

SHORTER NOTES

TRAJAN'S NOSE: *ANTHOLOGIA PALATINA* 11.418 AND PLUTARCH'S *REGVM ET IMPERATORVM APOPHTHEGMATA* 172E*

ABSTRACT

*Anth. Pal. 11.418 is traditionally attributed to Trajan. The distich mocks a man's large nose and is a typical example of a scoptic epigram. Even though the attribution to Trajan looks suspicious, scholarship has been inclined to accept his authorship. However, it is possible that the poem was written about the emperor instead, which would also explain the misattribution. This hypothesis, if correct, sheds light on the surprising opening anecdote of Plutarch's *Regum et imperatorum apophthegmata* (172E), which is dedicated to Trajan.*

Keywords: Trajan; *Palatine Anthology*; *Greek Anthology*; scoptic epigrams; author attribution; Plutarch

The eleventh book of the *Anthologia Palatina* includes various epigrams of the scoptic genre, often mocking peculiar physical features.¹ Long-nosed people are among the favourite victims, of which 11.418 is an interesting example.² The poem compares a man's large nose with the *gnomon* of a sundial, casting its shadow on his teeth and hereby indicating the hour:³

ἀντίον ἡελίου στήσας ῥίνα⁴ καὶ στόμα χάσκων,
δείξεις τὰς ὥρας πᾶσι παρερχομένοις.

If you put your nose pointing to the sun and open your mouth wide,
you will show all passers-by the time of day.

The epigram caught scholarly attention because of the scholium added to these two lines: Τραϊανοῦ βασιλέως. This looks suspicious, since it is the only mention of Trajan as the composer of a poem.⁵ The evidence of Greek poetry written by other Roman emperors, on the contrary, is more substantial. Suetonius, for instance, describes Tiberius' Hellenistic literary output and his poetic style (*Tib.* 70), of which *Anth. Pal.* 9.387 seems to be an example; and, perhaps more interestingly, the *Historia Augusta* alludes to the

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¹ See G. Nisbet, 'Satiric epigram', in P. Bing and J.S. Bruss (edd.), *Brill's Companion to Hellenistic Epigram* (Leiden and Boston, 2007), 353–69 on this type of epigram.

² D.L. Page, *Further Greek Epigrams* (Cambridge, 1981), 560–1.

³ Text and translation from W.R. Paton, *The Greek Anthology*, vol. IV (London and New York, 1918), 272–3.

⁴ On the scholarly debate concerning the short ι in ῥίνα, see G. Nisbet, *Greek Epigram in the Roman Empire: Martial's Forgotten Rivals* (Oxford, 2003), 196 n. 30: the most elegant solution suggested so far is probably that of Page (n. 2), 561, who deletes καὶ.

⁵ The author of *Anth. Pal.* 6.332 is probably Hadrian, as the first hand notes, and not Trajan, as suggested by a later hand: Page (n. 2), 556 n. 2.

poetic activity of Trajan's immediate successor, Hadrian (*Hadr.* 14–16), also confirmed by the *Anthologia Palatina* which includes various of his epigrams.⁶ This contrasts sharply with the lack of any further evidence in the case of Trajan as a Greek poet.⁷

However, Page correctly argues that one needs a convincing explanation for how 11.418 ended up being attributed to Trajan, if he is not the author.⁸ Scholars never came up with such an explanation, so the attribution is usually accepted with caution.⁹ Let us attempt such an explanation here. Anyone familiar with the many statues of Trajan and coins that bear his image will have noticed his distinctive long-bridged nose.¹⁰ As a consequence, it seems perfectly possible that the distich was not written by the emperor but *about* him instead; it would by no means be the only epigram that makes fun of a Roman emperor.¹¹ If this hypothesis is correct, one can readily see where the misattribution might have originated from.¹² It also makes sense from an interpretative point of view. The notions of monumentality (στήσας; the *gnomon* set up like a pillar) and public space (πᾶσι παρερχομένοις) receive particular attention in the poem. Such constructions were often established by the emperors (e.g. the *horologium Augusti*):¹³ if Trajan is the addressee of 11.418, the punchline would be that the ruler should not build a *horologium*, since he might serve as one himself, with this epigram as its inscription.

⁶ Discussed in detail by J. Klooster, 'Tiberius and Hellenistic poetry', *Aitia* 7 (2017), 1–13. See also the entries of C. Vieilleville, 'Hadrien' and A.M. Piguet, 'Tibère', in C. Urlacher-Becht (ed.), *Dictionnaire de l'épigramme littéraire dans l'antiquité grecque et romaine* (Turnhout, 2022), 1.709 and 2.1450–1 respectively. Page (n. 2), 559–60 convincingly defends Tiberius' authorship of *Anth. Pal.* 9.387.

⁷ I am therefore not inclined to follow the argument of A.M. Piguet, 'Trajan', in C. Urlacher-Becht (ed.), *Dictionnaire de l'épigramme littéraire dans l'antiquité grecque et romaine* (Turnhout, 2022), 2.1464–5, at 1465: 'Cette hypothèse' (i.e. Trajan's authorship) 'est renforcée par le fait que l'AP conserve également certaines épigrammes grecques de plusieurs autres empereurs, tels que Tibère, Hadrien et Julien.'

⁸ Page (n. 2), 556.

⁹ Cf. G. Nisbet, 'Roman imperial receptions of Hellenistic epigram', in P. Bing and J.S. Bruss (edd.), *Brill's Companion to Hellenistic Epigram* (Leiden and Boston, 2007), 543–63, at 550–1.

¹⁰ E.C. Brice, 'On the class of coins denominated "restored"', *The Numismatic Journal* 1 (1837), 243–58, at 255 observes that Trajan's *nummus restitutus* that contains an image of Pompey represents the general with a nose that is 'very tolerably bridged, and just such a one as Trajan might have claimed for his own. Indeed, were it not for the curly tuft upon the forehead, distinctive of Pompey (and, curiously enough, expressly mentioned by Plutarch), the portrait might pass for that of his great successor in Eastern triumphs.'

¹¹ A.V. Makhlaiuk, 'Emperor's nicknames and Roman political humour', *Klio* 102 (2020), 202–35, at 211–16 provides a convenient overview of the Roman tradition of ridiculing emperors (for any reason), usually in verse, such as the Greek epigram that mocks Nero cited in Suet. *Ner.* 39 (page 212). P. Watson, 'A gallery of characters: real persons and fictitious types in epigram', in C. Henriksen (ed.), *A Companion to Ancient Epigram* (Hoboken, 2019), 43–58, at 45 and 55 n. 4, building on Nisbet (n. 4), 113–33, connects Suet. *Ner.* 39 with a series of epigrams by Lucillius in *Anth. Pal.* 11, in which the poet would seem to make fun of Nero as well; but such interpretations have been refuted by L. Floridi, *Lucillio*, Epigrammi (Berlin and Boston, 2014), 3–5; L. Floridi, 'Lucillius', *OCD*⁴ (online version, 2021); L. Floridi, 'Lucillius', in C. Urlacher-Becht (ed.), *Dictionnaire de l'épigramme littéraire dans l'antiquité grecque et romaine* (Turnhout, 2022), 2.921–4, at 923.

¹² An earlier scholium that referred to the addressee of the poem (εἰς Τραϊανῶν βασιλέα or perhaps even Τραϊανῶ βασιλεῖ), might have been misread and included as a genitive in *Pal. graec.* 23. The fact that the *Anth. Pal.* includes other poems written by emperors, as discussed above, could have encouraged this incorrect reading.

¹³ Cf. O. Weinrich, 'Ein Epigramm des Kaisers Trajan und sein literarisches Nachleben', *Die Antike* 17 (1941), 229–48, at 233 on *Anth. Pal.* 11.418 and such monuments.

If one accepts this interpretation, the distich sheds light on the surprising opening anecdote of Plutarch's *Regum et imperatorum apophthegmata*, his only work dedicated to Trajan (172E):¹⁴

Πέρσαι τῶν γρυπῶν ἐρῶσι καὶ καλλίστους ὑπολαμβάνουσι διὰ τὸ Κῦρον ἀγαπηθέντα μάλιστα τῶν βασιλέων γεγονέναι γρυπὸν τὸ εἶδος.

The Persians love hook-nosed men and consider them the most beautiful, since Cyrus, their most beloved king, was of a hooked-nosed appearance.

This also opens the section on Cyrus the Great (172E–F), which in turn introduces the Persian part of the work (172E–174B).¹⁵ It is striking that the opening ‘apophthegm’ does not contain a quote of the Persian ruler, as this contrasts with the preceding dedicatory letter to the Roman emperor. Here Plutarch claims to have collected sayings of famous kings and generals for his busy addressee, as a brief substitute for the lengthy *Parallel Lives* (172B–E).¹⁶ As such, this apparent contradiction does not need to be problematic, since other anecdotes at the outset of a section also serve as an introduction and do not contain a saying of the historical figure.¹⁷ Yet even if other opening anecdotes provide such general descriptions of the new character as well, it still is ‘remarkable that, immediately after the discussion of the importance of sayings, the first apophthegm does not contain one: it only relates that the Persians love people with hooked noses because of Cyrus’ physical appearance (172E)’.¹⁸

However, in light of this new hypothesis on *Anth. Pal.* 11.418, the story about Cyrus’ nose might in fact be highly relevant for Plutarch’s powerful addressee, not in the least if we read the apophthegm collection in the context of Trajan’s Parthian expeditions, as recent scholarship inclines to do.¹⁹ Plutarch’s message would be that Trajan’s long-bridged nose, just like the appearance of his admired and beloved hook-nosed Persian predecessor, will in the future no longer be derided, but will be regarded as a new ideal of

¹⁴ Greek text from W. Nachstädt, W. Sieveking and J.B. Titchener (edd.), *Plutarchi Moralia*, vol. II (Leipzig, 1971). See L. van der Wiel, *An Opaque Mirror for Trajan. A Literary Analysis and Interpretation of Plutarch’s Regum et imperatorum apophthegmata* (Leuven, 2024) for a full analysis of the apophthegm collection as a genuine Plutarchan work (chapter one provides an overview of the scholarly debate on its authenticity).

¹⁵ For the structure of the collection see L. van der Wiel, ‘A proposal for restructuring Plutarch’s *Regum et imperatorum apophthegmata*’, *GRBS* 63 (2023), 1–26; L. van der Wiel (n. 14), 93–8.

¹⁶ For a discussion and interpretation of 172B–E, see M. Beck, ‘Plutarch to Trajan: the dedicatory letter and the *apophthegmata* collection’, in P.A. Stadter and L. van der Stockt (edd.), *Sage and Emperor: Plutarch, Greek Intellectuals, and Roman Power in the Time of Trajan (98–117 A.D.)* (Leuven, 2002), 163–73; S. Citro, ‘Alcune note ai *Regum et imperatorum apophthegmata*’, in M. Sanz Morales, R. González Delgado, M. Librán Moreno and J. Ureña Bracero (edd.), *La (inter)textualidad en Plutarco* (Cáceres and Coimbra, 2017), 51–9; S. Citro, ‘Consigli per un imperatore: saggio di commento (*Reg. et imp. apophth. 172B–E*)’, *Ploutarchos* 14 (2017), 3–34; and van der Wiel (n. 14), 75–91.

¹⁷ F. Saß, *Plutarchs Apophthegmata regum et imperatorum: Teil 1* (Ploen, 1881), 4 rejects the argument of R. Volkmann, *Leben und Schriften und Philosophie des Plutarch von Chaeronea* (Berlin, 1869), 222–3, who regards the apophthegms without a saying as an indication of inauthenticity. Van der Wiel (n. 14), 53–5 and 94–6 discusses in detail which anecdotes do not contain a quote (such as the opening stories of sections).

¹⁸ Van der Wiel (n. 14), 102.

¹⁹ Beck (n. 16), 165. See also van der Wiel (n. 14), 44, 89 and 390.

beauty and majesty across the Roman empire, Parthia included, reminding all subjects of the emperor's great exploits and his wonderful rule.²⁰

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²⁰ Even if Plutarch probably did not have *Anth. Pal.* 11.418 in mind (or similar epigrams on Trajan's nose, if they existed), the entire tradition of mocking peculiar noses described at the outset of this article seems to play a role in the background of 172E, where the Persian predilection for aquiline noses is presented as a remarkable cultural phenomenon. Thus even though hooked noses were seen as a sign of royalty in antiquity (as is suggested by Plut. *De audiendo* 45A, referring back to Pl. *Resp.* 5.474de), their owners still seem to have been ridiculed because of their appearance: Cyrus himself even makes fun of a hooked-nosed man in Xen. *Cyr.* 8.4.21, which is referred to in Plut. *Quaest. conv.* 633B–C, a passage briefly discussed by A. Nikolaidis, 'Quaestiones convivales: Plutarch's sense of humour as evidence of his Platonism', *Philologus* 163 (2019), 110–28, at 119.