<sup>40</sup> For simultaneous actions and events in the tablet’s spatial organization, although divided into distinct sub-spaces or enclosures, the position of the external observers is of major significance. The internal narrator’s temporal position relative to the action within the picture is clearly bound to the higher deictic frame of the exegesis.<sup>41</sup> The interpreter and the beholders act as observers looking at events and actions occurring in local distance from an exterior position: the first reports in ‘real time’ to the internal group of fictitious beholders (via *deixis ad oculos*) and indirectly to the external recipients (via *deixis am Phantasma*) – which reminds one very much of the use of teichoscopy in Greek epics and tragedy. In the course of the text, both the viewers and the readers navigate through the representational field of the picture (4,1–32) as well as through the text – which again is a representational medium. They immerse into the wanderers within the depicted topography, who are making their way through Βίος. At the same time, however, the immersive or absorbent power with respect to the reader is undermined, as narrative flashbacks and flashforwards to an earlier or later point in the story and the coexisting models of life, presented according to conditional ‘if...then’ patterns,<sup>42</sup> break the illusion of a coherent

<sup>40</sup> On ‘linearization’ as an instrument of narrative to represent temporal simultaneity cf. Fowler 1991, 29–30. On the representation of space along a sequential temporal line in narrative cf. Zoran 1984, 312–315. 321.

<sup>41</sup> On the notion of *deixis* note that as the old exegete takes a staff and points with it to the picture (ἐκτείνας πρὸς τὴν γραφήν, 4,2), so too the Δαίμων appears ‘with a scroll in one hand and as if showing something with the other’ within the picture described (ἔχων χάρτην τινὰ ἐν τῇ χειρὶ καὶ τῇ ἑτέρᾳ ὥσπερ δεικνύων τι, 4,3).

<sup>42</sup> Cf. the frequent use of conditional clauses (including an iterative or gnomic sense) within the pictorial exegesis, e.g. 9,3–4 (ἐὰν οὖν τις πεισθῇ ὑπ’ αὐτῶν εἰσελθεῖν [...], ἕως ἂν γαργαλίξῃ τὸν ἄνθρωπον [...]. ὅταν γὰρ ἀνανήψῃ, αἰσθάνεται [...]. διὸ καὶ ὅταν ἀναλώσῃ πάντα ὅσα ἔλαβε παρὰ τῆς Τύχης, ἀναγκάζεται [...]. ὅταν οὖν πάντα αὐτοῖς ἐπιλίπη, παραδίδονται τῇ Τιμωρίᾳ. The conditional style illustrates the broad spectrum of different lifestyles and the variability of acting in Βίος. By this narrative (discursive)

hodology and of *one* single perspective on the illusory space.<sup>43</sup> In addition, the schematic representation of the picture and its marking as 'Life' (without any attribute such as the 'life of someone', as mentioned above) suggest a meta-narrative and universally conceived simulation of sequentially arranged narratives and perspectives, which no concrete text *περὶ βίου* is obviously able to offer to such a degree. The *Tabula* enables its internal and external recipients to adopt a highly privileged position in front of the tablet, thus allowing for a perspective 'from the outside' onto the picture.

The outsider's perspective on 'Life' is also a prominent theme in a legendary anecdote of a conversation between the philosopher Pythagoras and Leon, the tyrant of Phlius, on the Peloponnese, whose fullest report is transmitted through Cicero (*Tusc.* 5,8–9 = Herakl. Pont. fr. 88 Wehrli).<sup>44</sup> Replying to Leon's question – 'Who are philosophers?' – the sage expresses the idea that life seems to him like the gathering when great games of all Greeks were held (*similem sibi videri vitam hominum et mercatum eum, qui haberetur maximo ludorum apparatu totius Graeciae celebritate*). As part of this festival or fair,

some men sought to win fame and the glory of the crown by exerting their bodies, others were attracted by the

gain and profit of buying and selling, but there was one kind of man, the noblest of all, who sought neither applause nor profit but came in order to watch and wanted to see what was happening and how: so too among us, who have migrated into this life from a different life and mode of being as if from some city to a crowded festival, some are slaves to fame, others to money; but there are some rare spirits who, holding all else as nothing, eagerly contemplate the universe; these he called lovers of wisdom, for that is what philosopher means; and as at the festival it most becomes a gentleman to be a spectator without thought of personal gain, so in life the contemplation and understanding of the universe is far superior to all other pursuit.<sup>45</sup>

Cicero, translating a passage by Heraclides of Pontus as he himself indicates (*ut scribit auditor Platonis Ponticus Heraclides*), has Pythagoras create a *tableau* of (life as) a festival, where different groups of people simultaneously pursue their particular interests and businesses (*ut illic alii [...], alii etc.*), each striving perpetually for glory and profit. Only one group has come to watch the market.<sup>46</sup> This group is likened to the philosophers, who contemplate the nature of things from a privileged position.<sup>47</sup> The people

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arrangement, the linear temporal order of events and actions in the story is interrupted.

<sup>43</sup> On the undermining of the recipient's absorption 'into the picture', cf. also the invaluable observations made by Squire – Grethlein 2014, 301–309. According to them, by the devaluation of written texts (*γράμματα*) that are banned to the realm of *Ψευδοπαιδεία*, the *Tabula Cebeitis* points out the boundaries of pictorial exegesis mediated through the text (i.e. the *Tabula* itself). And yet, a way out of this dilemma is indicated by the fictitious orality of the dialogic setting, which 'purports to record an impromptu ethical conversation' (p. 300).

<sup>44</sup> Cf. also Diog. Laert. 1 *prooem.* 12; Sosicrates in Diog. Laert. 8,8; Aët. 1,3,8; Diod. Sic. 10,10,1; Iambl. *VP* 44. 58. 159. For a discussion of the variant versions of the story see Gottschalk 1980, 23–26.

<sup>45</sup> The English translation of Cicero follows Gottschalk 1980, 23–24.

<sup>46</sup> *visendi causa venirent studioseque perspicerent, quid ageretur et quo modo* in Cicero; cf. Iamblichus' *τόπων θέας ἔνεκα καὶ δημιουργημάτων καλῶν καὶ ἀρετῆς ἔργων καὶ λόγων*, *VP* 58.

<sup>47</sup> *rerum naturam studiose intuerentur [...] in vita longe omnibus studiis contemplationem rerum*

competing for the sake of fame and the others trying to trade profitably remind one of the adherents of the ‘seductive women’, representing the Ἀρεταί in the *Tabula Ceбетis*.<sup>48</sup> According to Cicero, in Pythagoras’s festival, only the ardently contemplating people (*studiose intuerentur*) do not mingle with the crowd – as beholders they stand aside without getting close to the ‘Vanity Fair’ going on there. There is a correspondence with the group of wanderers in the *Tabula* who finally manage to reach the height of Εὐδαιμονία and are in succession crowned by her as if they were the winners of supreme games.<sup>49</sup> Only these people are led by the Ἀρεταί to a place from where they watch those who spend their time wickedly and live wretchedly. The one who is blessed by Εὐδαιμονία, though, ‘lives nobly and observes how poorly they are doing’ (αὐτός τε καλῶς ζῆ καὶ τούτους θεωρεῖ ὡς κακῶς πράσσουσιν, 25,3). Both the blessed as well as the beholders of the tablet listening to the pictorial exegesis of the narrative frame (like the contemplator of Pythagoras’s fair and, correspondingly, the philosopher), watch the whole panorama or ‘market’ of ‘Life’ in

front of them at their leisure.<sup>50</sup> This privileged perspective, from which the whole pictorial panorama can be controlled visually, bears resemblance to the external or spatially distant standpoint (or bird’s eye view) of the narrator already found in the Homeric epics.<sup>51</sup> In Cicero as well as Pseudo-Keβes, the listeners occupy a similar standpoint from which they get an entire view of the described scenery. In both texts, ‘Life’ (*vita hominum* or Βίος respectively) becomes perceptible through a reduced focus on human experience, attitudes, and features of behaviour. Despite its obvious similarities to the *Tabula Ceбетis*, the ‘Life’ –represented as a fair in Heraclides Ponticus and Cicero – appears more likely to be a kind of immovable portrait that gives an almost stationary impression of simultaneously ongoing (inchoative or incomplete) activities, although it is also fitted into an overall unified mechanism – the groups of people mentioned are introduced with ‘there are’ (*esset*) and are rarely provided with verbs designating motion (*petent, ducerentur*).<sup>52</sup> The *Tabula*, on the other hand, has a plethora of verbs and participles that insinuate dynamic motion and

*cognitionemque praestare* in Cicero; cf. also Iamblichus’ τὴν τῶν καλλίστων θεωρίαν, *ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> πλῆθος τι γυναικῶν ἑτέρων παντοδαπὰς μορφὰς ἔχουσῶν [...]. Αὐταί τοίνυν Δόξαι καὶ Ἐπιθυμίας καὶ Ἡδοναί καλοῦνται. Ὅταν οὖν εἰσπορεύηται ὁ ὄχλος, ἀναπηδῶσιν αὐταί καὶ πλέκονται πρὸς ἕκαστον, εἶτα ἀπάγουσι, *Tab.Ceb.* 6,1–2.

<sup>49</sup> Στεφανοῖ αὐτόν, ἔφη, τῆ ἑαυτῆς δυνάμει ἢ τε Εὐδαιμονία καὶ αἱ ἄλλαι Ἀρεταί πᾶσαι ὡσπερ τοὺς νενικηκότας τοὺς μεγίστους ἀγῶνας, *Tab.Ceb.* 22,1.

<sup>50</sup> The passage *Tab.Ceb.* 2,2 possibly hints at a Pythagorean heritage of the allegory of ‘Life’. The man who once donated the tablet is introduced as follows: ‘Once long ago, a certain foreigner came here, a sensible man and exceptional in wisdom, who was emulating in word and deed a Pythagorean and Parmenidean way of life, and he dedicated both his temple and the painting to Cronus’ (ἀλλὰ ξένος τις πάλαι ποτὲ ἀφίκετο δεῦρο, ἀνὴρ ἔμφρων καὶ δεινὸς περὶ σοφίαν,

λόγῳ τε καὶ ἔργῳ Πυθαγόρειόν τινα καὶ Παρμενίδειον ἐζηλωκῶς βίον, ὃς τό τε ἱερὸν τοῦτο καὶ τὴν γραφὴν ἀνέθηκε τῷ Κρόνῳ).

<sup>51</sup> On this see de Jong – Nünlist 2004, especially on p. 65 the description of the ‘*panoramic standpoint, non-actorial*’: ‘The narrator positions himself at a considerable distance and can oversee the totality of the events. This standpoint is often used for the description of settings’.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Hafner 2013, 80 with n. 97 (verbs of motion creating an effect of vividness). On such forms of ‘linguistic excess’ cf. already Hom. *Il.* 18,541–549 where the (imaginary) pictorial representation of the shield of Achilles exceeds the simple description of what can be seen by animating ostensibly inert images: as can be observed again in the later *Tabula*, the Homeric poet-narrator contrasts the animation of the scene with the inert materiality of the medium – the metal shield produced in Hephaestus’ forge in Homer, the votive tablet in Ps.-Ceβes’ *Tabula*.

rushing about with respect to the depicted events. Compared to the almost static description of the festival to which 'Life' is compared by Pythagoras, the design of the ekphrasis in the *Tabula Cebetis* is much more intricate. Here, the description of the picture – by juxtaposition of the different levels of the tablet within a paratactical arrangement – evokes an illusion of spatiality on the one hand and of progressive sequentiality on the other. Through the narration, these levels are connected to one coherent sequence which, however, has to constantly cover up the changes of perspective between these different levels.<sup>53</sup> The oscillation between the setting of multiple perspectives with its hermeneutical openness in the pictorial scenes and represented figures on the one hand, and the single perspective of the narrative exegesis inserting all figures and events into a linear chronology on the other, contribute to the special tension of the text.<sup>54</sup> This switch of different levels within the narration of the tablet's spatial arrangement is, of course, closely related to the ethical dimension of the text, as the listener or reader – being confronted also with several 'wrong' ways of life – gains a privileged knowledge about which option or way he or she should better choose (and which not!). This didactical or

pedagogical effect is by no means excluded from the high persuasiveness evoked by the text's pictorial exegesis. In my view, though, the *Tabula Cebetis* rather constitutes particularly a meditation about its own aesthetics – the text explores the limitations of a text mediating a pictorial representation. Its narrative lets its recipients reflect on the boundaries of different media and the bridging of the gap between spatial and temporal dimensions in a playful way.<sup>55</sup> Does this imply ekphrasis' inherent necessity to fail in trying to reconcile the supposed incommensurability between pictorial representation and the represented object?<sup>56</sup> It is possible, but the *Tabula Cebetis* certainly displays an ekphrasis that, due to its object ('Life'), reflects productively upon its own mechanics and the aporetic moment to present events narrated in their time-sequence (i.e. 'Life' regarded as 'lifetime') and to additionally represent a pictorial space which consists of a varied mosaic encompassing a multiplicity of individual scenes. While the 'architectonic' structure of the tablet may induce readers to perceive the depicted elements as juxtaposed in space, the subject of the ekphrasis ('Life') – as it is narrated within the higher deictic frame and from the perspective of the old exegete and the internal beholders –

<sup>53</sup> Cf. on this Fowler 1991, 28–29, who on p. 29 states, with references to linguists' views on the phenomenon, that 'a literary description necessarily inscribes a point of view more strongly than a plastic one [...]: when we describe in words a scene, we have to decide the order in which we are to present the details and the duration—which may be zero—of the description of each of them. Narratologically [...] the visual scene described functions as story to the narration of the verbal description [...]: a point of view is necessarily inscribed, though there may be accepted ways in a particular culture of ordering the elements [...]. But the speaker's solution of the linearization problem necessarily imposes a point of view.'

<sup>54</sup> Cf. on this inherent tension of every aesthetically loaded description, Drügh 2006, esp. 17,

reinterpreting Lessing's *Laocoon*: on the one hand, description aims at creating *ἐνάργεια* or *evidentia*, i.e. such vividness that one can almost see what is narrated; on the other, description for this purpose accumulates the characteristics of the represented object and, in doing so, contradicts the textual economy according to which just one element or just a few of one paradigm are realized within a syntagma. As a result, description is in danger of becoming the opposite of vividness: *obscuritas*.

<sup>55</sup> On the arrangement of space in the temporal verbal continuum of narrative cf. Zoran 1984.

<sup>56</sup> The necessary failure of ekphrasis and the medium's inability to reflect temporally overlapping occurrences iconically is underscored by Mersch 2007, 59.



nevertheless unfolds gradually in ‘real time’. As a meta-ekphrasis, which is situated in the realm of C(h)ronus (1,1) and which illustrates a place called ‘Life’, the text throws into relief the connection of spatiality and

sequentiality (or temporality) within a single narrative, thus exploring the relative capabilities and limitations of its own aesthetic resources.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Cf. on this Webb 2009, 167–168.

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