Scholarship and Morality: 
Plutarch’s Use of Inscriptions

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In 1958, workmen digging the foundations for a home to the west of Theseion Square in Athens came across some ancient blocks. Amongst them was discovered an inscribed votive pillar of marble of *circa* 330 BC (later published as *SEG* xxii 116) recording a decree proposed by [He]gesippos son of Hugesias in honour of Neoptolemos, who had made a dedication to Artemis at the time when Chairylla was priestess of Artemis. By reference to Plutarch, the blocks were identified as the remains of the temple of Artemis Aristoboule, which, according to Plutarch, Themistocles had built near to his house in the Athenian city deme of Melite:¹

‘He gave offence to the people when he built the temple of Artemis, for not only did he style the goddess Artemis *Aristoboule*, or Artemis wisest in counsel – with the hint that it was he who had given the best counsel to the Athenians and the Greeks – but he chose a site for it near his own house at Melite…. A small statue of Themistocles used to stand in this temple of Artemis *Aristoboule* even down to my own times, and to judge by this he must have been a man not only of heroic spirit but of heroic appearance’ (*Themistocles* 22.1–2; cf. *Moralia* 869c).²

This passage is typical of Plutarch’s style of autopsy-report, the aim of which is to highlight anything that contributes to an impression of the character under investigation. The inscribed dedications and honorary decrees which probably jostled for attention at the temple even at the time of Plutarch’s visit were not mentioned by him because, for his purposes, the statue was the item that gave

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¹ Vanderpool and Threpsiades. This identification was contested: see Amandry.
² All translations of Plutarch’s *Lives* are those of Scott Kilvert 1960 and 1973. All translations of the *Moralia* are those of the Loeb Classical Library.
clearest insight into the character of Themistocles. Plutarch was uninterested in quoting or discussing inscriptions for their own sake. Indeed, recent scholarship, including Desideri’s comprehensive review of the documents mentioned by Plutarch, has established Plutarch as only an ‘armchair epigrapher’ who more often than not relied on others’ reports of inscriptions. Desideri and others have concluded that Plutarch recognized the value of documentary autopsy but was only occasionally moved to carry it out himself, most frequently at Athens and Delphi.

So much for the negative side of the picture. The positive aspect is that in both the Lives and Moralia, Plutarch alludes to, discusses and quotes a range of Greek and Latin epigraphical categories, including, to name a few: inscriptions on statues (Cato Major 19.3), choregic tripod-bases and other dedications (Nicias 3.3; Moralia 398a, Alexander 16.8, Titus Flamininus 16.5); grave monuments (Cato Minor 11.2), political slogans (Tiberius Gracchus 8.10), laws (Solon 25.1) and boundary stones (Theseus 25.4). He is familiar with some technical aspects of epigraphy: for instance the appearance of the imprecation ἄγος θύσῃ at the head of a decree (Moralia 1035b); he is the first scholar to notice what David Lewis branded the ‘entrenchment clause’, forbidding the taking down of a document (Perides 30.1; Lewis, 81–9), and he criticizes as slovenly the habit of recycling inscriptions as building materials (Moralia 85f–6a). Inscriptions in the Lives and Moralia play a variety of roles: they reveal the level of fame, philotimia, and wealth of an individual; they assert individual and community virtues to be emulated and vices to be avoided; they act as proofs in arguments or as evidence to substantiate an assertion (Lycurgus 1.2; Aemilius Paulus 15.6); they provide insight into those characters who read them, write them, and react to them (Moralia 330e–f; Pompey 27.3, Demosthenes 20.2, Alexander 69.2); they are instruments of magic, hubris, nemesis or even agents of divine intervention (Themistocles 8.2–3, Aristides 27.3, Brutus 8.3, Fabius Maximus 2.3, Alexander 17.2; Moralia 400e; Antony 60.6); inscriptions can be the key to riddles and can preserve epichoric understandings of words and phrases (Moralia 292b); they provide a starting point for philosophical inquiry (Moralia 116c, 384ff.); or a point of opening or closure for individual Lives (Otho 18.2, Sulla 38.4, Themistocles 1.1, Aristides 1.2, Lycurgus 1.2).

By the time that Plutarch was writing, antiquarian interest in epigraphy had left a legacy of writings that purposefully collected inscriptions or were heavily reliant on documentary and lapidary material. The most strongly

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3 On Plutarch’s use of statues to make characterizing points about his subjects, see Mossman 1991.
4 Desideri; Higbie; Buckle; Crespo Güemes.
5 Braun; Jacoby 1944.
epigraphical of ancient texts lacked the merit or fortune necessary to survive into modern times, but were popular as reference-works and were much-cited by travellers, historians and biographers in antiquity. Therefore it is no surprise that fragments of works on decrees, dedications, monuments and tripods such as the Ψηφισμάτων συναγωγή of Craterus, the Περί τῶν ἀναθημάτων τῶν ἐν τῇ ἀκρόπολει of Polemon of Ilion the στηλοκότας, or the Περί ἀκροπόλεων, Περί τῶν ἐν Ἀθήναις ἀναθημάτων, Περί τῶν ἐν Ἀθήναις τριπόδων, and the Περί μνημάτων of Heliodorus of Athens are preserved in citations in extant authors.6

Inscriptions were recognized long before Plutarch’s time as a means of recording the character and morality of an individual, not just by historians and intellectuals but also by proposers of honorary decrees. This is particularly evident from the end of the fourth century BC when honorary decrees inscribed on stone become longer and tend to detail more closely the praiseworthy actions of the honorand (cf. Rosen). Inscriptions were cited in the law-courts of the 330s BC as a way of trying to indicate that the morals of past generations were higher than those of the present (Aeschines 3.184–5; Lycurgus 1.109).7

This paper proposes that Plutarch employed inscriptions in a manner which reflects his familiarity with the use of epigraphical material in classical Greek literature. He values highly the application of epigraphical evidence in scholarly controversies, though he is cautious about launching interpretations on the basis of epigraphical evidence alone. In the Lives, his employment of inscriptions to demonstrate an understanding of the workings of philotimia in fifth- and fourth-century Athens leads him to say something from the epigraphical evidence about the morality of his characters; in the Moralia, this attitude towards inscriptions develops into a rigorously-pursued morality of epigraphy.8

6 Craterus, FGrH 342, F 1–8; Polemon of Ilion, FHG 3.108–48; Heliodorus of Athens, FGrH 373 F 1–3, 6–7. For other ancient epigraphical collections, see Boeckh i: vii–ix; Larfeld, i: 16–25.

7 The verses were later cited by Plutarch (with some textual variations, for which see Page, 255–9) in his discussion of Cimon’s activities after the Persian Wars (Plut. Cimon 7). For the processes behind Aeschines’ reception of the verses, and an explanation for the incorrect order in which they are quoted, see Jacoby 1945, 195–211, challenged by Gomme.

I. Epigraphy and Scholarly Persuasion

From the fifth century onwards, a wide range of inscriptions were discussed and quoted in Greek literature in ways that do not appear ‘systematic’ to modern historians but rather as ornamental devices (cf. West), as ammunition in scholarly controversies (Marincola, 103), and to assert an impression of scholarly control over the evidence (Marincola, 104–5).

An inscription that exemplifies this tendency is the spectacular Serpent Column, a Greek thank-offering set up at Delphi at the end of the Persian wars. Herodotus, Thucydides, Apollodorus son of Pasion, Pausanias, Diodorus Siculus, Plutarch all mention the inscription, sometimes adding a new twist to the stories behind it. Apollodorus tells us that after Pausanias engraved his solipsistic epigram on the base of the monument, the Spartans were fined by the Amphictyonic League and had to be forced to erase the lines. Apollodorus hoped to increase his powers of persuasion by displaying an authoritative knowledge of Greek history through a knowledge of its documents. The document also provides a veiled criticism of Thucydides who says no more than that the Spartans erased the inscription immediately. As we shall see below, Plutarch cites the same inscribed dedication in his attack on Herodotus.

Historians too employed documents and inscriptions with polemic force. Theopompus claimed that the inscription recording the Peace of Callias was a forgery by pointing to its anachronistic letter-forms (FGrH 115 F 154). However, the most striking surviving piece of polemic is preserved in Polybius’ attack on the historiographical methods of Timaius. Timaius, as Polybius reports, proudly cited epigraphical evidence in his onslaught on Aristotle’s account of the origins of the Epizephyrian Locrians. According to Polybius, Timaius claims to have examined a stone recording the treaty between colony and the mother–city, and tries to replace other authors with this knowledge. Polybius attacks him, however, for failing to reveal the full name of the city in which he saw the inscription, the exact spot where it was set up and the identity of the person who showed him the document; he insinuates that Timaius has invented the document (FGrH 566 F 12; Polyb. 12.10–1). Polybius’ point is that Timaius abuses the potential scholarly authority of inscriptions. Plutarch, however, is more careful: he is cautious in his use of epigraphical evidence to make points about history; however, he tends to use it with less caution, even vehemence, in scholarly polemic.

It is worth commenting on Plutarch’s tendency to prioritize citation of epigraphical or documentary evidence. Stadter (109–23) has already argued that Plutarch preferred documentary evidence to the evidence of Thucydidean

9 The Serpent Column: Meiggs and Lewis no. 27; cf. Hdt. 8.82, 9.81; Th. 1.132; [D.] 59.97; Plut. Mor. 870e; Trevett.
orators whose speeches he did not consider genuine. In the ‘Table-Talk’, Plutarch explicitly praises inscriptional-based evidence. Inscriptions, via the praiseworthy records of the antiquarian Polemon, can be a more accessible source of knowledge than an obscure treatise like Acesander’s Libya (FGrH 469 F 7). Having stated that Acastus, at the funeral of his father, held a contest of poetry at which the Sibyl won, he tells us:

“I was immediately fastened on by many, who demanded my authority for so incredible and paradoxical statement; luckily I remembered and told them that Acesander in his Libya has the tale. ‘This reference,’ I went on, ‘is not generally accessible, but I know that many of you will be interested, as you ought to be, in consulting the account of the Treasuries at Delphi by Polemon of Athens, a man of wide learning, tireless and accurate in his study of Greek history. In that book you will find that in the Treasury of the Sicyonians was deposited a golden tablet dedicated by Aristomache of Erythrae, twice victor in epic verse at Isthmia’ (Moralia 675b).10

Plutarch’s belief that the epigraphist occupies a privileged position in the world of scholarship validates his use of epigraphy as a weapon in scholarly controversies and in the reconstruction of Greek history and biography. In the preface to the Nicias, he warns his readers that his subject has been incomparably dealt with by Thucydides. He promises that he will not try to outdo Thucydides in terms of descriptions of battles and speeches. Instead, his aim will be to collect items of interest that have eluded previous writers in the Nicias. Some of these are epigraphical:

‘Certain facts, however, which have eluded most writers altogether, or have been mentioned only haphazardly by others, or are recorded only in decrees or in ancient votive inscriptions, I have tried to collect with care. In doing this my object is not to accumulate useless detail, but to hand down whatever may serve to make my subject’s character and temperament better understood’ (Nicias, 1.5).11

Here Plutarch emphasizes his diligence in collecting inscriptions, in the hope that this will contribute to an understanding of Nicias’ character. In the Aristides, Plutarch reveals awareness of the contentious nature of epigraphical interpretation in his discussion of the debate about whether the existence of

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10 Ἐπιγραφομένων δὲ πολλῶν καὶ τὸν βεβαιωτὴν ὡς ἀπίστου καὶ παραλόγου τῆς ἱστορίας ἀπαιτοῦντων, ἐπιτυχῶς ἀναμνησθέντες ἀπέφευραν Ἀκέσανδρον ἐν τῷ περὶ Λιβύης ταῦτ’ ἱστορίαν. ‘καὶ τότῳ μὲν’ ἔφην τὸ ἀνάγκωσα τῶν ὅκ’ ἐν μέσῳ ἑστὶν τοῖς δὲ Πολέμωνος τοῦ Ἀθηναίου περὶ τῶν ἐν Δελφοῖς Ἱησούρων οὐμε [ἄτι] πολλοίς ὑμῶν ἐνυπηγχαίνει ἐπιμελεῖ ἑστὶ καὶ χρή, πολυμαθός καὶ οὐ νυστάζοντος ἐν τοῖς Ἑλληνικοῖς πράγμασιν ἀνδρός ἐκεῖ τοῖνυ εὐρήσετε γεγραμμένον, ὡς ἐν τῷ Σικυωνίων Ἱησούρῳ χρυσοῦν ἄνεκετο βιβλίον Ἀριστομάχας ἄναξίθημα τῆς Ἐρυθραίας ἐπικώ … ποιήσω δεῖς Ἱσμία νεικικυίας.

11 τὰ διαφεύγουσα τοὺς πολλοὺς, ὦ δ’ ἐτέρων δ’ ἐφημένα σποράδην ἢ πρὸς ἀναθήματι ἢ ψηφίσματι εὑρήμενα παλαιῶς πεπείραμα συναγαγεῖ, οὐ τὴν ἄχρηστον ἄξροιζου ἱστορίαν, ὀλλά τὴν πρὸς κατανόησιν ἢδους καὶ τρόπου παραδιδόθ.
choregic monuments bearing Aristides’ name provide proof of his wealth. The problems, Plutarch realizes, are two-fold: poor men, such as Epaminondas and Plato the philosopher, were able to have their names recorded as choregoi when they themselves were sponsored by a benefactor; secondly, as Panaetius points out, the inscription may refer to a different Aristides of a later era (Aristides, 1.6). Plutarch leaves the debate unresolved, and the passage stands as an indication of Plutarch’s caution in employing arguments from inscriptions.

But it is the in De Herodoti Malignitate where Plutarch most fully develops his use of inscriptions in scholarly polemic. In an important article, Stephanie West identified Herodotus as a pioneer in the use of epigraphical evidence, while showing that he puts inscriptions to largely ornamental use. However, in both the Lives and in the De Malignitate, one of Plutarch’s charges against Herodotus is his ignorance of inscriptions. In his description of Plataia in the Aristides (19.6), he quotes an inscribed altar to argue, against Herodotus, that in addition to the Athenians, the Tegeans and Spartan also challenged the Persians at Plataia. The most sustained attack on Herodotus occurs in the De Malignitate. In this work, Plutarch considerably reinforces his attack on Herodotus by reference to his ignorance of key epigrams and inscriptions that tell the story of the Persian wars. For one thing, he claimed that the Greeks fled at Artemision and that the Greek victory there was the fruit of bribery and deceit:

‘With a single phrase he wipes out (aphairetai) the Greek victory, pulls down the trophy, and makes empty bombast out of the inscriptions (kathairei kai tas epigraphas) which they set up in the temple of Artemis Proseoa.12 This is the verse that stands there…’ (867f).13

Plutarch implies that Herodotus’ ignorance of epigraphy is equivalent to destroying the Greek victory and the inscriptions commemorating that victory. Contrarily, Plutarch finds this patriotic monument particularly alluring, citing it also in his description of Artemision in the Themistocles (8.3). Later on in the De Malignitate, Plutarch makes a vicious attack on Herodotus’ description of Adeimantus’ behaviour at Salamis. Herodotus claims that the Corinthian commander fled in fear from the scene of battle, and was persuaded to return only by a speeding cutter. But for Plutarch, this description puts drama above accuracy: ‘it seems that this cutter fell down from the skies – since he is more theatrical in every other respect than the writers of tragedy, why should he avoid using the machinery of stage’?

12 For confirmation of the epithet, see an inscription found on the site, IG xii (9) 1189.5.

13 δὲ εἰς ῥήμα τὸ νίκημα τῆς Ἑλλάδος ἀφαιρεῖται καὶ τὸ τρόπαιον καθαίρει καὶ τὰς ἐπιγραφὰς, δὲ ἔκεντρο παρὰ τῇ Ἀρτέμιδι τῇ Προσημώφι, κόμπων ἀπωφαίνει καὶ ἀλαζονείαν; ἔχει δ’ οὕτω τούτῳ γραμμα.
This is a manifestation of the tragic or dramatic history that Plutarch despises (cf. Themistocles 10.1). Plutarch’s response is to turn to the epigraphic evidence: ‘it is unlikely that an Athenian would make such abusive remarks about Corinth, when he could see the name of that city inscribed third in order on the barbarian spoils offered to the gods, following the name of the Spartans and the Athenians’ (870d). After this reference to the Serpent Column, he goes on to cite further inscriptions in support of this argument: the inscription on the Corinthian cenotaph on Salamis, another from the sanctuary of Poseidion at Isthmus, a dedication made by a Corinthian captain at the temple of Leto and the grave-stone of Adeimantus (870b–f). Finally, he quotes an epigram set up at the temple of Aphrodite on the summit of the Acrocorinth, recording that the Corinthian women prayed to Aphrodite in the hope that she might inspire their men with passion for battle against the barbarian (871b). He claims that this last epigram was maliciously ignored by Herodotus, and deems it incredible that a man like Herodotus should be unaware of a story of which even the remotest Carian would have caught wind, made famous by Simonides’ epigram on the bronze statues that were set up in the temple of Aphrodite. Having quoted the epigram, Plutarch asserts that this is something worth remembering, ‘instead of dragging in the sorry tale of Ameinocles killing his son’ (871a–c). Plutarch thinks that Herodotus’ decision to ignore accessible inscriptions relevant to Greek activity in the Persian wars reveals his malice. Moreover, Herodotus is a bad historian because he prefers drama to epigraphical accuracy. The reader is forced to choose between the conclusion that Herodotus is incompetent in dealing with epigraphical evidence or alternatively, that he hides his knowledge through malice. For Plutarch, on the other hand, epigraphy emerges as the remedy to the dramatic history that he finds so distasteful.

So far, we have seen the way in which, in both the Lives and the Moralia, Plutarch realizes the potential of epigraphy as a source or weapon of scholarly polemic. Thus he is echoing the tendency of fifth- and fourth-century oratory and historiography to use inscriptions in this way.

14 ὁ δὲ κήλης οὗτος ἦν, ὡς ἐοικεν, ὀφόραυστητής· τί γάρ ἔδει φείδεσθαι μηχανής τραγικῆς, ἐν πᾶσι τοῖς ἄλλοις ύπερταίοντα τοὺς τραγῳδοὺς ἀλαζονεῖς; 15 On Plutarch’s hostility to tragic history, see Mossman 1988, 84–5 n. 6; Wardman, 168–79. 16 οὐδὲ γάρ εἰκὸς ἢν Ἀθηναῖον ταῦτα βλασφημεῖν περὶ τῆς Κορινθίων πόλεως, ἢν τρίτην μὲν ἑώρα μετὰ Λακεδαιμονίου καὶ μετ’ αὐτοῦ ἐγχαραττομένη τοῖς ἀπὸ τῶν βαρβάρων ἀνασκήμασιν. 17 Part of the first couplet was found on Salamis: see Meiggs and Lewis no. 24. 18 The verses for Adeimantus are quoted by Favorinus ([Dio Chrysostom] 37.19).
II. The Morality of Epigraphy

The Greeks used honorary decrees to encourage citizens and foreigners to play a spirited role in public life, by promoting their appetite for honour, or *philotimia*, through the setting up of public inscriptions. This was made explicit on certain Athenian state decrees from the mid-fourth century BC onwards by the ‘hortatory clause’ (cf. Henry). Such clauses consisted of a statement of intention to encourage a spirit of competitive emulation among the citizens (e.g. 333/2 BC, IG II² 338 lines 17–24), or to promote the Athenian reputation and their readiness to return a favour (e.g. 343/2 BC, IG II² 223 a lines 13–4). Of course, the existence of the hortatory clause does not necessarily mean that every reader took notice of the intention, or indeed that they responded to the call for *philotimia*. However, that some did take the hortatory intention seriously becomes clear in Demosthenes Against Leptines. In this speech, Demosthenes argues that the law of Leptines revoking the exemption granted to certain Athenian honorands from payment of liturgies is unworkable, and will not significantly improve Athens’ financial situation. He argues also that Leptines’ abolition of exemption of will blacken the Athenian reputation for treating her honorands well, and it will create resentment and distrust among her former benefactors. The sum of this is that it will discourage future benefactors, and will thus ruin the system of *philotimia* that the Athenians were striving to promote (esp. 108). A long section of the speech (29–87) lists the most famous benefactors who have received *ateleia*, and he makes vivid reference to the inscription honoring Leucon, King of the Cimmerian Bosporos (20.36–7). For Demosthenes, therefore, the right use of epigraphy safeguards the Athenian grain-supply and the well-being of the *polis*.

I suggest that Plutarch’s interpretation of epigraphy has similarly moralizing aspects, and that his morality of epigraphy swings on the idea, enunciated by Demosthenes, that right epigraphy keeps in tune with the interests of the *polis*.

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19 For a comprehensive study of *philotimia* in Athenian inscriptions, see Whitehead.
20 ‘Crown him with a gold crown worth 10 *drachmai* for the sake of his just behaviour in his superintendence of the springs, so that also others who are ever elected as (superintendents) of the springs might act with *philotimia* towards the *demos* (στεφανώσαι αὐτὸν χρυσῶι στεφάναι ἀπὸ τοῖς δραχμῶι ἀρετῆι ἑνὲ καὶ δικαιοσύνηι τῆι περὶ τήν ἐπιμελείαν τῶν κρηνῶν, ὅπως ἀν καὶ οἱ ἄλλοι οἱ ἀεὶ χειροτονοῦμενοι ἐπὶ τάς κρήνας φιλοτιμῶνται ἐκαστοὶ εἰς τὸν δῆμον).
21 ‘So that all the other *epistatai* may know that the Athenian *demos* and *boule* returns gratitude to those who are constantly speaking and doing the best things on behalf of the *boule* and the people’ (ὅπως ἂν [οὺς καὶ οἱ ἄλλοι ἄτατοι] τειχίως οἴδας ὅτι ὁ δῆμος καὶ ἡ βουλή ἐπίσταται χάριτας ἀποδίδοντοι τοῖς ἀεὶ λέγουσιν καὶ πράττουσιν τὰ βέλτιστα ὑπὲρ τῆς βουλῆς καὶ τοῦ δῆμου).
or records something noble, whether it be a fine deed of a statesman or the collective action of the polis.

The role of successful choregic activity in boosting the profile of the wealthy in ancient Athens has recently been stressed by Peter Wilson (Wilson, 109–262). Plutarch cites with particular insight the choregic tripod-bases in his reconstruction of the intersection of philotimia and political activity in the classical Greek city.22 Near the start of the Nicias, he tells us that whereas Pericles had governed Athens by virtue of his natural superiority and the force of his eloquence, and Cleon had used opportunism, charisma and oratory, Nicias used his wealth in his favour:

‘He tried to ingratiate himself by providing dramatic and gymnastic exhibitions and other forms of public munificence on a more expensive and sumptuous scale than anything ever seen in Athens before. Two of his offerings to the Gods are still standing in my day – the statue of Pallas Athena on the Acropolis, which has lost its gold plating, and also the shrine placed under the tripods in the precinct of Dionysus. Nicias won the prize many times with the chorus he presented, and, indeed, he was never defeated’ (Plutarch, Nicias 3.2–3).23

After this passage he goes on to list Nicias’ dedications at Delos. Plutarch, who has evidently seen the monument of the fifth-century general (mentioned also by Plato, Gorgias 472a)24 here appears to be a perceptive reader of classical Athenian euergetism. Elsewhere, he recognizes that Themistocles spent money on choregic monuments in order to boost his profile (Themistocles 5.4).

However, Plutarch has reservations about the morality of this employment of epigraphy. In Nicias’ monuments, ‘there are signs of a certain vulgarity and ostentation’. Nicias, however, gets the benefit of Plutarch’s very serious doubts, as he adds that ‘it seems likely that his love of display was the outcome of his religious piety, and that the winning of popularity and hence of influence over the masses was quite a secondary object’ (Nicias 4.1). Plutarch here demonstrates an understanding of classical euergetism but he casts some doubt on the morality of using choregic sponsorship and ostentatious display of tripods to boost one’s profile in the city.

23 χορηγίας ἀνελύσαι καὶ γυμνασιαρχίας ἐτέρας τε τοιαύτας φιλοτιμίας τὸν ὄμοιν, ὑπερβαλλόμενος πολυτελεία καὶ χάριτι τούς πρὸ ἐαυτοῦ καὶ καθ’ ἐαυτόν ἑπταντας. εἰστήκη δὲ καὶ τῶν ἀναδημάτων αὐτῶν καὶ καθ’ ἡμᾶς τὸ τε Παλλάδιον ἐν ἀκροτόλιε, τὴν χρύσωσιν ἀποβεβηλκός, καὶ ὅ τοις χορηγικοῖς τρίτοις ύποκείμενος ἐν Διονύσου νεώς ἐνίκησε γὰρ πολλάκις χορηγηθείς, ἔλειψθε δ’ οὐδέποτε.
24 Attempts have been made to associate Nicias the dedicant of the fourth-century choregic monuments with Nicias the fifth-century general, but Wilson doubts the association: Wilson, 209.
In the *Moralia*, Plutarch extends the use of ancient epigraphy from being a gauge of individual morality to that of the city. In the essay *On the Fame of the Athenians*, choregic monuments provide evidence of Athenian profligacy. For, the tripods that they supported were ‘a last oblation of their wasted livelihood, an empty memorial of their vanished estates’ (349b), and an indication (348d) that the Athenians were extravagant and prioritized ostentation over military expenditure.

For Plutarch, epigraphy can serve as a measure of character and great deeds. We can find instances where the correct use or the abuse of epigraphy reflects on a character. This is particularly clear in the case of Timoleon, whose understanding of the morality of epigraphy earns him praise. Having won a victory in Sicily, Timoleon sent a report of his victory alongside captured armour, an action that for Plutarch communicates Timoleon’s *polis*-patriotism through epigraphical aspirations:

‘His ambition was that in Corinth, alone of all the Greek cities, men should see the most conspicuous temples adorned not with the spoils taken from Greek states, melancholy offerings obtained by the slaughter of men of their own race and blood, but decked with ornaments won from the barbarians and baring honorable inscriptions which testified to the justice as well as the courage of the victors: in this instance the memorial proclaimed that ‘the Corinthians and their general Timoleon freed the Greeks living in Sicily from the yoke of Carthage and thus dedicated these thank-offerings to the Gods’ (*Timoleon*, 29.5 – 6).

Timoleon’s aspirations are contrasted with those of his enemies the Sicilian tyrants. One of them, Mamercus, insulted the Syracusans by his use of epigraphy:

‘For Mamercus, who had a high opinion of himself as a writer of poems and tragedies, boasted of his victory over the mercenaries, and when he dedicated their shields to the gods, he composed the following insulting inscription: ‘Those gilded bucklers of purple with amber and ivory inlaid proved no match in the field for our cheap little, plain little shields’ (*Timoleon*, 31.1). 27

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25 ἑπίσπευσα τῶν ἐκκεχυμένων βίων καὶ τῶν ἐκλειστότων κενοτάφιον οἴκων.
26 διαλόγμενοι αὐτοῦ τὴν πατρίδα πάσιν ἀνθρώποις ζηλοτήν εἶναι, ἰδεώμεσιν ἐν ἑκείνῃ μόνῃ τῶν Ἑλληνικῶν πόλεων τοὺς ἐπιφανειστάτους ναοὺς οὐχ Ἑλληνικοῖς κεκοσμημένους λαφύροις, οὔδ’ ἀπὸ συγγενῶν φόνου καὶ ὁμοφύλων [ἀνασκήματος] μνήμης ἀπετρεπτῆς ἔχοντας, ἀλλὰ βαρβαρικὰ σκύλα, καλλισταῖς ἑπιγραφαῖς δηλοῦντα μετὰ τῆς ἀνδρείας τῶν νεκρευκτῶν τὴν δικαιοσύνην, ὅτι Ἐκκένθιοι καὶ Τιμολέων ὁ στρατηγὸς, ἐλευθερώντας τοὺς Σικελίαν οἰκούντας Ἑλλήνας ἀπὸ Καρχηδονίων, χαριστήρια Θεοῖς ἀνέδηκαν’.
27 καὶ γὰρ ὁ Μάμερκος, ἐπὶ τῷ ποιήματα γράφειν καὶ τραγῳδίας μέγα φρονοῦν, ἐκόμπαξε νικήσας τοὺς μισοδιόρους, καὶ τὰς ἀσπίδας ἀναδείξας τοῖς Θεοῖς ἐλεγείαν ὕβριστικόν ἐπέγραψε “τάσδ’ ὀστρειογραφεῖς καὶ χρυσελεφαντηλέκτρους ἀσπίδας ἀσπίδιοις εἶλομεν εὐτελέσιν”. 

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Accordingly, Timoleon and Mamercus provide examples of the right and wrong of epigraphy. Plutarch’s morality of epigraphy contributes to his portrait of character.

Plutarch’s notion that inscribed dedications provide moral insight into the customs of the classical Greeks emerges also in the *Moralia*. In *On the Oracles at Delphi*, Theon contends the worthiness of Diogenianus’ indignation at the dedications of Greek courtesans by reference to even more shameful offerings commemorating Greek inter-*polis* wars:

‘You fell no pity for the Greeks when upon the most beautiful votive offerings you read the most disgraceful inscriptions: ‘Brasidas and the Acanthians from the Athenians’ and ‘The Athenians from the Corinthians’ and ‘The Phocians from the Thessalians’ and ‘The Ormeatans from the Sicyonians’ and ‘The Amphictyons from the Phocians’…. It would be well for kings and rulers to dedicate votive offerings to commemorate justice, self control, and magnanimity, not golden and luxurious affluence, which is shared also by men who have led the most disgraceful lives’ (401c–d).28

Dedications commemorating victories of Greeks over non-Greeks fulfil the moral potential of the epigraphic habit, whereas commemorations of victories of Greeks states over other Greeks states represent an abuse of the habit.

So far I have been interested in Plutarch as a critic of the party setting up the inscription; but the reader too is subject to Plutarch’s epigraphical censure. The reader should not waste their time on reading frivolous inscriptions:

‘What difficulty is there about refraining from reading the inscriptions on the tombs as we journey along the roads? Or what is there arduous in just glancing at the writing on walls when we take our walks? We have only to remind ourselves that nothing useful or pleasant has been written there: merely so–and–so ‘commemorates’ so and so ‘wishing him well’ and someone else is the ‘best of friends’ and twaddle of this sort. It may seem that no harm will come from reading these, but harm you it does by imperceptibly instilling the practice of searching our matters that do not concern you.’ (520d–e).29

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28 οὐδ’ αἰκίτερες τούς Ἐλλήνας ἐπὶ τῶν καλῶν ἀναθημάτων αἰσχίστας ἀναγγινώσκων ἑπιγραφάς ‘Βρασίδας καὶ Ἀκάνθοις ἀπὸ Αθηναίων’ καὶ ‘Ἀθηναίοι ἀπὸ Κορινθίων’ καὶ ‘Φωκεῖς ἀπὸ Θεσσαλῶν’, ‘Ορνέαται δ’ ἀπὸ Σικυονίων’, ‘Ἀμφικτύνοις δ’ ἀπὸ Φωκέων’… δικαιοσύνης γάρ ἀναθηματικὴ καὶ σωφροσύνης καὶ μεγαλονοσίας καλῶς ἔχει τίθεσθαι παρά τῷ θεῷ τῶν βασιλέων καὶ τούς ἀρχόντας, οὐ χρυσῆς καὶ τρυφώσεως εὐπορίας ἢ μέτεστι καὶ τοῖς αἰσχίστα βεβιωκόσιν.

29 τῇ χαλέπτῳ ἐστιν ἐν ταῖς δόξαις τᾶς ἐπὶ τῶν τάφων ἑπιγραφάς μὴ ἀναγγινώσκειν, ἢ τί δυσχερές ἐν τοῖς περιτάτοις τὰ κατὰ τῶν τοίχων γράμματα τῇ ὑπεὶ παρατρέχειν, ὑποβάλλουσας αὐτοῦτό τις χρήσιμον οὐδὲν οὐδ’ ἐπιτερτής ἐν τούτοις γέγραπται, ἀλλ’ χρήσιμον οὐδὲν οὐδ’ ἐπιτερτής ἐν τούτοις γέγραπται, ἀλλ’ ἐμνήσθη ὁ δείνα τοῦ δείνος ἐπ’ ἀγαξίω’ καὶ φιλών ἄριστος ὅ τε τις, καὶ πολλὰ τοιαύτης γέμουσα φλυαιρίας; ἢ δοκεῖ μὲν οὐ βλάπτειν ἀναγγινωσκόμενα, βλάπτει δὲ λεληθὸτος τῷ μελέτῃν παρεμποτεῖν τοῦ ζητεῖν τὰ μὴ προσήκουντα.
Wasting one’s time on reading inane inscriptions is the pointless activity of the polypragmatist. It is evident from this passage, that while those inscriptions relating to the great men who are subjects of their lives are well worth reading, those inscriptions relating to obscure men, with nothing virtuous to communicate, are not.

For Plutarch, the value of epigraphy is that it provides worthwhile material for the historian or biographer engaged in reconstructing the lives of great individuals or recounting for emulation the great deeds of the Greeks of antiquity. Plutarch uses inscriptions in the Lives to contribute to his portrait of the morality of characters under discussion. In the Lives this moral interpretation of inscriptions betrays a particularly moral stance on the whole subject of epigraphy. In the Moralia this develops into a morality of epigraphy which Plutarch impresses upon his readers. The epigraphical morality outlined in section II of this paper should be closely associated with his conviction, which emerged in section I, that inscriptions are ammunition for scholarly polemic because they provide both insight into character and a basis for writing good history.

John Moles (1999) has already analysed the way in which ancient historiographers conceived of their own works as redeploying an epigraphical image of permanency and fixedness in a variety of different ways; I hope to have highlighted a way in which Plutarch expresses both a descriptive and protreptic ‘morality of epigraphy’ which derives from the fifth- and fourth-century century literary treatment of inscriptions and also the hortatory intention expressed on some decrees.30 I have argued here that in many ways, Plutarch’s use of inscriptions is as much a reflection of his reading of classical authors as a result of his own moral views.

Bibliography


30 For Plutarch’s use of ‘descriptive’ and ‘protreptic’ morality, see Duff, 1999 and Pelling, 2002.


2b: Other authorial techniques
Ewen Bowie examines Plutarch’s habits of citation. More specifically, he explores the extent to which Plutarch’s habit of ‘decorative’ quotation from canonical prose and poetic texts extends beyond the Moralia, where it can be argued to be largely a practice inherited from the philosophical traditions in which he works, and into the Lives, whose historiographic and biographic pedigree might not lead one to expect this practice as often as it appears. Further, he also considers how significantly the range of authors from whom ‘decorative’ quotations are drawn differs between Moralia and Lives.

Bernard Boulet discusses Plutarch’s reuse or adaptation of the same material according to the occasion, and relates his different (and sometimes inconsistent) versions to his different audiences.* His test case is the way Plutarch portrays the god Apollo, and Boulet finds that this portrayal fluctuates from a purely theoretical Neopythagorean Oneness all the way to a fantastic mythological god. So how is one to understand these incompatible visages of Apollo?

The article elaborates the hypothesis that Plutarch chooses his words, frames his theories and models his myths to fit each occasion. In short, he commonly adapts his speech with a view to the reader or listener. In his dialogues, for example, some speeches are addressed to good moral souls, while others are intended for more philosophical minds. And in the Lives, the Delphic oracle speaks to experienced statesmen. An overview of several dialogues and Lives bears witness to the fact that this inconsistency is indeed consistent and, consequently, it is argued, purposeful. The various descriptions of Apollo correspond to the variety of readers.

Simon Verdegem, in exploring the relationship between the Quaestiones Romanae and the Lives of Romulus, Numa, Publicola, Coriolanus, and Camillus, deals, partly, with the same problem. The detailed comparisons of corresponding passages from the aforesaid works will demonstrate that Plutarch greatly adapted his material to the generic and specific requirements of these works. Besides, this article asks and attempts to answer the following questions: Why do the Lives of Romulus, Numa, Coriolanus, and Camillus have much more elements in common with the Quaestiones Romanae than the other Roman Lives? Is there any connection with the relative chronology of the Lives? Does the discrepancy have to do with the nature of Plutarch’s sources and/or the amount of source material available to him? Or do Lives dealing with the earliest phases in a people’s history simply give more opportunity to insert aetiological information?

* Cf. also Stadter, above, p. 53–54.
Timothy Duff examines the ways in which Plutarchean Lives begin, and proposes an alternative classification of the openings of the Lives to that proposed by Philip Stadter in his influential paper of 1988. In particular, he argues that most Lives, whether they fall first or second in their pair, and whether they are preceded or not by a prologue to the book as a whole, begin with proemial non-narrative material. Close readings of the first chapters of the Perikles, Alkibiades and Themistokles demonstrate their proemial function.

Ana Vicente studies Plutarch’s methods from a different perspective, and to trace the Plutarchean composition process, she examines some intratextual relations between the Vitae and the Moralia. More specifically she discusses relationships between Alexander and Quaestiones convivales, Marius and Regum et imperatorum apophthegmata and Cato Maior, Quaestiones convivales and Regum et imperatorum apophthegmata. It appears that the conclusions of such analyses may also contribute to inquiries concerning matters of chronology and authenticity.

The last article of this chapter somehow foreshadows, if from an opposite angle, the contents of the next one. Anastasios Nikolaidis is not concerned with Moralia in the Lives, but with Lives in the Moralia, namely with the presentation of some biographical heroes in Plutarch’s treatises. Are Plutarch’s worthies always employed to emblematize the same virtues and vices in the Moralia as in the Lives or also to illustrate various other issues and situations? And in cases of different (and occasionally conflicting) versions of the same events, or when differences of emphasis or interpretation are observed, which version represents more faithfully Plutarch’s conviction about the event or the hero involved? A careful investigation of this kind could be fruitful in several respects: (a) in suggesting Plutarch’s true beliefs on a number of issues (his Political Precepts, for example, must be based on settled and steady convictions rather than on his source-information; thus, if some views regarding Periklean policies in the Praec. ger. reip., for instance, vary from those expressed in the Life of Perikles, it must be the Praecepta rather than the Life which represent his true opinion about Perikles); (b) in throwing some light on his methods of work; (c) in helping us – occasionally – to decide the sequence or the relative chronology of some of his writings.