

PETER KRUSCHWITZ

Epigraphy: the Art of Being Nosy?
Some Thoughts on Plutarch, *De curiositate* 11 (= *Moralia* 520d–f)
and Related Texts

I.

The philosopher Plutarch wrote a short treatise whose Greek title is Περὶ πολυπραγμοσύνης (*Peri polupragmosunēs*), a title usually rendered as either ‘On Curiosity’ or, more commonly still, ‘On Being a Busybody’ in English.¹ The Greek title of Plutarch’s work was already known to Aulus Gellius, who devoted an entire, rather delightful chapter of his *Noctes Atticae* to a conversation he had with a man who did not know Greek, discussing the impossibility of capturing the term’s wide-ranging significance and express it by means of a single Latin word.² Later generations had no such struggle: the common Latin title of Plutarch’s work now is *De curiositate*.

From the wording of his chapter, it is rather obvious that this solution, using *curiositas* as the Latin equivalent of πολυπραγμοσύνη, would not have satisfied Gellius, not least as (a) the Greek term implies an excess of an activity, which in reduced doses was potentially acceptable and arguably even useful, and (b) the Latin term *curiositas* does not exclusively come with an inherently negative value judgement.³ Gellius explains to his anonymous interlocutor that⁴ –

«ad multas igitur res adgressio earumque omnium rerum actio polypragmosyne» inquam «Graece dicitur, de qua hunc librum compositum esse inscriptio ista indicat.»

This project has received funding from the European Research Council under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement no. 832874, MAPPOLA). – All translations of ancient texts are by the author.

¹ The treatise has not received significant attention in classical scholarship, but see e.g. INGENKAMP 1972 and, more recently, NIKOLAIDIS 2011.

² On the (ancient) history of the concept of πολυπραγμοσύνη cf. the general study of LEIGH 2013.

³ Further on this matter see e.g. ADKINS 2018, esp. 194–196 and, more substantially still, SETAIOLI 2020. Note, however, that *curiosi* is also a technical term denoting spies, informers, or undercover agents in Late Antiquity.

⁴ Gell. 11. 16 (esp. sections 6–8). – Further on this section see HOWLEY 2018, 24–33.

«thus to attack many things and to make all those things your personal responsibility», I say, «is what is called *polupragmosune* in Greek, which, according to that title, is what this book was written about.»

and, when asked whether πολυπραγμοσύνη ought to be considered a virtue, –

«minime» inquam «uero; neque enim ista omnino uirtus est, cuius Graeco nomine argumentum hoc libri demonstratur, neque id, quod tu opinare, aut ego me dicere sentio aut Plutarchus facit. deterret enim nos hoc quidem in libro, quam potest maxime, a uaria promiscaque et non necessaria rerum cuiuscemodi plurimarum et cogitatione et petitione.»

«but not at all», I said, «for it is not at all a virtue what is thus expressed by its Greek term in the discussion of the book, and neither do I sense that what you have in mind is what I claim nor what Plutarch does. For in this book he discourages us, as much as possible, from both the manifold, indiscriminate, and unnecessary consideration and the pursuit of many matters of whatsoever kind.»

Gellius rightly suggests that, according to Plutarch, πολυπραγμοσύνη – nosy meddling in other people's affairs as well as making their concerns one's own – is an undesirable trait.

As such, it is, of course, in need of corrective action for one's own sanity's sake. Consequently, the final sections of Plutarch's treatise, chapters 10ff., are devoted to identifying, and correcting any such undesirable behaviours. It is precisely in this context, in chapter 11 of *De curiositate*, that Plutarch gives his first piece of advice: first and foremost, stop getting distracted by the most insignificant and basic matters (τὰ βραχύτατα καὶ φαυλότατα) along your path! Or, as Plutarch puts it,⁵ –

Μέγιστον μέντοι πρὸς τὴν τοῦ πάθους ἀποτροπὴν ὁ ἔθισμός, ἐὰν πόρρωθεν ἀρξάμενοι γυμνάζωμεν ἑαυτοὺς καὶ διδάσκωμεν ἐπὶ ταύτῃ τὴν ἐγκράτειαν· καὶ γὰρ ἡ αὐξήσις ἔθει γέγονε τοῦ νοσήματος κατὰ μικρὸν εἰς τὸ πρόσω χωροῦντος. ὃν δὲ τρόπον, εἰσόμεθα περὶ τῆς ἀσκήσεως ὁμοῦ διαλεγόμενοι. πρῶτον μὲν οὖν ἀπὸ τῶν βραχυτάτων καὶ φαυλοτάτων ἀρξώμεθα.

«The most important step, however, towards warding off this affliction is habit formation, beginning early, when we train and educate ourselves to acquire this self-control: for the disease grows through habitual actions, advancing forward step by step. We will get to understand the way in which to do that as soon as we discuss the training needed. First of all, however, let us now begin with the most insignificant and basic matters.»

Which are those ways, one might wonder, whereby one might avoid those «most insignificant and basic matters»? Plutarch's response follows immediately, and his choice is arguably somewhat surprising:⁶

τί γὰρ χαλεπὸν ἐστὶν ἐν ταῖς ὁδοῖς τὰς ἐπὶ τῶν τάφων ἐπιγραφὰς μὴ ἀναγινώσκειν, ἢ τί δυσχερὲς ἐν τοῖς περιπάτοις τὰ κατὰ τῶν τοίχων γράμματα τῇ ὄψει παρατρέχειν, ὑποβάλλοντας αὐτοῖς ὅτι

⁵ Plu. *De curios.* 11 (= Mor. 520d).

⁶ Plu. *De curios.* 11 (= Mor. 520d–e).

χρήσιμον οὐθέν οὐδ' ἐπιτερπὲς ἐν τούτοις γέγραπται· ἀλλ' «ἐμνήσθη» ὁ δεῖνα τοῦ δεινός «ἐπ' ἀγαθῷ» καὶ «φίλων ἀριστος» ὅδε τις, καὶ πολλὰ τοιαύτης γέμοντα φλυαρίας;

«For how is it difficult not to read the inscriptions on tombs when on journeys, or how is it troublesome to manage to walk past what is written on the walls with a mere glance on leisurely walks, reminding ourselves that not one useful or pleasing thing is written in them? But that Lady Such-and-Such «commemorates» Mr Such-and-Such «wishing them well» as they are «the best of friends», and much more nonsense of this type.»

And why exactly would that be a problem? Well, Plutarch explains that⁷ –

ἃ δοκεῖ μὲν οὐ βλάπτειν ἀναγινωσκόμενα, βλάπτει δὲ λεληθότως τῷ μελέτην παρεμποιεῖν τοῦ ζητεῖν τὰ μὴ προσήκοντα.

«It seems that reading these things causes no harm, but it does cause harm to people by imperceptibly implanting the practice of being on a quest for what is not appropriate.»

The study of inscriptions is thus imagined as somewhat of a gateway drug – a slippery slope towards ultimately becoming hopelessly nosy, distracted, and interested in other people's affairs (that ought to be none of one's own business), a first step towards τὸ ζητεῖν τὰ μὴ προσήκοντα, «the quest for what is not appropriate». What is worse, it causes these effects λεληθότως, without immediate realisation, stealthily, imperceptibly.

Maintaining a strong focus on what is important, therefore, is of the essence, Plutarch continues:⁸

καὶ καθάπερ οἱ κυνηγοὶ τοὺς σκύλακας οὐκ ἑῷσιν ἐκτρέπεσθαι καὶ διώκειν πᾶσαν ὁδμήν, ἀλλὰ τοῖς ῥυτῆρσιν ἔλκουσι καὶ ἀνακρούουσι, καθαρὸν αὐτῶν καὶ ἄκρατον φυλάττοντες τὸ αἰσθητήριον ἐπὶ τὸ οἰκεῖον ἔργον, ἵν' εὐτονώτερον ἐμφύηται τοῖς ἴχνεσι

πέλματα θηρείων μελέων μυκτῆρσιν ἐρευνῶν

οὕτω δεῖ τὰς ἐπὶ πᾶν θέαμα καὶ πᾶν ἄκουσμα τοῦ πολυπράγμονος ἐκδρομάς καὶ περιπλανήσεις ἀφαιρεῖν καὶ ἀντισπᾶν ἐπὶ τὰ χρήσιμα φυλάττοντας.

«And just as hunters do not let young dogs turn away from their course and follow each and every scent, but drag on their leashes and pull them back on track, keeping their senses pure and unspoilt for their proper task, for it to become even more focused on the tracks

«with their nostrils seeking the tracks of idle beasts»,

in the same way one must remove the excursions and strolls of the meddlesome individual towards each and every spectacle and acoustic experience, and redirect them towards useful ends.»

And for anyone who might need more than one simile in order to grasp the message:⁹

⁷ Plu. De curios. 11 (= Mor. 520e).

⁸ Plu. De curios. 11 (= Mor. 520e–f).

⁹ Plu. De curios. 11 (= Mor. 520f).

ὥσπερ γὰρ οἱ ἀετοὶ καὶ οἱ λέοντες ἐν τῷ περιπατεῖν συστρέφουσιν εἴσω τοὺς ὄνυχας, ἵνα μὴ τὴν ἀκμὴν αὐτῶν καὶ τὴν ὀξύτητα κατατρίβωσιν, οὕτω τὸ πολύπραγμον τοῦ φιλομαθοῦς ἀκμὴν τινα καὶ στόμωμα νομίζοντες ἔχειν μὴ καταναλίσκωμεν μηδ' ἀπαμβλύνωμεν ἐν τοῖς ἀχρήστοις.

«For as eagles and lions, when they walk, retract their claws, lest they wear off their pointiness and sharpness, thus we should not waste or dull the keen desire to acquire knowledge of someone eager to learn – if we think that this characteristic, too, has a sharp point and a cutting edge to it – on useless matters.»

At first glance, Plutarch's words are terrible news for epigraphists, of course: not only does the author seem to dismiss the vast majority of their evidence as worthless of consideration – as something that is of so little inherent value that one must not go out of one's way in order to study it. What is worse still, he appears to suggest that the study of inscriptions, arising out of natural curiosity, is a slow but certain way to intellectual decline and meddling behaviour in life in general.

At this point, any epigraphist with an ounce of self-respect must, of course, want to disagree with Plutarch's verdict, and surely it is not good enough simply to dismiss the passage as «amusingly naive» as JOHN BUCKLER has done in his important discussion of «Plutarch and autopsy».¹⁰ The obvious questions are: can the passage from *De curiositate* be turned to epigraphists' advantage, and is there anything to be learnt from it for epigraphical science? Arguably there is, and that applies to (at least) three areas: (i) our understanding of ancient forms of engagement with inscriptions, (ii) our appreciation of the nature and (reception-focused) processes of the lettered world in antiquity, and (iii) – potentially – a first step towards a better understanding of the fine line between (acceptable) curiosity and (unacceptable) overstepping of privacy-related boundaries. All three aspects merit further consideration on the basis of the Plutarchan text.

II.

A first and obvious reaction to what Plutarch has to say in *De curiositate* 11 is to point out that the philosopher obviously would not have to offer his advice against something that had no relevance or applicability to real life. Why dismiss a practice that no-one adhered to?

The fact that the study of funerary and wall inscriptions by passers-by does, in fact, not only feature on, but tops, Plutarch's list of detailed advice against undesirable meddlingness is an important indicator of how the author appears to have perceived the actions of the people whom he encountered around him – or at least of the prejudices he held against them in that particular regard. To put things into perspective: Plutarch places the popular interest in funerary and wall inscriptions even above (a) peeking through open doors and staring and leering at women in public (ch. 12); (b) getting involved in heated discussions and arguments in public spaces as well as any other kind

¹⁰ BUCKLER 1991, esp. 4795.

of spectacles and displays (ch. 13); (c) showing too much of an interest in the affairs of one's own (and for that matter: everyone else's) female partner(s) (ch. 14); (d) rushing to read every written message immediately upon arrival (ch. 15); and, finally (e) going as far as to employ spies and informers in order to procure information about others (ch. 16). Certainly, getting distracted by inscriptions even to Plutarch's mind was not the worst matter on this remarkable list – quite the contrary; but, as suggested above, it is imagined as a slippery slope – and as something so common, something that even happens on an almost subconscious level (the adverb *λεληθότως*, «imperceptibly» is especially relevant here) that it requires mention in the same way as all the other very relatable (a–d) and more egregious (e) activities.

In a recent article, JULIA DOROSZEWSKA has placed much emphasis on the role of the eyes and of vision in *De curiositate*, linked to metaphorical language uses in which the eyes become «windows of curiosity», through which the light of this world may enter the human soul and mind.¹¹ And, without a doubt, much of what Plutarch has to offer in his prescriptions for the avoidance of meddlesome tendencies and habits is related to visual aspects. But inscriptions in the ancient world were not just objects with a visual dimension, of course – although it is the principle of autopsy that has remained the defining marker of quality in epigraphic editions ever since THEODOR MOMMSEN's successful advocacy for this method as the professional standard for the future:¹²

οὕτω δὲ τὰς ἐπὶ πᾶν θέαμα καὶ πᾶν ἄκουσμα τοῦ πολυπράγμονος ἐκδρομὰς καὶ περιπλανήσεις ἀφαιρεῖν καὶ ἀντισπᾶν ἐπὶ τὰ χρήσιμα φυλάττοντας.

«in the same way one must remove the excursions and strolls of the meddlesome individual towards each and every spectacle and acoustic experience, and redirect them towards useful ends.»

Certainly, this final sentence of chapter 11 of *De curiositate* initiates the transition from the first to the second of Plutarch's list of meddlesome no-nos, and the next item on his list – peeking through open doors – is perhaps a more obvious case of πᾶν θέαμα καὶ πᾶν ἄκουσμα, of «each and every spectacle and acoustic experience». At the same time, it may be taken (with a degree of caution) as additional confirmation of the now well-established view that ancient inscriptions were not read in silence and therefore constituted a visual medium, but were commonly read out aloud and thus were also an acoustic medium:¹³ vision and acoustic combined increased the distracting potential of ancient inscriptions to their original audiences, and this aspect

¹¹ DOROSZEWSKA 2019.

¹² Plu. *De curios.* 11 (= Mor. 520f).

¹³ See BUSCH 2002 and, more extensively specifically on inscriptions, CENATI et al. 2022, esp. 151–158.

perhaps ought to play a significantly more important role in modern scholarship than it does at present.¹⁴

JAVIER DE HOZ had – quite rightly – argued that Plutarch's *De curiositate* is a highly relevant source for an understanding of literacy levels in the ancient world.¹⁵ But matters do not stop there – the passage does not merely provide us with a means to assess ancient assumptions about individuals' preparedness to engage with written messages in everyday settings. Taking into account the established overall sensuousness of inscriptions and the ancient reading experience more fully is also an important step towards a much more appropriate appreciation of the lettered world(s) and spaces that Greco-Roman society (and societies) inhabited in Plutarchan times.¹⁶ This lettered world provided its inhabitants manifold and diverse opportunities to create, design, and send, but also to receive, and to engage with, written messages. Relevant scholarship of the past decades has fully embraced, and focused on, the concept of ancient «epigraphic habits», a habit that favours the production aspect of ancient inscriptions. The logical next step is now to develop a related concept with especial emphasis on the reception side, exploring «epigraphic reading habits» (in relation to reading habits more generally, partly with a view to the media that were employed to convey written messages).

III.

In relation to the «epigraphic reading habit» that is revealed in *De curiositate*, an aspect that is both easily overlooked and arguably of high significance, is the fact that Plutarch does not, in fact, generally advise against engaging with the lettered world that was inhabited by the people of the ancient world. Rather, the author admonishes his (largely elite) readership to refrain from engaging with two types of inscriptions in particular, and even this matter is aligned to two specific scenarios: once embarked on a journey (ἐν ταῖς ὁδοῖς), one should not read the inscriptions on tombs (τὰς ἐπὶ τῶν τάφων ἐπιγραφάς); and when on a somewhat more leisurely walk (ἐν τοῖς περιπάτοις), one should not pay closer attention to what has been written on the walls (τὰ κατὰ τῶν τοίχων γράμματα) – a phrase that would seem to refer to inscriptions written with paint and charcoal, i.e. dipinti rather than the significantly less visible graffiti, first and foremost. Plutarch does not expressly advise against reading any other type of inscription, be they inscribed on buildings, sacred objects, statues and sculpture, dedications, or votives.

Assuming that the choice was made purposefully, and not just on a whim, it is tempting to argue that Plutarch, in his discourse, singled out funerary inscriptions and

¹⁴ Further on this see e.g. M. LIMÓN BELÉN – X. ESPLUGA – P. KRUSCHWITZ, «What Can a Dog Called Margarita Teach us About Ancient Rome» at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tgo4vm76kS8> (last accessed: June 2022).

¹⁵ DE HOZ 2007.

¹⁶ This concept is developed more fully in KRUSCHWITZ 2016.

wall inscriptions in particular because he regarded them as of comparatively low(er) status and / or value than other types of inscriptions and written sources. After all, while our modern epigraphic corpora give the impression that the Roman epigraphic habit was a reasonably universal one when it came to social class-based engagement with it, it is equally evident that not every social group produced every type of inscription. This is particularly obvious in, but not in any way restricted to, the field of verse inscriptions, which, for most of antiquity, have been explained to be a domain of the non-elites, but which, in actual fact, were so only in the (dominant) sub-field of funerary poetry, whereas in other areas – such as building inscriptions or mosaics – they had little or no relevance to the lower social orders.¹⁷

A hypothetical argument that Plutarch prohibits engagement with funerary and wall inscriptions because of their overall low status might further be supported by the seemingly dismissive statements that he makes about their content and nature:¹⁸

... ὑποβάλλοντας αὐτοῖς ὅτι χρησίμον οὐθὲν οὐδ' ἐπιτερπὲς ἐν τούτοις γέγραπται· ἀλλ' «ἐμνήσθη» ὁ δεῖνος τοῦ δεῖνος «ἐπ' ἀγαθῶ» καὶ «φίλων ἄριστος» ὅδε τις, καὶ πολλὰ τοιαύτης γέμοντα φλυαρίας;

«... reminding ourselves that not one useful or pleasing thing is written in them? But that Lady Such-and-Such <commemorates> Mr Such-and-Such <wishing them well> as they are <the best of friends>, and much more nonsense of this type.»

But does not Plutarch himself refer to these types of inscriptions with some regularity, especially in order to illustrate his historical points, at least in the context of those whom he regarded as <great men>? Do we have to accept some kind of Plutarchan double-standard when it comes to <scholarship and morality>, as, for example, PETER LIDDEL has suggested in an important article on the use of inscriptions in the works of Plutarch:

«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.»¹⁹

Things may not be quite so straightforward. An important clue that Plutarch does not actually condemn any engagement with these texts, even in the context of his *De curiositate*, lies in the observation that the author offers not just one, but two rationales for his advice. And in doing so, his double reasoning does not occur on the same level on both occasions:

¹⁷ Further on this matter see now KRUSCHWITZ 2021 and cf. more generally SCHMIDT 2014.

¹⁸ Plu. *De curios.* 11 (= Mor. 520e).

¹⁹ LIDDEL 2008, esp. 136. A similar point has subsequently been made by ZADOROJNYI 2011, esp. 114–118 (with particular emphasis on graffiti), accepted by ROSENMEYER 2018, 26 (with nt. 82).

1. Plutarch's immediate, first explanation to his readership is that nothing of significance will be missed if one were willfully to ignore the inscriptions on tombs and on walls. Everyone knows what is written there, and Plutarch even gives an ironic summary of these texts' content. Reading it results in nothing that is either useful or especially pleasing.
2. Plutarch's second explanation builds on the first one, but goes significantly beyond it: reading funerary or wall inscriptions, while travelling for other purposes and with another destination in mind, can eventually result in getting distracted by matters that are not one's business; easily getting distracted for insignificant reasons that diverts one from a more significant purpose is a habit that is actively discouraged in the training of hunting dogs, for example, so as to keep one's senses sharp and one's attention alert.

It is this particular sequence that the two-tiered argument of the text suggests a different take on Plutarch's overall message – a message that may be summarised as follows: (i) for your own good, stay focused on your path and on what matters: you may confidently do so because (ii) you will not miss anything of great importance or anything surprising, content-wise. It is in order to give credence to this second (backup) step, (ii), that Plutarch deliberately downplays the (stereotypical) messages contained in funerary and wall inscriptions. In other words, above all these two text types would seem to represent the written environment and the ubiquity of writing in the ancient world, not a social or ethical sphere of a specific kind.

Closer to the end of his chapter 11, Plutarch once more returns to the two types of travel that lead individuals to be exposed to funerary and wall inscriptions. What initially had been referred to as either a journey (ἐν ταῖς ὁδοῖς) or a leisurely walk (ἐν τοῖς περιπάτοις) is now referred to as either excursions (τὰς ἐκδρομάς) or strolls (περιπλανήσεις) of the nosy busybody, distracted by any spectacle and acoustic experience (πᾶν θέαμα καὶ πᾶν ἄκουσμα).²⁰ Openness to the world around us is not an issue as such, Plutarch suggests: in fact, in the case of wall inscriptions, he does not even promote complete disengagement, but keeping one's engagement at the most superficial level – τῇ ὄψει παρατρέχειν, 'walk past with a mere glance'! Rather, one must be selective in one's engagement with the (written) environment, so as to avoid any dulling of one's senses that is not in turn rewarded by acquiring useful knowledge:²¹

οὕτω τὸ πολὺπραγμον τοῦ φιλομαθοῦς ἀκμήν τινα καὶ στόμωμα νομίζοντες ἔχειν μὴ καταναλίσκωμεν μηδ' ἀπαμβλύνωμεν ἐν τοῖς ἀχρήστοις.

«thus we should not waste or dull the keen desire to acquire knowledge of someone eager to learn – if we think that this characteristic, too, has a sharp point and a cutting edge to it – in useless affairs.»

²⁰ Plu. De curios. 11 (= Mor. 520f). – The acoustic dimension of ancient inscriptions was already noted, above, section II with nt. 13.

²¹ Plu. De curios. 11 (= Mor. 520f).

Approaching inscriptions for a specific (e.g. research-related) purpose, and studying them with an ability to distinguish between the extraordinary and the mundane, the exceptional and the common, would not seem to fall under this ban on useless activities – neither for readers in the ancient world (and thus for Plutarch himself) nor for students of epigraphy in later periods.

While this will be a reassuring point for epigraphists to take away from this passage, it is by no means the most important one. It is much more significant to ponder two further aspects, namely (a) the perceived (and realised) attention-grabbing potential that, according to Plutarch, lies in written messages in the public sphere, and (b) the conditioned behaviour of individuals in a lettered world to engage with the writing that surrounds them not just in a passive, but in an active way, distracting them even from other goals that had originally set them in motion. Considering the other meddlesome-behaviour-inducing aspects against which Plutarch advises his readership, funerary and wall inscriptions have a similar ability to attract human attention, as gateways into other people's lives, as open doors, public spectacles and fights, and recently arrived letters (to say nothing about hired spies).²² This is important to bear in mind in any attempt to understand epigraphic reading habits.

IV.

It is, of course, a well-established and absolutely common, stereotypical mode in Roman funerary inscriptions to request the attention of those who pass by. This feature has often been explained as some kind of competition for attention amid a multitude of voices in the Roman roadside graveyard – an explanation that seems, in fact, somewhat absurd, considering that those travelling at some speed and some distance would not actually be able to read those invitations at all. Furthermore, one has to wonder which element of uniqueness or attention grabbing would ultimately reach the desired audience.²³ A much more plausible explanation for these textual elements would be that they were not designed for a primarily reading, but for a listening audience – an audience that would perceive the texts acoustically while passing by, or while standing close, as the text was being read out by someone who had already stopped and embarked on engaging with a monument's inscription.²⁴

It is clear that Aulus Gellius, as stated at the beginning of this paper, did not consider the Latin noun *curiositas* an adequate term to convey the full range of meanings

²² Cf. above, section II.

²³ For an experimental take on this matter see P. KRUSCHWITZ, 'Hello Stranger, or: Pompeian Greetings from Beyond the Grave!' at <https://thepetrifiedmuse.blog/2016/11/04/hello-stranger-or-pompeian-greetings-from-beyond-the-grave/> (last accessed: June 2022).

²⁴ This is clearly expressed in CIL IX 7164 = Suppl. It. 4 (1988), Sulmo 58 = AE 1989. 24; EDR 114466, ll. 38–48, as was noted e.g. by BODEL 1993: *titulumque quicumque legerit aut lege[ntem] | auscult(ue)rit* («whoever reads this inscription or listens to someone reading it out»). Further on this aspect cf. also above, nt. 13.



Fig. 1: CIL XIV 3956 = ILS 6226 = CCCA III 450

of the Greek word *πολυπραγμοσύνη*.²⁵ At the same time, it is also apparent that the Latin adjective *curiosus* -a -um was perfectly capable of expressing an excessive behaviour, a *nimis*, an anxious 'too much': the main focus, however, rests on the desire to find out and learn, not on a set of distracting time-consuming activities beyond that.²⁶ Is a sense of such a 'too much' palpable in Roman inscriptions? Was there a sense of acts of inquisitive overstepping of privacy-related boundaries – even within an area that, according to Plutarch's *De curiositate*, was an open invitation to all and sundry to engage with the written world that surrounded them?

Interestingly enough, the adjective *curiosus* would seem to provide a good starting point to enter into such an enquiry. Arguably one of the most striking examples is a short comment, presented as a concluding line, on a funerary monument from Nomentum (Mentana) in Latium, datable to the second century A.D. The altar, dedicated to a priest of the Magna Mater cult and his house-born slave Melizusa, is inscribed on two sides – but it is the main, frontal inscription for the priest himself that is of interest here (Fig. 1):²⁷

²⁵ See above, section I with nt. 3.

²⁶ Cf. ThLL s.v. *curiosus*, 1493. 47 – 1494. 5.

²⁷ CIL XIV 3956 = ILS 6226 = CCCA III 450; EDR 133038.

[– – – V]erulano
 Phaedro sacerdoti
 [N]omentanorum Matris d(eum) m(agnae)
 [Ideae (?)] annis XXXV et sanitate
 5 [qu]omodo uolui hilaris annis LXX
 (vac.)
 Curiose, quit at te?

«For ... Verulanus Phaedrus, priest of the Nomentani for the Great Idean (?) Mother of the Gods for 35 years and (sc. I lived), as I desired, in health for 70 years of good cheer. Nosy fellow, how is this any of your business?»

The syntax of the main part of this inscription is somewhat unsatisfactory – there is a word for «he lived» missing, which has led some to restore it in the lacuna of line 4. This, however, is impossible, since the verb «he lived» would have to be placed ahead of the first number of years (*annis XXXV*), which can only be the number of years of Verulanus Phaedrus' tenure of the priesthood. MARTEN VERMAASEREN's restoration of *Ideae*, at CCCA III 450, in keeping with the accustomed nomenclature of Magna Mater Cybele is therefore much more plausible. The most important aspect, however, is the final line of this inscription, clearly set apart from the remaining text by a *vacat*, as well as spaced out much broader than the remaining text:²⁸ *curiose, quit at te?* «Nosy fellow, how is this any of your business?»

The author of an inscription from the vicinity of Bou el Freis in Numidia (Algeria) is rather less vague in the way in which they refer to disdain for the *curiosi*. In what would appear to be a Priapean-style inscription on a sizeable (undated) stone monument (78 × 47 × 29 cm), the author informs their readers that²⁹ –

Curiosos pedico:
inuide, cacas.

«I bugger nosy fellows. Envious man, you are going to shit (yourself?!).»

The first-person text ought to be imagined to represent the words of a (now lost) sculpture – phallic in one way or another – that was obviously designed to scare off any *curiosi* by means of a very common threat of an act of sexualised violence.³⁰ The focus in the discussion of this piece, apart from the act of *pedicare*, thus far has been on the idea that the monument is apotropaic in nature, addressing an *inuidus* («envious [or: jealous] man»³¹). What is rather more interesting here, however, is that the *inuidia* would appear to have been imagined as being the more or less direct result of being

²⁸ For an easily accessible image refer to www.edr-edr.it/edr_programmi/view_img.php?id_nr=133038 (last accessed: June 2022).

²⁹ MARCILLET-JAUBERT 1975 (with fig. 1) (= AE 1976. 709).

³⁰ See e.g. KAMEN – LEVIN-RICHARDSON 2015, esp. 451.

³¹ See e.g. GHALIA 1991, esp. 259.

curiosus. Hence, the threat is directed at them, and those who still cannot avert their gaze, the inscription suggests, must face excrementitious consequences as a bodily reaction to the threat-turned reality.

Moving from such unpleasant extremes to rather more dignified examples from the field of funerary inscriptions, incriminated by Plutarch for encouraging meddlesome behaviour, one may note the following two³² examples of inscriptions that would appear to conceptualise privacy-related boundaries by way of addressing the *curiosus lector*:

1. An inscription from Lugdunum (Lyon) of the second or early third century A.D.:³³

 [- - -] F+[- - -]
 [- - -] i en curio[s- - -]
 [- - -] si scire quae[ris]
 [- - -] corpus et ipsum.
 5 [pe]r mare Romam p[er]-
 [titi]t. albeus insontis
 plures in Tartaro
 misit.
 sub ascia dedicauit.

«... behold, inquisitive fellow (?), ... if you seek to know ... and the body itself ... went to Rome across the sea. A barge has sent many innocent people into the Tartarus. They dedicated (sc. this monument) *sub ascia* («below the axe»).

The initial part of the inscription is too damaged to come to any certain conclusions regarding the nature of the address directed at *curio[s- - -]* individuals (*curio[se]* seems like the most plausible supplement, but one might also think of *curio[si]* or *curio[sus]*).

2. An inscription from Madauros in the province of Africa proconsularis (M'Daou-rouch, Algeria) of the late second century A.D. (Fig. 2):³⁴

³² The phrase *curiose lector* has also been claimed for ILAlg I 2244 = CLE 1952, but since it falls entirely into a supplement of this fragmentary inscription, this piece cannot be adduced as firm evidence. Geographical (and epigraphic corpus-based) proximity of this piece to ILAlg I 2242 = CLE 2107 (on which see below, item 2), both of which are from Madauros, has aided this restoration.

³³ CIL XIII 2315 = AE 1982. 710; cf. <https://institucional.us.es/cleo/index.php/inscripcion/1034-iaml-440-cil-xiii-2315-cle-645/?ant=2326&lang=en> (with images; page last accessed: June 2022).

³⁴ ILAlg I 2242 = CLE 2107; cf. [https://db.edcs.eu/epigr/bilder.php?s_language=en&bild=\\$AH_ILAlg-01_02242.jpg;\\$JL_ILAlg-01_02242.jpg](https://db.edcs.eu/epigr/bilder.php?s_language=en&bild=$AH_ILAlg-01_02242.jpg;$JL_ILAlg-01_02242.jpg) for images (last accessed: June 2022). – Further on this inscription see SCHMIDT 1998, esp. 173–177 and HAMDOUNE et al. 2011, 158–161 n. 85; cf. also MAGGIO 2016, esp. 134f.

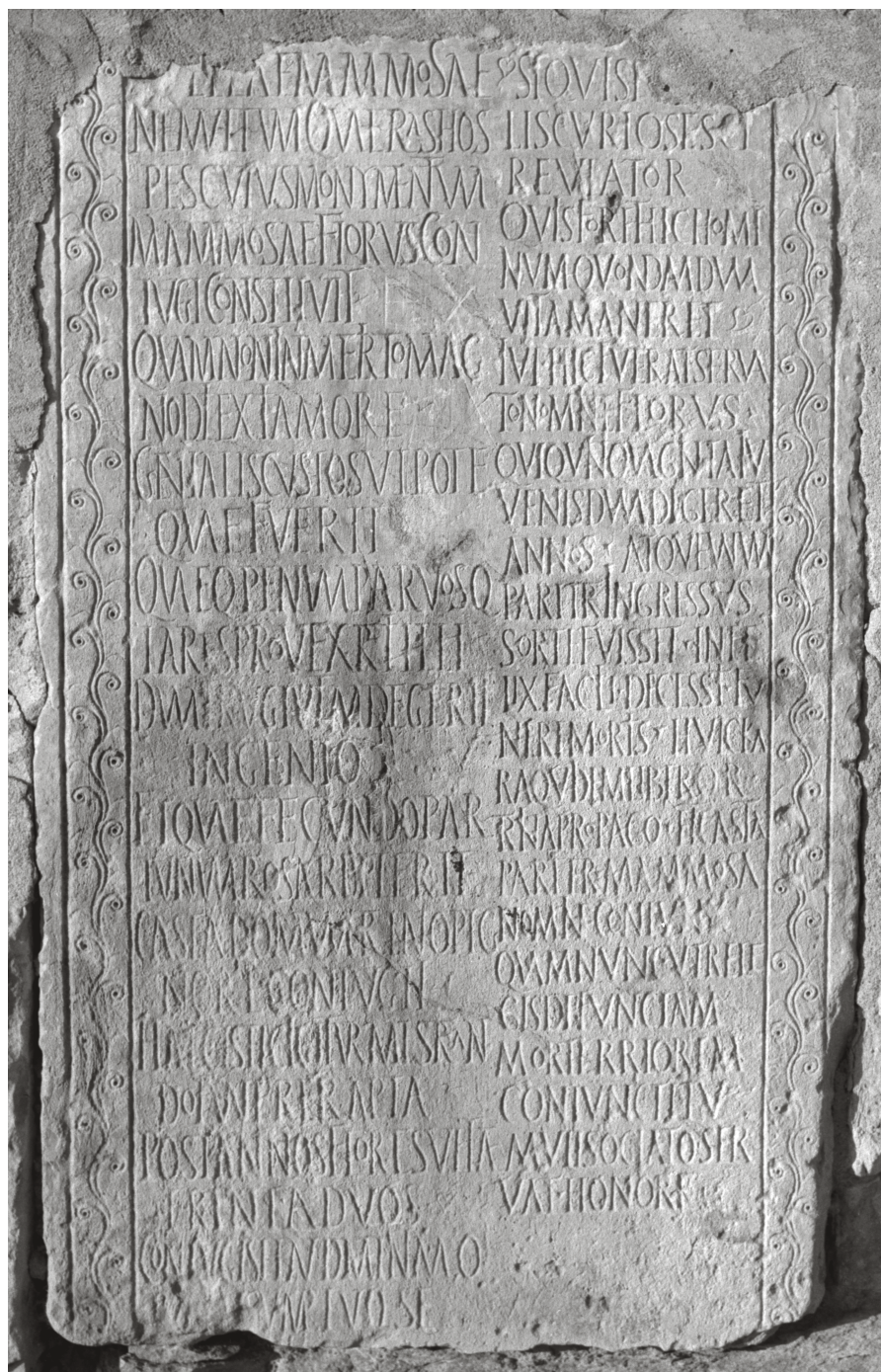


Fig. 2: ILAlg I 2242 = CLE 2107

| | | | |
|----|------------------------------------|----|-----------------------------------|
| | col. I | | col. II |
| | <i>[Aur]eliae Mammosae</i> | 25 | <i>si quis f[orte ue]-</i> |
| | <i>ne multum quaeras hos-</i> | | <i>lis curiose sci-</i> |
| | <i>pes cuius monymentum</i> | | <i>re uiator</i> |
| | <i>Mammosae Florus con-</i> | | <i>quis foret hic homi-</i> |
| 5 | <i>iugi constituit</i> | | <i>num quondam dum</i> |
| | <i>quam non inmerito mag-</i> | 30 | <i>uita maneret</i> |
| | <i>no dilexit amore</i> | | <i>Iul(ius) hic fuerat serua-</i> |
| | <i>genialis custos utpote</i> | | <i>to nomine Florus</i> |
| | <i>quae fuerit</i> | | <i>qui quinquaginta iu-</i> |
| 10 | <i>quaeq(ue) penum paruosq(ue)</i> | | <i>uenis dum degeret</i> |
| | <i>lares prouexerit illi</i> | 35 | <i>annos atque unum</i> |
| | <i>dum frugi uitam degerit</i> | | <i>pariter ingressus</i> |
| | <i>ingenio</i> | | <i>sorte fuisset infe-</i> |
| | <i>et quae fecundo par-</i> | | <i>lix facili decessit fu-</i> |
| 15 | <i>tu numerosa replevit</i> | | <i>nere mortis huic ka-</i> |
| | <i>casta domum trino pig-</i> | 40 | <i>ra quidem liberor(um)</i> |
| | <i>nore coniugii</i> | | <i>trina propago et casta</i> |
| | <i>haec istic igitur miseran-</i> | | <i>pariter Mammosa</i> |
| | <i>do funere rapta</i> | | <i>nomine coniunx</i> |
| 20 | <i>post annos flore(n)s uitae</i> | | <i>quam nunc ut rele-</i> |
| | <i>tri(gi)nta duos</i> | 45 | <i>gis defunctam</i> |
| | <i>coniugis haud minimo</i> | | <i>morte ʿpʰriorem</i> |
| | <i>luctu sumptuq(ue) se-</i> | | <i>coniuncti tu-</i> |
| | <i>[pulta – – –]</i> | | <i>muli sociato ser-</i> |
| | | | <i>uat honore.</i> |

«For Aurelia Mammosa. – Stranger, do not lose much time asking whose monument this is: Florus has erected it for his wife Mammosa. He adored her enormously and not at all undeservedly, as she was the guardian of their household, and she supported him in increasing our store of provisions and in carrying our humble household to a higher level as she had set her mind to living frugally. Furthermore, rich in her ability to give birth and chaste in her demeanour, she filled the house with triple legitimate offspring. Thus in her death she was snatched away from her husband who deserves our pity, in the prime of her life, after thirty-two years. Buried in not at all insignificant sorrow of, and at great expense to, her husband, she ...

If you happen to desire to know, inquisitive wayfarer, who this man was while he was still alive: he was Iulius Florus, who never blemished his good name. He lived for fifty years youthful in spirit, and as fate had allotted him to embark on another year, unlucky man, he died a sudden death. He had three beloved offspring in his children and a chaste wife to boot, Mammosa by name, who predeceased him and whom he now protects, as you read, in the joint honour of a combined grave.»

The text of this slightly damaged inscription, laid out over two columns, honours a couple, Aurelia Mammosa (ll. 1–24, left column) and her husband Iulius Florus (ll. 25–49, right column).

With a view to the overall linguistic register of these two inscriptions, the translation of *curiosus -a -um* has been toned down somewhat, but the meaning and message seem to be perfectly in keeping with what could be observed before. The second inscription,

from Madauros, is especially interesting, as both of its segments start with an address to the reader (*hospes, uiator*). In the first column, dedicated to Aurelia Mammosa, the text tells the readers not to lose a lot of time over asking the question of who has been buried here (*ne multum quaeras*). In fact, they already know the short-short answer, for line 1 provided the essential information, *viz.* the name of the deceased. More than twenty lines later, at the top of the second column, readers find themselves addressed again: *si quis f[orte ue]llis curiose sci|re uiator ...*, «if you happen to desire to know, inquisitive wayfarer, ...». Clearly the initial suggestion not to lose much time was unsuccessful – whoever made it this far³⁵ was ready to spend a lot of time, and therefore could no longer be considered a *hospes*: whoever still wants to know more, even about the husband (who is emphatically assuming the second place behind his beloved wife in this display), must be a *curiosus uiator*. Not necessarily a nosy fellow, but definitely an anxiously inquisitive type, whose endurance gets rewarded with even more information, but – arguably – also the feeling that they are getting close to overstaying their welcome in this reunited couple's proximity.

The first case, from Lyon, may not seem equally strong in terms of its use of *curiosus* at first; but that may, in fact, be a false perception. The unknown deceased travelled to Rome, and they did so [*pe*]r mare, «across the sea». To place this statement immediately ahead of a sentence that, completely out of the blue, explains that many an innocent person has entered the underworld by boat (*albeus* = *alueus*) arguably implies that the deceased had drowned during their journey – making this an especially difficult and painful reason for a burial (or cenotaph). Such an elevated level of pain and grief would perfectly justify keeping especially inquisitive, intrusive visitors to the grave at a fair distance.

The tension between public display and privacy is taken to an extreme in the next (and final) example, a graffito from the baths of Titus in the city of Rome, not least since it matches Plutarch's claim that funerary *and* wall inscriptions are especially to be avoided by the wayfarer:³⁶

*Hic ego me memini quendam futuisse
puellam ...
cunno ... non dico, curiose.*

«I remember that I fucked someone here
... a girl ...
... in the pussy ... I don't say that, nosy fellow!»

There has been a certain amount of linguistic discussion about the meaning of this graffito, not least since it resembles, to an extent, the message and even the wording of

³⁵ That is assuming that they actually read everything up to here: skipping some or all of the text on the left was considered a distinct possibility, as the phrase *ut rele|gis* (ll. 44–45) demonstrates.

³⁶ CLE 1810.

other graffiti found in different parts of the empire.³⁷ Without denying the existence of apparent textual parallels, it is perfectly reasonable, however, to preserve the original wording and layout for discussion here, as they are perfectly intelligible, meaningful, and arguably even intentional in the way they are.

One such linguistic point that has been made³⁸ is that *quendam* (l. 1) ought to be a non-standard variant of *quandam*. This is certainly possible from a linguistic point of view, for sure;³⁹ but is such an assumption actually necessary? Based on a linear understanding of the graffito, the text is perfectly clear, instilling the view that the writer has had intercourse with a male *quidam*. The second line, *puellam*, then messes with the reader's initial assumption. Finally, the third line, with a single obscenity in the ablative and then a delightfully worded aposiopesis, drives the point home: read again, and read carefully, and you will find that the author *does* say certain things (*futuisse!*) while he does *not* specify others (*cunno!*). If one actually insisted to know the specifics of the action, then one definitely must be a *curiosus*.⁴⁰ However coarse the sentiment, it is clear that here, too, the writer was using precisely the adjective *curiosus* -a -um to invoke some kind of a privacy-related boundary, defining how much information they were ready to volunteer – and where they draw a line.

V.

The texts assembled in the previous section focused on just one particular concept, namely *curiositas*, to establish whether or not boundaries between the texts of publicly displayed inscriptions and their readership(s) were on ancient authors' minds in the composition of the text, in their concepts of «epigraphic reading habits», and in the imagined dialogues between inscribed objects and their human interlocutors.

Taking Plutarch's comment on reading inscriptions as a point of departure, it would seem well worth exploring this matter even further, expanding on notions of private, public, and everything that lies on the vast spectrum in between. In this regard, one may also take into account a late antique Greek epigram from Kibyra (datable to the mid-sixth century A.D.), which has been transmitted as follows:⁴¹

³⁷ The original text has been discussed and expanded in the light of reasonably close variants by GIL 1979/1980, esp. 186f., which subsequently has resulted in similar presentations by other scholars: note esp. COURTNEY 1995, 98–101, 308f. (n. 94d) and, more recently, SPAL 2016, 114f. (with nt. 566).

³⁸ A second linguistic matter will only be briefly touched upon below, nt. 40.

³⁹ Thus e.g. COURTNEY 1995, 308 ad loc.

⁴⁰ F. BÜCHELER, CLE ad loc. somehow appears to have understood *dico curiose* as an expression akin to *dico Latine*, «I speak in a straightforward manner» (adducing Quint. inst. 8. 1. 2), which would be a misunderstanding of both the graffito and of Quintilian's text. Resulting from that, the same misunderstanding exists in ADAMS 1982, 80.

⁴¹ SGO 17/01/03 = AP 9. 648.

ἄσπὸς ἐμοὶ καὶ ξεῖνος ἀεὶ φίλος· οὐ γὰρ ἐρευνᾶν
«τίς, πόθεν ἢ ἐ τίνων», ἐστὶ φιλοξενίης.

«Fellow citizen and stranger are always (sc. equally) dear to me: for to ask
«who are you», «where are you from», or «who are your parents» is not a marker of hospitality.»

The epigram, reportedly inscribed at a dwelling at Kibyra and written from an inn-keeper's perspective, makes it clear that such seemingly straightforward questions – at least in the author's mind, if not rather more widely – might be perceived as an aggressive and intrusive act, even violating the ancient concept of hospitality (*philoxeniē*): these questions, understandable though the intention behind them may be, do not put a guest at ease nor do they make a guest feel especially welcome. So why should the dead suffer, and endure such endless probing questions from the living?

A close examination of Plutarch's *De curiositate* 11 shows that, while the author uses a reference to a common ancient practice of stopping to read inscriptions on tombs and to take more than just a gander at what has been written on the walls as a first piece of advice to prevent the spread of meddlesome behaviour, he by no means suggests that scientific (historical) research falls in the same category. The Plutarchan passage supports the view that engagement with the written environment was common, at least in the circle of the author's intended readership. The passage supports the view that not only production-related aspects, but also diverse forms of reception and engagement with the lettered world merit more research. Above all, however, the passage invites us to re-think notions of public and private spheres once again, namely even in relation to inscribed objects that were placed in public spaces for everyone to see: after all, to look at what is publicly visible in writing merely because it is possible to do so, may simultaneously be covered by legal frameworks and still perceived as an intrusive act, in the same way as is peeking through open doors or staring at individuals in the streets could be viewed as invasive, as Plutarch suggested: οὐ γὰρ ... ἐστὶ φιλοξενίης.

Universität Wien

Institut für Alte Geschichte und Altertumskunde, Papyrologie und Epigraphik

Universitätsring 1

1010 Wien

Österreich

peter.kruschwitz@univie.ac.at

Bibliography

- ADAMS, J. N. (1982), *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary*.
- ADKINS, E. (2018), Silence and Revelation: Discourses of Knowledge in Apuleius, in E. PLAN-
TADE – D. VALLAT (edd.), *Les savoirs d'Apulée*, *Spudasmata* 175, 191–212.
- BODEL, J. (1993), Rec. J. H. HUMPHREY (ed.), Literacy in the Roman World, *JRS* 83, 183f.
- BUCKLER, J. (1991), Plutarch and Autopsy, *ANRW II* 33.6, 4788–4830.
- BUSCH, S. (2002), Lautes und leises Lesen in der Antike, *RhM* 145, 1–45.
- CENATI, C. – GONZÁLEZ BERDÚS, V. – KRUSCHWITZ, P. (2022), When Poetry Comes to
Its Senses: Inscribed Roman Verse and the Human Sensorium, in E. COUSINS (ed.), *Dy-
namic Epigraphy: New Approaches to Inscriptions*, 143–176: [https://uscholar.univie.ac.at/
detail/o:1425430](https://uscholar.univie.ac.at/detail/o:1425430) (last accessed: June 2022).
- COURTNEY, E. (1995), *Musa Lapidaria. A Selection of Latin Verse Inscriptions*.
- DOROSZEWSKA, J. (2019), Windows of Curiosity: Eyes and Vision in Plutarch's *De curiositate*
(Mor. 515B–523B), *GRBS* 59, 158–178.
- GHALIA, T. (1991), À propos d'une inscription à valeur apotropaïque d'un contrepoids de pres-
soir découvert dans la région de Kélibia, in A. MASTINO (ed.), *L'Africa romana. Atti dell'VIII
convegno di studio*, Cagliari, 14–16 dicembre 1990, vol. I, 252–262.
- GIL, J. (1979/1980), Notas a los Carmina Latina Epigraphica, *Habis* 10–11, 183–188.
- HAMDOUNE, C. – ÉCHALIER, L. – MEYERS, J. – MICHAUD, J.-N. (2011), Vie, mort et poésie
dans l'Afrique romaine d'après un choix de Carmina Latina Epigraphica.
- HOWLEY, J. A. (2018), Aulus Gellius and Roman Reading Culture. Text, Presence, and Imperial
Knowledge in the *Noctes Atticae*.
- DE HOZ, J. (2007), Plutarco, Peri polypragmosynes 520d–e y 522d, y la alfabetización en el
mundo antiguo, in A. BERNABÉ – I. RODRÍGUEZ ALFAGEME (edd.), *Φίλου σκιά: studia philo-
logiae in honorem Rosae Aguilar ab amicis et sodalibus dicata*, 103–108.
- INGENKAMP, H. G. (1972), Plutarchs Schriften über die Heilung der Seele, *Hypomnemata* 34.
- KAMEN, D. – LEVIN-RICHARDSON, S. (2015), Revisiting Roman Sexuality: Agency and the
Conceptualization of Penetrated Males, in M. MASTERSON – N. S. RABINOWITZ – J. ROB-
SON (edd.), *Sex in Antiquity: Exploring Gender and Sexuality in the Ancient World*, 449–460.
- KRUSCHWITZ, P. (2016), Inhabiting a Lettered World. Exploring the Fringes of Roman Writing
Habits, *BICS* 59, 26–41: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2041-5370.2016.12016.x>.
- KRUSCHWITZ, P. (2021), Musisch-poetische Quellen-Kunde: Kulturgeschichtliche Gedanken
zu den carmina epigraphica in Vitruv's *De architectura*, *Sylloge Epigraphica Barcinonensis*
19, 27–53.
- LEIGH, M. (2013), From Polypragmon to Curiosus. Ancient Concepts of Curious and Meddle-
some Behaviours.
- LIDDEL, P. (2008), Scholarship and Morality: Plutarch's Use of Inscriptions, in A. G. NIKOLAIDIS
(ed.), *The Unity of Plutarch's Work: 'Moralia' Themes in the 'Lives', Features of the 'Lives' in
the 'Moralia'*, 125–142: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110211665.3.125>.
- MAGGIO, L. (2016), Pia, casta, rarissima: Les vertus des femmes en Numidie septentrionale sous
le Haut Empire Romain, *Epigraphica* 78, 111–144.
- MARCILLET-JAUBERT, J. (1975), Un propriétaire ombrageux, *Epigraphica* 37, 153–158.
- NIKOLAIDIS, A. G. (2011), Plutarch's 'Minor' Ethics: Some Remarks on *De garrulitate*, *De
curiositate*, and *De vitioso pudore*, in G. ROSKAM – L. VAN DER STOCKT (edd.), *Virtues for
the People. Aspects of Plutarchan Ethics*, 205–221.
- ROSENMEYER, P. A. (2018), The Language of Ruins: Greek and Latin Inscriptions on the Mem-
non Colossus.
- SCHMIDT, M. G. (2014), Carmina Latina Epigraphica, in C. BRUUN – J. EDMONDSON (edd.), *The
Oxford Handbook of Roman Epigraphy*, 764–782: <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195336467.013.035>.

- SCHMIDT, M. G. (2016), Zum Plan einer neuen Sammlung der Carmina Latina Epigraphica (CIL XVIII): Methodische Überlegungen und praktische Beispiele, *Chiron* 28, 163–177.
- SETAIOLI, A. (2020), Busybodies or Busy Bodies? Plutarch's *De Curiositate* and Gellius, *Prometheus* 46, 242–253: <https://doi.org/10.13128/prometheus-9237>.
- SPAL A. (2016), Poesie – Erotik – Witz. Humorvoll-spöttische Versinschriften zu Liebe und Körperlichkeit in Pompeji und Umgebung, *Untersuchungen zur antiken Literatur und Geschichte* 122.
- ZADOROJNYI, A. V. (2011), Transcripts of Dissent? Political Graffiti and Elite Ideology Under the Principate, in J. A. BAIRD – C. TAYLOR (edd.), *Ancient Graffiti in Context*, 110–133.

