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Section 2 Work in Progress

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Doctoral Project: Plutarch's *Greek Question*. An Historical, Historiographical, and Anthropological Commentary

Aims of the Project

For my doctoral project I am treating the work of Plutarch that goes by the name of *Quaestiones Graecae* (QG).¹ The QG is an antiquarian work in 59 autonomous sections, in a question-and-answer format, that gathers elements peculiar to the culture – understood in Tylor's broadest definition² – of civic and ethnic communities of the Greek world and attempts to provide a definition that may clarify them or a causal explanation that may illuminate their origins and functions. This work, which belongs to the broader realm of Question-Literature, thus combines, in a unique way, features typical of lexicography and of the problemata genre related to the Peripatetic milieu (see Jazdzewska's excellent 2018 contribution). We are unable to determine whether this collection was published by its author, whereas we can be certain that the *Quaestiones Romanae* were because of Plutarch's explicit references in *Rom.* 15, 7 and, in part, *Cam.* 19, 12. The QG and the QR, together with the *Quaestiones Barbaricae*, were probably intended to form a significant triptych that would compare Greeks, Romans and Barbarians. This triptych was inter-related by literary genre and theme, in which each work, however, would retain a well-defined identity with its own

¹ I shall not return here to the work's title problem, referring to it by the title of the humanistic translations. It is impossible to establish what the original title was (Payen 2012, p. 230) – if there ever was one – due to the discrepancy between a discordant and unclear manuscript tradition; the references of Plutarch in *Rom.* 15, 7 and *Cam.* 19, 12 to the *Quaestiones Romanae* – a work related to the *Quaestiones Graecae* but not perfectly akin to them – as Αἰτίαι ῥωμαϊκά; and Lamprias' catalogue referring to our work as Αἰτίαι Ἑλλήνων.

² „The complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities acquired by man as a member of society.” E.B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art and Custom*, London 1871.

characteristics. It is reasonable to think that the work had a long compositional phase, gradually taking up material that Plutarch might have considered worthy of attention and interest, either because it was useful to satisfy some personal curiosity, or because it was functional to the drafting of other works. The composition phase, therefore, preceded the writing of a large part of the Lives, but did not always take place in function of them.

First and foremost, the project will entail drafting an Italian translation and thorough commentary on the 59 Greek Questions following the example set by Halliday (1928) and never pursued again. Three distinct levels will be kept in mind as I comment on each Quaestio, though the levels will be in continuous and mutual dialogue: 1) a more strictly historical level that, where possible, aims to clarify the chronological contexts within which Plutarch's objects of research are operating, emphasizing their possible continuity over time and the possible meaning of their selection by a *πεπαιδευόμενος* at the turn of the 1st and 2nd centuries CE; 2) a level that would anthropologically examine the rites, customs, and usages described by Plutarch, when the subject matter of the Quaestio allows, and that would analyze Plutarch's descriptive and interpretative schemes in fruitful comparison with those employed by modern scholars, distinguishing, when possible, the different emic and etic perspectives; 3) a third level, constituting the last section of each commentary, will aim to investigate the mechanisms of construction of the individual QG, analyzing each question and answer, case by case, both separately and in their mutual relation, in an attempt to identify the literary, documentary, and oral sources used by the Cheronaeon for the drafting of each Quaestio. The research will also aim to bring out, if possible, the artificial or genuine character of the questions in relation to the answers, and to show the skillful work of decanting done in the transfer from the source's literary genre to Q&A format of the target work. This *Quellenforschung* will allow a return to the vexata quaestio of Plutarch's use of materials from the 158 *Πολιτεῖαι* of the Peripatetic school that appeared as the backbone of the entire collection. It was a group of writings whose reading would have triggered the composition of the QG as a whole, partially determining their themes and characters, but also to consider the possibility of Plutarch's use of lexicographic and paroemiographic collections that were ready or in the process of being compiled. Thus, there will be an opportunity to return to an in-depth investigation of the Cheronaeon smithery and its working, of Plutarch's techniques of composition and reuse of materials, as well as to see the degree of his originality input in his use of sources, that appear, from time to time, discussed, enriched, or plundered.

Given the commentary and punctual analysis of the individual Quaestiones, it will be possible, following an inductive method, to address more general problems concerning the work. I propose to reflect on Plutarch's selection of his objects of inquiry: significantly, these seem to refer back to the Greek world prior to Hellenism and the arrival of Rome, to the

world between Homer and Aristotle, a world in which one notes the conspicuous absence of Athens and Plutarch's discreet interest in his native Boeotia. It will therefore be necessary to reflect on the purposes of writing this work, a problem intimately and constantly connected with the audience for which the author composes his work and his work's intrinsic nature. We cannot rule out that the work may be a team effort and left 'unfinished', and a strongly hypomnematic character must be acknowledged. It may have served as a collector of materials elsewhere (re)used by Plutarch in his writings and probably on the occasions offered by everyday life. These features would suggest a work intended for personal use or for a small group; nevertheless, we can't deny that it is written keeping in mind the educated contemporaries, Greeks and Romans, who must have found the topics covered of some interest. The antiquarian character of these, at a time when the claim of greater antiquity of community institutions served to impose and vindicate their prestige, win disputes, and obtain favors and privileges, will not be the reflection of harmless hobby, but will have acquired a particular political value. Accordingly, it will also be necessary to question the form of the work and its belonging to a specific literary genre that calls for discussion, insight, and inter-activity, and its possible expendability in other contexts, such as banquets and visits to great sanctuaries, contexts that serve as a background for other Plutarch's works. Finally, I propose to return to the problem of the title of the work, not in a vain attempt to determine what it was originally (if there ever was one), but to meditate on aetiology among the ancients, analyzing what Greeks meant by αἰτία and αἰτίαι over time, from Homer to Plutarch.

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