Encyclopaedism from Antiquity to the Renaissance

There is a rich body of encyclopaedic writing from the two millennia before the Enlightenment. This book sheds new light on this material. It traces the development of traditions of knowledge-ordering which stretched back to Pliny and Varro and others in the classical world. It works with a broad concept of encyclopaedism, resisting the idea that there was any clear pre-modern genre of the ‘encyclopaedia’, and showing instead how the rhetoric and techniques of comprehensive compilation left their mark on a surprising range of texts. In the process it draws attention to both remarkable similarities and striking differences between conventions of encyclopaedic compilation in different periods. The focus is primarily on European/Mediterranean culture. The book covers classical, medieval (including Byzantine and Arabic) and Renaissance culture in turn, and combines chapters which survey whole periods with others focused closely on individual texts as case studies.

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Rethinking the ancient *quaestio*

The inclusion of ancient *quaestiones*-literature in a book about encyclopaedism before the Enlightenment might strike some readers as surprising. Yet the main argument of this chapter is that ancient Greek and Latin texts written in this form do indeed have a claim to the title encyclopaedic—notwithstanding the problems that ensue from our anachronistic use of this term. They do so because of their key function as textual means of collecting and systematising knowledge that spans a variety of fields or themes. This function, the trademark of projects of encyclopaedic scope, is already inscribed in the technique of question-and-answer, which was developed as an interactive mode of research and validation of knowledge in the context of more or less formal didactic praxis. This later paved the way for the subsequent recording of these enquiries in written form, and their collection in larger textual corpora of *quaestiones*, which could then be flexibly reconfigured or restructured, as well as expanded, or abridged. We can identify this formal fluidity and open-endedness as another feature that links *quaestiones*-literature with other literary kinds that were, throughout antiquity, particularly well-suited for projects of knowledge accumulation, especially lexica (most characteristically, Pollux’s *Onomasticon*), miscellanistic collections of heterogeneous subject matter (such as Athenaeus’ *Deipnosophistae*), and Pliny the Elder’s monumental *Natural History*.

I will here focus my investigation on four imperial Greek *quaestiones*-collections, written by the Platonist philosopher Plutarch of Chaeronea at some point between the late first and early second century CE. Each employs different variants of the question-and-answer technique in order to launch enquiries into natural science (*Natural Questions*, henceforth...
Greek and Roman culture and customs (Greek and Roman Questions, henceforth QG and QR, respectively), and Platonic exegesis (Platonic Questions, henceforth QPl). The four texts formed part of a richer production of works in the question-and-answer format by the philosopher (totalling 13 titles), of which, together with his Table Talk (henceforth QC), they are the only ones that survive to this day. They are also integral to a larger imperial literary tradition of writing problems, represented by authors such as Seneca, Philo of Alexandria, Heraclitus, Alexander of Aphrodisias, and Porphyry. They are especially significant because they constitute perhaps the most thematically wide-ranging, single-authored quœstiones-corpus of imperial Greco-Roman antiquity. Their sheer polymorphism testifies to the tremendous versatility of the question-and-answer format as a means of organising knowledge in this period. It thus allows us to situate quœstiones-writing at the heart of a broader Greco-Roman imperial impetus to produce, organise, and monumentalise knowledge of all sorts, through (in most cases) prose. This is a phenomenon whose cultural and intellectual ramifications, and importance for our interpretation of a significant segment of imperial Greco-Roman literary production have recently become the subject of groundbreaking study by classical scholars. Plutarch’s quœstiones yield especially rich opportunities for a productive exploration of the conditions under which such writings were read, their cultural resonance and intellectual outlook. They also matter as key exponents of a literary aesthetic that is characteristic of imperial projects of knowledge accumulation: this entails an

5 From the Latin title Quaestiones Naturales (Greek: Αἴτια Φυσικά/Αἴτιαι Φυσικαι).
6 From the Latin Quaestiones Graecae (Greek: Αἴτια Έλληνοι/Αἴτια Έλληνοι), and Quaestiones Romanae (Greek: Αἴτια Ῥωμαίοι/Αἴτιαι Ῥωμαϊκαι), respectively.
7 Quaestiones Platonicae (Greek: Πλατωνικὰ Ζητήματα).
8 From the Latin Quaestiones Convivales (Greek: Συμποσιακὰ Προβλήματα), literally translatable as Symptotic Questions, or Symptotic Problems. See Klotz and Oikonomopoulou (2011).
10 On Aristotle, see below. The other relevant works are Seneca (first century CE), Natural Questions; Philo (first century BCE–first century CE), Questions on the Genesis and Exodus; Heraclitus, Homeric Questions; Alexander of Aphrodisias (second–third century CE), Problems (probably not a genuine work), Φυσικὰ Σχολικαὶ ἀπορίαι καὶ λύσεις, Ἁθηναῖα Προβλήματα; Porphyry (third century CE), On Aristotle’s Categories, and Homeric Questions (in various recensions).
11 The authenticity of, especially, the QG had been disputed in the past, mostly on unsound arguments: see Halliday (1928) 13.
12 Murphy (2004) on Pliny the Elder; König and Whitmarsh (2007b), on a variety of ancient compilatory literature. See also Braund and Wilkins (2000); and Jacob (2001) on Athenaeus; Morgan (2007) and this volume, on miscellaneistic order in imperial ethical literature.
experimentation with different structural schemes, and a preference for transitions that are associative, and often abrupt, rather than logical or following criteria of thematic coherence; a predilection for inconclusiveness, which strongly conveys the sense that a project is incomplete, or unfinished; and a restless negotiation of ideas of totality. Accordingly, the present chapter will pursue a detailed investigation of precisely these key aspects, with a view to reaching a nuanced understanding of Plutarch’s *quaestiones*-collections as projects of knowledge accumulation that sought to play an integral role in the intellectual culture of their time. It also argues, seemingly paradoxically, and despite these elements of inconclusiveness and open-endedness, that they have a significant amount in common with the ideals of comprehensiveness usually associated with encyclopaedic writing.

Scholars of classical antiquity have long been reluctant to acknowledge a culturally central role for the Plutarchan *quaestiones*-collections, which remain marginal even within the relatively under-studied Plutarchan *Moralia*. Most classicists in fact commonly think of them (the QC perhaps excluded) as nothing more than Plutarch’s sub-literary collections of personal notes (*hypomnêmata*), and tend to dismiss their content as narrowly scholastic.\(^\text{13}\) This attitude seems striking, if compared with the intense scholarly work on medieval and Renaissance *quaestiones*-literature (the tradition of writing *quaestiones* continued, albeit with breaks and retransformations, into both those periods),\(^\text{14}\) which has treated such works as integral to the history of medieval and Renaissance encyclopaedism.\(^\text{15}\) In recent years, however, some exciting research has surfaced, which has paved the way for the exploration of Plutarch’s corpus of *quaestiones* along altogether new and groundbreaking lines. Pascal Payen’s volume of essays on the *QG* and *QR* is the most seminal among them: it was the first scholarly work to propose an investigation of the two collections as a unified project, drawing particular attention to their dynamics of parallelism.\(^\text{16}\) This has promoted a fresh consideration of them as projects akin to Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives*, which share some of the latter’s cross-cultural vision and intellectual

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\(^{13}\) See Rose (1924) 50–1; Halliday (1928)14; Pearson and Sandbach (1965) 135; and Cherniss (1976) 3–4. On the QC, see Fuhrmann (1972) viii–ix. On Plutarchan *hypomnêmata*, see Van der Stockt (1999a) and (1999b).

\(^{14}\) The medieval ‘genre’ of *quaestiones* in fact begins in the thirteenth century. Lawn (1963) traced it back to the ‘scientific renaissance’ that took place in Salerno in the thirteenth century, in which the ‘rediscovery’ of Aristotle’s *Problems* played a key role. See also Blair (1999a) and (1999b); Monfasani (1999).

\(^{15}\) In addition to the works just cited, see Ventura (2004) and (2007) 277.

\(^{16}\) Payen (1998a). On reservations concerning their being written as a unified project, see Swain (2000).
sophistication. Payen’s volume also offered the first set of studies that drew attention to Plutarch’s hellenocentric perspective as a key element that determines the presentation of material in both collections, and highlighted the centrality of the geographical theme in them. Both these approaches were taken up by subsequent scholarship, which has further enhanced our view of the two collections as culturally meaningful and coherent projects. A recent essay by Rebecca Preston has proposed that Plutarch’s different degrees of cultural distancing (and underlying hellenocentrism) are reflected in the differing formats of the question-and-answer technique in each collection. Preston also insightfully explores the implications of this divergence for addressing broader questions of cultural authority and identity in the two works.  

John Scheid, finally, has argued that the QR is organised in such a way as to constitute a virtual tour (periégésis, in Greek) of the city of Rome: its enquiries, in other words, are structured around a topographical plan, that of the forum of Rome, which thus operates as a kind of mnemotechnic ‘skeleton’ for the work. Scheid’s study brings to the fore the affinities the QR shares with other key imperial texts which invest landscape and geography with cultural meaning (most importantly, Plutarch’s so-called Delphic dialogues, and Pausanias’ Periegesis). But it also raises broader, intriguing questions about readership and about the density and depth of cross-cultural encounters between Greeks and Romans in Plutarch’s time.

Plutarch’s QN and QPl have, by comparison, received much less attention, let alone been subject to such radical reassessment. However, recent work by scholars such as Sven-Tage Teodorsson, despite its rather traditionalist focus on these latter collections’ sources, has usefully highlighted their intellectual hybridism, and experimentation with different styles of philosophical explanation. It thus invites fruitful comparisons with the rich intellectual tapestry of Plutarch’s other three collections, including that of the QC, a work which partially overlaps with them in terms of its scientific and philosophical interests.

Building on and furthering these approaches, my discussion will begin by broadly contextualising the reading and use of quaeestiones-texts during

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18 Scheid (2005–6) believes the QR can be construed as a kind of ‘promenade imaginaire dans la vieille Rome.’
20 Teodorsson (1999). See also Santaniello (1999), and Senzasono (1999).
21 See recent study of this text by König (2007); also Klotz and Oikonomopoulou (2011).
the high Roman empire, in order to reconstruct the broader intellectual climate in which the writing and consultation of such works would have flourished. I will then proceed to look closely at the subject matter and internal organisation of Plutarch’s QN, QG, QR and QPl, drawing particular attention to the ways in which these sustain a peculiar and idiosyncratic, yet characteristically imperial version of encyclopaedism.

Plutarch’s *quaestiones* in context: reading *quaestiones*-literature in the high empire

Plutarch’s QN, QG, QR, and QPl are texts which offer next to nothing in the way of clues about their purpose and anticipated readership. This reticence has long been taken as evidence of their sub-literary character. Hypotheses about their purpose and readership can be made more concrete however, if we take into account the way in which Plutarch himself and other authors of the imperial period represent their own reading of what most scholars agree was their model-text, the (pseudo-)Aristotelian (to them, genuinely Aristotelian) naturalist collection of *Problems*.

The pseudo-Aristotelian *Problems* brings together various strands of the Peripatetics’ encyclopaedic labour. According to Pierre Louis, it gained an unprecedented popularity following Andronicus of Rhodes’ new edition of Aristotle in the first century BCE. It was still widely read in the late first and early second century CE, the period during which Plutarch wrote his corpus of *quaestiones*. The influence it exercised on Plutarch’s own *quaestiones* is unquestionable, and can be traced not only in these collections’ literary format, but, in the case of the QC and the QN especially, also in aspects of their content. By Athenaeus’ time, the *Problems* was such a popular work that an itinerant showman from Alexandria called Matreas ‘wrote parodies of Aristotle’s *Problems* (ἐποίησε δ᾿ οὗτος καὶ παρὰ τὰς Ἀριστοτέλεις ἀπορίας) and read them in public (καὶ ἀνεγίγνωσε δημοσίᾳ): “Why does the sun sink but not dive?”; “Why do sponges soak up wine but not get drunk?”; and “How can accounts be reconciled, if they don’t argue with one another?”’ (Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae* 1.19d–e, transl. S. D. Olson).

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22 We do possess testimonies on the much later (medieval) reception of the QN only: see Pearson and Sandbach (1965) 133–43. The only contemporary testimony is an unhelpful cross-reference to the QR by Plutarch himself (Rom. 15.7).


24 E.g. QN 1 (911d–e) and QC 1.9, echoing ps.-Arist. *Probl.* 932b4–7; 25–8, 933a17–26, 935a5–8.

Athenaeus’ comment that Matreas ‘inspired admiration among the Greeks and Romans’ (19d) gives a good hint at the parodic performance’s success and popularity. At any rate, this popularity eventually led to a second edition–recension at the end of the second century CE, which probably effected the rearrangement of the collection’s contents resulting in its current thirty-eight books, as well as entailing changes in the contents themselves (addition and probably also removal of material).  

This key development in the Problems’ textual history speaks of a text open to continuous input, both elastic (that is, receptive of accretion and augmentation, and, equally, of abbreviation or omission) and plastic (that is, open to reshaping and restructuring); a text, therefore, that was truly encyclopaedic (in the sense that it allowed for continuous production of updated versions). Jacob assimilates it to a set of ‘index cards’ (‘fiches’) distributed in ‘folders’ (‘dossiers de travail’), an open, working text, in other words, which, however, ranks above a heterogeneous set of hypomnēmata because of the coherence of its language and style. This openness is further confirmed, and offers hints about the ways other imperial problem-texts might have been read, if we look at a revealing set of testimonies from two key readers of (probably different versions of) the text in the second century CE, Plutarch himself and Aulus Gellius.

In the opening scene of QC 8.10, Plutarch’s Roman patron and friend Mestrius Florus is depicted as reading from a copy of what he refers to as Aristotle’s Natural Problems (Προβλήματα Φυσικά – one of many texts within the wider body of Aristotelian Problems literature) that he encountered (ἐν τῷ Θήρμων τῷ Θηρμοπυλαίᾳ) in Thermopylae, the place where he and his friends spent some (probably leisurely) time together. The text stresses that the Aristotelian enquiries acted as a stimulus for Florus to formulate and pursue enquiries of his own. He ‘was himself full of questions’ (αὐτός τε πολλῶν ἀποριῶν... ὑπεπίμπλατο...), we learn, ‘as is natural for a philosophical spirit’ (ὅπερ εἰώθασι πάσχειν ἐπιεικῶς αἱ φιλόσοφοι φύσεις, 734d). Crucially, the text continues, Florus communicated (μετεδίδου) his enquiries to his friends (ibid.), a statement which emphasises the communal and interactive context in which it all took place. By responding in this way, the opening narrative concludes, Florus confirmed the Aristotelian maxim that ‘great
learning gives many starting points (πολυμάθειαν ἄρχας ποιεῖν: ibid.).

QC 8.10’s opening narrative is revealing on the simultaneous existence of different intellectual operations surrounding the use of the Problems: solitary reading, side by side with the practice of philosophical enquiry (based on the guidance the text offers) together with others – all in a leisurely setting; active engagement with the text (suggested by the verb πάσχειν, which figuratively alludes to the text’s impact on the philosophical reader), but also use of it as a platform for new enquiry (marked by the inceptive verb ὑπεπίμπλαιτο), which is, moreover, as rich and varied as the text’s variegated content itself (note the symmetry between the terms πολλῶν ἀποριῶν–πολυμάθειαν). The analogy stresses the educational subtext of miscellanistic variatio (a point to which I shall return), and the passage as a whole is instructive on the keen interest imperial readers (and communities of imperial readers) took in the content of such texts, in settings other than institutional.31

Perhaps the emphasis on Florus’ reading from the Problems is meant to make a point about his Roman unfamiliarity with Greek science. For the standard manner of engagement with the text in the various sympotic discussions narrated by the QC is evocation from memory in an oral context, which entails a creative sort of ‘plagiarism’ of its contents. The ease with which the characters adapt the text’s arguments to their own purposes is remarkable. Plutarch himself, for example, speaks as follows in QC 1.9:

ἐπεὶ δὲ πᾶν τὸ λιπαρὸν δυσέκπλυτόν ἐστι καὶ κηλίδα ποιεῖ, λιπαρά δὲ ἡ θάλασσα, τούτ’ ἀν σέτιον εἶ ἀρμόστα τοῦ μὴ καλῶς πλύνειν. ὃτι δ’ ἐστ’ λιπαρά, καὶ ἀυτός εἴρηκεν Ἀριστοτέλης. οἷ τε γὰρ ἄλεις λίπος ἔχουσι καὶ τοὺς λύχνους βέλτιον παρέχουσι καομένους, αὐτὴ θ’ ἡ θάλασσα προσραινομένη ταῖς φλόξι συνεκλάμει, καὶ καὶ ταῖς μάλιστα τῶν ὑδάτων τὸ θαλάττιον: ὡς δ’ ἐγώμαι, διὰ τοῦτο καὶ θερμότατον ἐστίν.

But since everything oily is hard to wash and makes a stain, and the sea is oily, this would surely be the reason for its not cleaning efficiently. That the sea is oily Aristotle himself has said. For salt contains fat, so making lamps burn better; and seawater itself, when it is sprinkled into flames, flashes up with them. Indeed among waters it is particularly seawater that is flammable, and, in my view, this is the reason why it is also the warmest. (627c–d, transl. P. A. Clement and H. B. Hoffleit)

Plutarch claims that seawater is not good for washing clothes, because it has an oily consistency. He bases his answer on the authority of Aristotle, but does not quote a particular Aristotelian argument. He appears, instead,

30 ‘He began to have’ (sc. many questions) (see LSJ s.v. ὑπεπίμπλαιτο).
31 See also Oikonomopoulou (2011) 109–11 for further discussion of this passage.
to mix-and-match arguments drawn from three different sections of *Problems* Book 23: the sea is oily (λιπαρά);\(^{32}\) it is because its salt contains fat;\(^ {33}\) seawater strengthens flames;\(^ {34}\) it is most flammable (κάεται μάλιστα);\(^ {35}\) this is why it is also very warm.\(^ {36}\) Such mastery requires a level of familiarity with the *Problems* and its content that is surprising to modern readers. What it makes clear, however, is that, for at least a certain type of imperial philosophical reader, the *Problems* was not a static, fixed text, but a creatively adaptable treasury of directions of enquiry, methods, arguments and scientific observations, as well as a cast for that reader’s own ‘Aristotelian’ voice.\(^ {37}\)

Aulus Gellius, the author of the *Noctes Atticae* (*Attic Nights*, henceforth *NA*), is our second case study. Gellius lists *quaestiones* among his genres of miscellanistic predecessors (preface 7); and reads, or presents his characters as readers of, problem-works by Aristotle and Plutarch (in the latter case, the *QC*).\(^ {38}\)

Problem-texts possess the status of literary authorities for Gellius. He expresses elegant praise of the qualities of Aristotle’s *Problems* in the following terms:

*Aristotelis libri sunt, qui Problemeta Physica inscribuntur, lepidissimi et elegantiarum omnigenus referti.*

There is a work of Aristotle, entitled *Physical Questions*, which is most delightful, and filled with choice knowledge of all kinds. (*Attic Nights* 19.4.1)

*Lepidus* (‘charming’, ‘delightful’, but also ‘amusing’) is an apt characterisation for the ‘amusing’ topics Gellius next provides as examples (why the bowels loosen when one is seized by sudden fear, and why one has an urge to urinate after sitting for some time before a fire: 19.4.2–6). But it leaves no doubt that the ancients found the text (and texts like it) engaging, interesting, and entertaining precisely because it treated such colourful topics taken from everyday life.\(^ {39}\)

Problem-works written by both Aristotle and Plutarch feature above all as books (note the statement *libri sunt*, literally ‘there are books’, above) in the *Attic Nights*. These books are available in libraries, or in private copies, and are accessed, read, excerpted (the latter designated by the Latin verb

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\(^{32}\) *Probl.* 932b 4–7; 935a 5–8.  
\(^{33}\) Cf. 935a 7–8.  
\(^{34}\) Cf. 932b5.  
\(^{35}\) Cf. 933a17–26; 935a5–8.  
\(^{36}\) Cf. 932b6.  
\(^{37}\) See Oikonomopoulou (2011) for a fuller discussion of the role oral recollection plays in the QC’s attitude to Peripatetic knowledge.  
\(^{38}\) *NA*: 1.11.17–19, 2.30, 3.5–6, 4.11.11–13, 17.11, 19.4–6.  
\(^{39}\) Cf. Gell., *NA* 3.6.1 (‘per hercle rem mirandam’).
praecerpere: 2.30.11) and cited in a variety of ways (summary, paraphrase, or verbatim quotation in Greek, or in Latin translation). This may take place in the context of writing a new work: Gellius repeatedly states that he read and excerpted from the Problems for the purpose of writing his own miscellany.\textsuperscript{40} It may also happen when there is a need for verification of knowledge that is cited from memory, as in the case of the Peripatetic who ‘from the library of Tibur, which at that time was in the temple of Hercules and was well supplied with books, took out a volume of Aristotle and brought it to us’ (NA 19.5.4).\textsuperscript{41} Finally, excerpts from the work can stand on their own as philosophical guidance: this is the purpose for which Taurus selects a relevant passage from the Problems and sends it to one of his pupils in order to discourage him from associating with men of the stage (20.4).

Gellius also sketches a semi-institutional setting involving reading from the Problems. Attic Nights 19.6 narrates a scene where Gellius reads a passage from a copy of what he refers to as Aristotle’s Natural Problems together with his philosophical teacher, the Platonist Calvenus Taurus.\textsuperscript{42} The phrase he uses, ‘[w]hen I had read this at Athens with our friend Taurus’ (\textit{h}oc \textit{ego} Athenis \textit{cum} T\textit{au}ro nostro \textit{legissem}, 19.6.2) might imply the study of a text under the guidance of a teacher, a process known by the Greek term συνανάγνωσις (‘reading together’), common in philosophical teaching of later antiquity.\textsuperscript{43} The two men play discrete roles in such a context: Gellius (the pupil) requests Taurus’ opinion, and Taurus offers it. The critical scrutiny which the two men undertake of Aristotelian causation regarding the manifestation of redness and paleness in people experiencing shame and fear, respectively (19.6.2–3), is characteristic of the type of educational stimulus a text like the Problems could provide: it could offer material for the honing of critical skills, and, through them, for the formulation of new, or better questions – such as the question Taurus formulates at the end of the chapter, which is an advance on the Aristotelian one (19.6.3).

It would be naïve to deny the idealised character of the scenes just discussed. Plutarch and Gellius after all share an intellectual agenda which is underpinned (much more systematically in Plutarch’s case than in

\textsuperscript{40} See NA 2.30, 3.6, 19.4.
\textsuperscript{41} \textit{promit e bibliotheca Tiburti, quae tunc in Herculis templo satis commode instructa libris erat, Aristotelis librum eumque ad nos adfert}. The book in question is in all likelihood a problem-collection, as we can tell from the type of investigation it is concerned with.
\textsuperscript{42} See Lakmann (1995); Holford-Strevens (1997).
\textsuperscript{43} See Mansfeld (1994) 193–4. The \textit{cum} qualifies both \textit{legissem} and \textit{percontassem} (introducing a temporal \textit{cum}-clause), and \textit{Tauro} (zeugmatic link), which emphasises the joint character of the reading.
Gellius’) by philosophical ideals of learning. This necessitates the valorisation of problem-posing, in both its oral and written dimensions, as an expression of a philosophical disposition par excellence.\footnote{On the QC’s educational agenda, and its philosophical underpinnings, see König (2007), Kechagia (2011) and Oikonomopoulou (2011). On Gellius’, see Morgan (2004) and Beall (2004). On the constructed nature of Gellius’ reading scenes, designed so as to ‘privilege[s] the activities of learned commentators’, see Johnson (2009), and (2010), 98–136 (quotation from 110).} Even so, the styles of consultation that they sketch, imprinted as they are in the textual history of the pseudo-Aristotelian Problems, allow us accurately to map this text, and other texts like it, on to imperial Greco-Roman antiquity’s intellectual landscape. The pseudo-Aristotelian Problems was a work that was approached first and foremost as a definitive literary record of past enquiries: an encyclopaedic text that could be read, discussed, or mined for its informative content, thus functioning much like modern reference works, which are consulted by readers because of their comprehensiveness. Simultaneously though, these authors also present it as a text that could be treated as a variegated template of enquiry – that is, as a work which served as an inspiration for the independent pursuit of knowledge, by offering its readers a key set of models on what constitute suitable subjects for enquiry, as well as on how questions can be successfully formulated and answered by following rigorous logical procedures, employing specific rhetorical strategies, and summoning a wide range of theoretical knowledge and empirical evidence. This didactic subtext is also a crucial aspect of its encyclopaedism, for it sets the ground for the successful continuation of enquiry, with a view to encompassing, ideally and ultimately, the total sum of knowledge available.\footnote{See Fowler (1997) and North (1997) for a discussion of both these aspects.} Last but not least, Plutarch and Gellius draw vivid portraits of these texts’ users: Greeks and Romans, authors of scientific and miscellaneistic literature, philosophical teachers and their pupils, and members of the intellectual elite entertaining themselves at symposia and other types of elite social gathering. They thus allow us to gauge the cultural import communities of imperial pepaideumenoi (‘educated men’) ascribed to their consultation.

**Plutarch’s quaestiones: content and intellectual outlook**

At first glance the limited thematic scope of Plutarch’s collections of quaestiones, each of which is singularly dedicated to the treatment of a specific
topic, makes them fall short of the encyclopaedic range of their model-text, the pseudo-Aristotelian *Problems*. However, taken together as works which distil the research endeavours of a single author, they showcase Plutarch’s impressive ability to engage with different areas of human knowledge in a meticulous and systematic fashion – a skill that parallels the encyclopaedic zeal of his intellectual predecessors, the Peripatetics. Further, a close look at their contents shows that they are works which integrate a remarkable variety of learning from different sources, and methodological approaches from different fields, in order to devise well-rounded explanations for their queries. In this sense they, too, lay claim to being comprehensive, just like projects we unquestionably designate as encyclopaedic. Let us look closely at some characteristic examples.

The *QG* comprises a total of fifty-nine enquiries into the origins of various Greek communities’ religious customs and cultural practices. *Quaestio* 38 conveys their distinctive flavour. ‘Who’, it asks, ‘are the “Psoloeis” and who the “Oleiai” among the Boeotians?’ In the answer, the reader is referred to a local myth: the daughters of Minyas, Leucippe, Arsinoe and Alcathoe, were maddened by Dionysus (μανείσας), and, as a result, cast lots between them in order to determine whose children could be slaughtered. The unlucky victim was Hippasus, Leucippe’s son, who was promptly torn into pieces by the frenzied women. The Minyads’ husbands, who wore dark clothes in order to express their grief, were thus called ‘Psoloeis’ (the adjective ψολόεις meaning ‘sooty’, or ‘smoky’), and the women themselves were called ‘Oleiai’, the name, as Plutarch tells us, equivalent to the adjective ὀλοός, meaning ‘destructive’, or ‘murderous’, 29e–f).

Both the form of the enquiry (beginning with ‘who..?’), rather than with ‘why..?’), and its focus on the meaning of two local names, align this *quaestio* with the methods of Greek scholarship and lexicography, both traditionally devoted to antiquarian investigations. This association with the world of Greek scholarly research serves to confirm what Rebecca Preston has identified as the collection’s inside perspective on Greek matters, which leads it to stress its privileged access to non-mainstream, local knowledge. Going back to our example, Plutarch’s Greek readers would presumably have been as well acquainted as we are with the myth of Dionysus, and the role Boeotia played as the gruesome setting where the god’s rites were first established in Greece. However, the myth of the Minyads that is

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46 See Halliday (1928) 167.
49 See Euripides’ *Bacchae* (which was very popular throughout antiquity).
narrated offers a less well-known (though no less bloody) alternative to the much more familiar story of King Pentheus and Agave. This predilection for rarer, highly localised versions of widely known myths, and for stories set on the sidelines of major mythical or historical events, runs through the collection. It comes hand-in-hand with an interest in small and historically marginal Greek communities of the islands (Corcyra, Aegina, Lemnos, Tenedos, Samos, Ithaca, Rhodes), tribal areas (Locris, Aenis, Macedonia), the colonies of the Chalcidice peninsula or Asia Minor (Sane, Epidamnus, Cnidus), as well as (in most cases) politically insignificant Greek mainland cities (Epidaurus, Messene, Megara, Orchomenus). Boeotia, in our example, was an area known throughout antiquity as a cultural backwater of Hellenism.

Such a focus on the peripheral presumes unusual, extraordinary erudition, in the form of an impressive command of sources (local histories, but also writings on various cities’ constitutions). It also requires the conjunction of wide historical paideia with scholarly and linguistic skills, and geographical knowledge. Last but not least, it calls for the mobilisation of ‘inside’ knowledge proper. This is why Plutarch concludes the investigation by introducing his personal testimony as a Boeotian: ‘Even today’ (καὶ μέχρι νῦν), he remarks, ‘the people of Orchomenus give this name to the women descended from this family [sc. of the ‘Oleiai’].’ Plutarch then mentions the Agrionia festival, in which the priest of Dionysus ritually pursues these women, and has the power even to kill them. ‘In our time’ (ἐφ᾿ ἡμῶν), he adds, ‘the priest Zoilus killed one of them.’ Zoilus died an ugly death soon after this act, and a lawsuit on the part of the victim’s relatives caused his family eventually to lose the privilege of hereditary priesthood (299f–300a).

The QR is the lengthiest collection within Plutarch’s corpus of quaestiones, comprising a total of 113 enquiries into various Roman customs. Let us examine quaestio 24: ‘Why have they in the month three beginnings or fixed points, and do not adopt the same interval of days between them?’

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50 Key examples include the story of Neoptolemus acting as arbiter between Odysseus and the murdered suitors’ families (14), the Tyrrenians’ raid upon Attica in order to seize the Athenian women, subsequent expulsion from their islands of Lemnos and Iimbros, and migration to Laconia (21), Achilles’ murder of Tenes, the hero who gave his name to the island of Tenedos (28), and Agamemnon’s stopover at Eretria, during which his captive women sacrificed at the Thesmophoria (31). See also 37 and 41.

51 See also 8, 19, 37, 40–1.

52 Halliday (1928) 14–15, attributes most of the QG’s material to the Aristotelian–Peripatetic Constitutions. See also his notes for hypotheses on other sources.

The ‘three beginnings’ refers to the Calendae, Nones and Ides, the three key reference points around which the Roman calendar month was organised. In both form and length, this *quaestio* differs greatly from the one we have just examined. It is articulated as a ‘why’-question, thus more openly flagging its interest in causes; and it is considerably more experimental when it comes to the provision of explanations, offering two alternative answers to the question that is asked: the first answer, attributed to Juba and his followers (οἱ περὶ τὸν ᾿Ιόβαν) is that the Calendae were thus named because this was the day the officials called (ἐκάλουν) the people in order to announce the Nones five days later. The Ides, on the other hand, was a holy day (269c). The second answer is that each of the three days corresponds to a different phase of the moon, the Roman calendar being lunar: the Calendae corresponds to the day of the new moon, when the lunar orb is invisible (which suggests the name for the day derives from the Latin verb *celari*, ‘to be hidden’, and its derivatives, such as *clam*, ‘secretly’). The Nones corresponds to the first appearance of the moon (what Plutarch calls the ‘new moon’, νουμηνία), which suggests that the name derives from the Latin word for ‘new’ (*novus*, sharing the same root with the Greek νέος). The Ides, finally, correspond to the day of the full moon, and their name derives from the word ἐἰδος (‘beauty’), signifying the beauty of the moon’s full orb (269c–d).

This *quaestio* too enlists an encyclopaedic range of knowledge in constructing its dual answer. Plutarch draws his first explanation from the Mauretanian king Juba, whose work on the similarities between Greek and Roman cultures (fittingly entitled Ὀμοιότητες) provided inspiration for Plutarch’s own project of cross-cultural comparison. He also shows himself to be a master of both the Greek and Latin languages, to a depth that enables him to detect their common roots, and comfortably etymologise Latin words on their basis. He exhibits the sensitivity of a comparative ethnographer, who seeks to translate Roman culture in terms that are comprehensible to his Greek readership. This explains his careful manipulation of linguistic analysis: the names for all three days naturally all derive from specific Latin roots, but he only acknowledges these when there is no Greek equivalent for them (as in the case of *clam*, and *celari*, for Calendae). At the same time, he displays the biases of a hellenocentric observer, when, in deriving the Ides from the Greek word ἐἰδος, he presumes Greek origins for Latin cultural usage. Finally, he adduces scientific knowledge in order to pre-empt criticism of the Romans’ inaccurate calculations:

54 On the use of this work as a source in the QR, see Rose (1924) 20–7.
55 On this, see Preston (2001) 98–106.
we must not be persistent in seeking to find out the most precise number of days (οὐ δεῖ δὲ τῶν ἡμερῶν τὸν ἀκριβέστατον ἀριθμὸν διώκειν) nor disparage approximate estimations (οὐδὲ τὸ παρ’ ὀλίγον συκοφαντεῖν); for even now (καὶ νῦν) that astronomy has advanced so much, the irregularity of the moon’s movements continues to defeat the expert knowledge of mathematicians, and elude their calculations. (269d)

Once again this is Plutarch’s personal perspective, offered in the form of a scientific observation which allows his Greek readers to understand that the Romans’ differing perceptions of time, and the differences in social organisation that these entail, are not just a question of ‘cultural difference’, but ultimately emanate from a scientific problem, which concerns the accurate prediction of the moon’s movements.

The scientific touch with which QR 24 concludes provides a fitting transition to the QN, the collection whose 31 enquiries are closest in spirit to the pseudo-Aristotelian Problems. Thus, QN 12 asks: ‘What is the reason for the clearness and calm produced when the sea is sprinkled with oil?’ The focus on a naturalist problem pertaining to the sea is reminiscent of Book 23 of the pseudo-Aristotelian Problems. Echoes of that book are in fact to be found across the Plutarchan collection, suggesting that Plutarch carefully consulted it prior to composing his own naturalist quaestiones. Thus, QN 12 asks: ‘What is the reason for the clearness and calm produced when the sea is sprinkled with oil?’ The focus on a naturalist problem pertaining to the sea is reminiscent of Book 23 of the pseudo-Aristotelian Problems. Echoes of that book are in fact to be found across the Plutarchan collection, suggesting that Plutarch carefully consulted it prior to composing his own naturalist quaestiones. The format of this quaestio (it is articulated as a ‘why’-question), putting the focus on the underlying physical causes of a natural phenomenon, also echoes the typical form of Peripatetic naturalist enquiry, as encountered in the Problems. Moreover, Plutarch also gestures to the authority of that collection by citing the Aristotelian opinion on the problem first: ‘Is it, as Aristotle says, that the wind, slipping over the smoothness so caused, makes no impression and raises no swell?’ (914f). Plutarch however finds this answer inadequate. It only explains the external phenomenon (τὰ ἐκτός) plausibly (πιθανῶς). In an attempt to offer a more substantial causation, Plutarch articulates two answers of his own: the first is that the oil is denser than the sea, which is admixed with earthy matter and uneven in its internal constitution. As a result, the oil displaces the sea when quantities of the two liquids are mixed together. When, later, sea water flows back to its initial position, this leaves gaps (πόροι), which allow for much clearer visibility underwater (915a). The second answer is that the air that is normally admixed with sea water is usually affected by the water’s disturbance and roughness, thus losing its clarity and transparency. This is however averted when oil is sprinkled on the sea’s surface, causing the air to regain its normal clarity (915a–b).

56 See 1, 2, 4, 7–9, 10, 11. 57 Not extant in the current ps.-Arist. Prob.
The answers that Plutarch offers are typical of the QN’s scientific spirit: they blend empirical observation on the interaction between different liquids with scientific reflection on their physical properties. Oil may be sprinkled on the sea’s surface, causing temporary calmness; or it may be carried by divers to the sea’s depths, thus enhancing visibility underwater. These effects are then explained as emanating from differences in the two bodies’ internal constitution, which have to do with their qualities of density (πυκνότης) and regularity (ὁμαλότης). The concepts derive from a wider background of ancient scientific theory (going as far back as the Presocratics), which describes bodies and substances in terms of opposing qualities: heat and cold, wetness and dryness, roughness and smoothness, evenness and irregularity, density and looseness. Our quaestio presumes familiarity with this system, as well as with other key scientific concepts, such as that of the passages (πόροι), understood as channels that are carved through material bodies, interrupting their internal continuity; the notion that physical bodies may as a result of external influences expand, or contract (διαστολή and συστολή); and the fact that substances may be either pure (as oil is presumed to be) or admixed with other elements (καταμεμιγμένα).

Finally, the QPl is the shortest of all collections, dedicating ten enquiries to various questions of Platonic exegesis. Quaestio 6 attempts to explicate an obscure statement that Plato articulates in his Phaedrus: ‘In what sense is it asserted in the Phaedrus that the pinion’s nature (τὴν τοῦ πτεροῦ φύσιν), by which what is heavy is raised on high, is among things of the body most closely akin to the divine?’ The two answers that are proposed presume solid knowledge of Plato’s writings, as well as of a wider background of Platonic philosophy. This is because both attempt to shed light on the problem according to the principle of ‘explaining Plato from Plato’, that is, by recourse to well-known aspects of Platonic ‘doctrine’ (thought by imperial Platonists to be a complete and fully elaborated system of philosophical thought). Thus, Plutarch’s first explanation proposes a metaphorical interpretation based on Plato’s theories of recollection and love (found in the Symposium and the Phaedrus itself): by ‘wing’ (πτερόν), the beauty of the body is meant, which stirs the soul to remember (ἀναμιμνήσκει) its experience of higher, divine things. The second explanation, thought to be simpler than the first, derives from Plato’s theory on the tripartition of the soul (also encountered in the Phaedrus). According to it, the ‘wing’ is a reference to the soul’s rational faculty (ἡ λογιστικὴ καὶ διανοητικὴ [sc. δύναμις]), able to

58 Anaximander and Empedocles. See Lloyd (1964).
59 This theory is also Empedoclean.
60 246d–e.
lift it above the base and mortal preoccupations, in order to contemplate things divine (1004c–d).

Seen as a whole, the QPl’s explorations steadily guide the reader along the path of philosophical reflection, exploring, through Platonic eyes, god, the cosmos, the limits of human knowledge, and the nature and interrelation of body and soul. However, naturalist enquiry and scholarly investigation hold an important place here as well, helping to illustrate complex philosophical concepts such as that of ἀντιπερίστασις (reciprocal replacement, 7), or to discourse on the different parts of speech (10).

Quite clearly then, Plutarch’s quaestiones-collections are projects of impressive learning, which synthesise a wide range of source-material and intellectual approaches for the purpose of investigating even the most abstruse or complex topics. It is thus not far-fetched to think of them as texts that endorse an ideal of encyclopaedic polymathy. This is conceived in Peripatetic terms, as learning that is meant to be productively incorporated in order to give ‘many starting points’ – that is, opportunities for fresh or more sophisticated enquiries, which can lead to the conquest of new areas of knowledge.

**Selective reading: the Plutarchan quaestiones as reference works?**

Strictly speaking, Plutarch’s quaestiones-collections are miscellanistic works, that is, writings which blend together a wide array of different queries, with no apparent system or single organising principle underpinning their accumulation. This makes them integral parts of the Roman empire’s wider tradition of miscellanistic writing. However, the term ‘miscellany’ can only prove useful in understanding these texts up to a point. It should not preclude our thinking of them as ‘encyclopaedias’, for two reasons. The first is that the Plutarchan quaestiones’ lack of an overarching ordering scheme is in fact not incompatible with their function as reference works. Secondly, they are not completely unsystematic. On the contrary, as this section and the one following will show, they experiment with different ways of arranging their material, each of which carries its own underlying logic.

The case studies that we isolated in the previous section alert us to a key aspect of Plutarch’s quaestiones: namely, that they have been composed as

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62 See Morgan in chapter 5.
collections of discrete enquiries, each of which can stand on its own. Simon Goldhill has recently argued that texts which exhibit this feature are key exponents of an imperial attitude to knowledge, which sought the condensation of classical antiquity’s vast body of transmitted learning into short, bite-sized units, which could be readily consulted and selectively reused in new contexts. If the enquiries contained within Plutarch’s *quaestiones* were indeed assembled with such an end in view, this would make a strong case for the function of these texts as informative compendia of knowledge, compiled in order to be used as works of reference.

Indeed, these works share several features which give credence to such a hypothesis. The first is their overall modest lengths, which facilitate efficient scanning of their contents in order to locate information. Secondly, the conciseness of the individual *quaestiones* that they comprise (which is often extreme, especially in the case of the *QG*) aids the reader’s memorisation of empirical observations, historical knowledge, scientific and philosophical concepts, and arguments that are introduced, debated or refuted. Once memorised, this knowledge could then be reproduced, or (as the example of the pseudo-Aristotelian *Problems* has already suggested) flexibly reused in order to serve new intellectual ends. What is more, no logical continuity seems to exist between the different enquiries contained within each collection, such as can be found in other large-scale philosophical and scientific treatises from antiquity (such as Aristotle’s works on animals, for example). Even when related topics are examined (as we will see in the next section), the reader gains little sense of an attempt being made towards a methodical treatment of a wider or more complex area of enquiry. The technique of *variatio* (‘variety’), which dictates that enquiries should succeed one another on the basis of their differences, rather than similarities in theme, in conjunction with the absence of cross-references within each collection (which are kept to a bare minimum) compounds this feeling. It seems, then, highly plausible that Plutarch’s *quaestiones* are deliberately designed so as to encourage piecemeal reading of their contents – and, it follows, the isolation of information from their contents, in an attitude to knowledge that is characteristic of reference works.

In what sorts of contexts might these works’ contents, once extracted and memorised or copied, have been reused? The investigation of the mythical and historical origins of Greek and Roman cultural practice in the *QG* and *QR* would have had a powerful resonance in an era during which the past and cultural ‘identity’ were recurrently negotiated. The *QG*’s

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enquiries in particular would have fully satisfied the Second Sophistic’s taste for mythical and historical knowledge with a vivid local colour.\(^{65}\) Moreover, its focus on peripheral Hellenism is also a Second Sophistic construction, celebrating fragmentation as the perennial feature of the Greek world (largely left unchanged by the Romans), while also drawing attention to some of its most unpleasant side-effects (inter-city strife, migration) prior to the stabilising impact of Rome.\(^{66}\) Similarly, the QR’s interest in Rome’s customs was part of a wider predilection for the cross-cultural examination of customs, exploring Greek traditions against those of the Romans, Egyptians, Persians, Jews, and others. In Plutarch’s time, such questions routinely featured at symposia, as imperial Greek literature of the symposium, written by him (his QC) and authors like Athenaeus, testifies.\(^{67}\) They also emerged in the context of visits to Greek oracles, places which stirred memory of the past and prompted reflection on the diachronic continuity of Greekness. Plutarch’s Delphic dialogues offer vivid narratives of how this process worked: the Greek cities’ abundant dedications to the Delphic sanctuary, which the religious visitors encountered in the course of their guided tour around the site, triggered enquiries into their background, historical circumstances, nature, and purpose. Those, in turn, acted as a means of recalling key events of the Greek past, and renegotiating its legacy through critical reflection and dialogue.\(^{68}\)

Similarly, the QN’s investigations do not emanate from a scientist’s ivory tower, but are anchored in the economic and cultural parameters of practical life: agriculture, animal husbandry, hunting, fishing, sea-faring, swimming, feasting and drinking. As Plutarch informs his readers in QN 29, these are meant to inspire wonder at everyday phenomena, whose marvellous nature (τὸ θαυμάσιον) is usually unnoticed by people accustomed to be fascinated by the rare and the unusual (919b).\(^{69}\) Enquiries of this sort could also naturally spring up in real-life settings such as the symposium (as our earlier discussion of scenes from Plutarch’s QC, in which characters appear to read or cite from the pseudo-Aristotelian Problems, also suggested). Inspired

\(^{65}\) See Whitmarsh (2009) 211, and (2010) 1–16.\(^ {66}\) See Preston (2001) 108–9.\(^ {67}\) E.g. QC 1.10, 2.4, 5.2–3. Such scenarios of oral reperformance could also provide a compelling explanation for Plutarch’s insertion of his personal voice in QC 38 and QR 24 (examined above): under conditions of oral discourse, this would function as an effective communicative tool.\(^ {68}\) E.g. De Def. 397e–398a, 398d–e, 400d–e, 401b–d, 401e–f. Delphi was the focus of cultural, as well as religious, pilgrimage. On the topic, see esp. Rutherford (2003); and Elsner and Rutherford (2005). On Plutarch and Delphi, see Swain (1991).\(^ {69}\) This may well be a reference to the genre of paradoxography, which flourished in the period of the empire.
by the physical reality of consumption at the symposium, they prompted the exploration of topics such as the origin, nutritional benefits, and cultural value of sympotic staples such as wine, bread, water, fish, meat and vegetables (which could then ramify into the investigation of broader natural phenomena). They were also the result of curiosity about the material dimension of objects used at the symposium, or seen in religious locations such as Delphi: vessels, musical instruments, statues or sculptures.  

Platonic exegesis would have ensured an equally wide public: exegetical quaestiones were performed in public settings as declamatory displays, and covered Homeric themes, such as those featuring in Heraclitus’ allegorical Homeric Questions. They could also concern philosophical topics, like the ones broached in the Orations of Maximus of Tyre, which discuss similar topics to the ones found in Plutarch’s QPl: Socrates, the relationship between body and soul, and Platonic theology. Perhaps not accidentally, the individual titles of these Orations are often in interrogative form.

It is unfortunately impossible to track the reception of Plutarchan quaestiones’ contents in their own time in a more concrete fashion. What seems certain, however, is that, in their function as reference works, they would have furnished ample starting points for thought, discussion, debate, and entertainment on key intellectual preoccupations of their era, and thus held anything but a marginal role in their contemporary cultural scene.

Consecutive reading, and its subtexts

On the other hand, it would be impossible for any reader of Plutarch’s quaestiones to isolate a query of particular interest to his pursuits without first thoroughly scanning the collection. No table of contents is included with any of these works, nor even a summary of their chapters (as in the QC, for example). Thus, the collections seem to presume a consecutive reading of their contents at least once. Their modest lengths are, once again, instrumental, enabling readers quickly to scan their contents. A lot is invested in this act of consecutive reading, in fact, showing that the texts’ structure obeys a specific aesthetic, that of variatio, which is underpinned, in turn, by a didactic subtext.

70 E.g. QC 2.6, 3.10; De Def. 395c–396c.
72 See esp. Diss. 3, 7, 8–9, 11, 17–18, 20–1, 41, with commentary by Trapp (1997).
Consecutive reading quickly reveals that our collections’ individual *quaestiones* are grouped in variable patterns. Certain lines of enquiry may be pursued in depth, and this is seen in the existence of thematic clusters. Typical cases would be *QG* 16–18, and 54–7, which pursue a succession of enquiries into the customs of Megara and Samos, respectively;\(^{73}\) or sections 7–12 of *QN*, which explore various questions concerning seawater and the sea.\(^{74}\) Themes may be revisited at later points, often persistently. A characteristic example is the recurrence of enquiry into Roman marriage customs and ceremony in *QR*. It is taken up at the very beginning of the work (the first two questions), and recurs at various points later (6–9, 29–31, 65, 87, 105, 108), often independently resorting to the same kinds of historical aetiology (for example, the rape of the Sabine women).\(^{75}\) Equally frequently, enquiries succeed one another in an associative fashion. This is illustrated well by *QR* 10–14, where the first investigation (10: of the Roman custom of covering the head during religious worship) branches out, associatively, to the examination of exceptions to (11 and 13), or other manifestations of, the custom (14), and, arising from an explanation at the end of 11, an enquiry into why Saturn is considered the father of truth.\(^{76}\) Finally, independent, one-off topics frequently arise, often interrupting a thread of related material. The end of *QPl* 2 (arguing that god is called the supreme father and maker of all things because he crafted the universe out of body and soul, the latter of which he begot) would have naturally led to *QPl* 4 (which explores the terms of the interrelation between body and soul),\(^{77}\) but the association is interrupted by an intervening (and highly technical) investigation of the division of reality into mathematical segments in the divided line of Plato (*Republic* 6, 509d–513e).\(^{78}\)

Such a meandering sequence of loosely stitched-together material is not in fact unique to these collections: several authors of ancient compilatory texts profess to write ‘in a haphazard manner, not systematically but as each came to mind’\(^{79}\) (Plutarch *QC* 2, preface 629d), or opt for an associative style of arrangement. In texts like Plutarch’s *QC* and Athenaeus’ *Deipnosophistae*, this is meant to reflect the associative twists and turns of symposiac conversation. In texts like Gellius’ *Attic Nights*, it is meant to reflect the author’s own associative leaps at the moment of composition. The common

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75 *QR* 29, 31, 86–7, 105. Other recurring explanations concern the fear of infidelity (7,9, 65); the Romans’ avoidance of marriage to their kin (6, 108).
77 1000e–1001c, and 1002e–1003b, respectively.
78 *QPl* 1001c–1002e. Cf. *QPl* 5–7, with Cherniss (1976) 4. See also e.g. *QR* 104–8.
denominator is the link drawn between the order of the textual product and a cognitive process (such as memory, or mental association) or work method (such as reading, excerpting) from which it emerged.\(^8^0\) In other words, it ties miscellanistic order to a certain ‘epistemology’ (in Christel Meier’s use of the term).\(^8^1\) Variety of subject matter was, moreover, thought of as conducive to learning in the ancient world. Seneca the Elder, in his \textit{Controversiae}, says that curiosity is stirred best when fresh material keeps emerging: ‘Let my little book’, he says to his son, ‘always have something new (\textit{aliquid novi semper habeat libellus}), so that it keeps you intrigued (\textit{sollicitet}) through the alternation not only of (new) opinions but also of (new) speakers (\textit{non tantum sententiarum... sed etiam auctorum novitate}). The desire to get to know the unknown is more intense than the desire to go back to what is known’ (\textit{acrior est cupiditas ignota cognoscendi quam nota repetendi}) (4 preface 1–2).\(^8^2\)

How does this help us make sense of the miscellanistic order of Plutarch’s \textit{quaestiones}? In the first instance it alerts us to an association of its form with a variety of research styles: intensive investigation of larger themes, but also interest in the odd particularity; revision of topics, either because their investigation was paused, or temporarily diverted to other issues, or simply as a result of a desire to add new insights and perspectives to their understanding; and associative transition from one research question to another, which testifies to an investigation that is given free rein to branch out, without constraints of focus. The combination of these styles can only reflect ongoing and inconclusive research – a project involving lifelong engagement, such as the one Gellius undertakes, when he promises to continue collecting his ‘delightful little memoirs’ (\textit{memoriarum delectatiunculas}, preface 23) for as long as the gods (and the availability of leisure time) permit. This lack of conclusion is further highlighted by the arbitrary endings to each collection, which seem deliberately to point to the fact that the last word on the topic is still forthcoming. In effect, we have the preconditions for accretive, and, notionally at least, infinitely expandable texts. Thus, much like the pseudo-Aristotelian \textit{Problems} before them, Plutarch’s \textit{quaestiones} craft themselves as open-ended, elastic texts-in-progress.\(^8^3\) Moreover, miscellanistic order speaks of texts whose varied learning (\textit{πολυμαθία/aliuid novi}) can indeed offer their readers ‘many starting points’, in the sense that it stirs their curiosity for new knowledge. This knowledge is in part

offered by the threads of enquiry already contained within the texts, but may also, as the QC has instructed us, be ‘discovered’ through the formulation of new questions (inspired by the texts).\textsuperscript{84} The way is thus paved for the continuation of enquiry in the future.

Understood in such terms, miscellanistic order stands as an admission of the inherent difficulty of capturing the totality of available knowledge: ‘any piece of writing must be selective . . . and so intrinsically incomplete’, as John North puts it.\textsuperscript{85} But it is, for the same reason, an expression of an underlying desire for encyclopaedic completeness, whose fulfilment can only be guaranteed through the continuation of research, perhaps \textit{ad infinitum}. Thus, a key characteristic of the ancient miscellanistic text is that it looks outside itself to a larger sum of knowledge that can be explored and captured in textual form.

In addition to expressing such a desire, the texts also make a gesture towards the potential of this desire’s fulfilment. This is done by hinting at an inchoate, but potentially stable, overarching scheme of organisation, a scheme that would represent the neat ordering of their research through an all-encompassing, meaningful structure. Two case studies might illustrate what I mean. The first is the \textit{QG}. The text, as we have seen, consists of a miscellanistic array of questions concerning linguistic usage and custom in what seems to be a random sample of Greek cities, islands, or tribal regions. But as we have already noted, we may detect an attempt towards a comprehensive geographical coverage: the places mentioned cover the entirety of the mainland Greek geographical domain (from the Peloponneso to Thrace, and from the Ionian islands to Samos), and extend to the Aegean islands and the colonised areas of Asia Minor and Italy.\textsuperscript{86} Further, the text construes Greekness in terms of a tension between locality and discrete communal identity on the one hand (seen in the recurrent discussion of rituals, or interstate conflicts concerning community boundaries),\textsuperscript{87} and network or interconnectedness on the other.\textsuperscript{88} Incidentally, a similar tension also emanates from the \textit{QC}, as Jason König has demonstrated,\textsuperscript{89} which alerts us to the constructed character of Greekness in both texts. This is a Greek world that is highly fragmented, but also highly connected through trade, religious rites, colonisation expeditions, war and peace treaties. Above all, it is connected because of geography, which determines the movement of

\textsuperscript{85} North (1997) 184, 186–7.
\textsuperscript{86} Already noted by Payen (1998a) 49–55.
\textsuperscript{87} \textit{QG} 8, 11, 13, 15, 17, 21, 26, 30, 46, 52, 59.
\textsuperscript{88} \textit{QG} 5, 11, 13–14, 16–17, 20–1, 29, 30, 35, 41, 44, 49, 54–8. On ancient networks and connectivity, see Malkin (2003).
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cities, peoples, embassies, or armies in space: the Aenianians settle successive neighbouring regions of central and south-western Greece during their migrations (13, 26); Odysseus is exiled from the Ionian island cluster of Cephallenia, Zacynthus and Ithaca for the murder of the suitors, and subsequently moves westward to Italy (14); the island of Samos closely interacts in various ways with its neighbouring cities of Asia Minor: Priene, Ephesus, Miletus (20, 55–7). Colonisation, the Trojan expedition, and the centrality of Delphi entail links and movements on a grander scale, which transcend the local level.

Plutarch could have structured his material in such a way as to give prominence to the geographical theme. He could, for example, have clustered some of his enquiries together by region (the Peloponnese, Epirus, Macedonia, the islands). Alternatively, he could have utilised the theme of travel, making his topics follow the narrator’s (notional) journey from one Greek region, city or place to another (this was common in ancient geographical writing, and what both Strabo and Pliny did before him); equally, he could have structured material around specific geographical hubs (such as Delphi; this is a scheme Pausanias followed after him). Perhaps the text, if it were to expand into an ‘exhaustive’ inventory of Greek usage and custom, would indeed be arranged in one or more of these ways. But the QG, as it stands, seems to shun such organisational options, as the shifts of geographical focus from question to question are quite arbitrary (but note the strong presence of associative links, which I discussed above). Yet the emphasis on the theme of Greek connectivity acts as a subtle prompt for the reader (both ancient and modern) mentally to reorder the QG’s material according to any one of the geographical schemes sketched above. Needless to say this would require a reader actively engaged in the process of reading, and ideally with a solid overview of the material (probably through sequential reading). The wider geographical space occupied by the Greek world thus emerges, albeit only tentatively, as a viable topographical backdrop for the work’s disparate contents, left to future readers to explore.

90 See also QG 45–6, 49.
91 QG 9, 11, 12, 15, 21, 22, 30, 35, 41, 44, 46. This sense of Greek connectivity is further enhanced through a variety of narrative and linguistic devices, which cannot be fully listed here: one is the explanatory method itself, which sees the local in terms of the general; but also through vocabulary stressing relationships of geographical proximity and connection (e.g. 297f: γειτνιῶντες: 303d–e: ἐκ τῆς ᾿Εφεσίων χώρας εἰς Σάμον διέπλευσαν); or geographical markers (rivers, plains: 293f–294c; 297b–c: 303d).
92 See Clarke (1999a) 193–244; and Murphy (2004) 129–64. Cf. also the topographical ordering scheme of De Def. Or.
94 Cf. n. 18, above, on Scheid’s analysis of the topographical order underpinning the QR.
The second case study is the QN. We can discern in the text an incipient classificatory scheme on the basis of the following thematic rubrics: matters of nourishment (1–5); the sea (8–, or perhaps 7–12); plants and agriculture (14–16); animals and human activities connected with them (18–26). The reader is offered hints that these categories may expand to wine and drinking (10, 27, 30–1). The categories have a precedent in the pseudo-Aristotelian Problems, where in the current version Book 1 discusses medical issues (in which nourishment is central); Book 3 wine-drinking and drunkenness; Book 10 animals; Book 20 certain types of plants; and Book 23, as we have already seen, the sea. If, as we saw, the reorganisation of this text into its current thematic units took place at the end of the second century CE, the thematic clusters offered by the QN might be taken as a hint that the present thematic versions circulated as early as Plutarch’s time. Moreover, the emphasis on plants and animals pays homage to the Peripatetics’ monumental work on zoology and plant classification, as represented by Aristotle’s History of Animals and Theophrastus’ On the Causes of Plants. This is matched by the Peripatetic ancestry of the text’s scientific vocabulary, and its echoes (in some cases, adaptations) of theories found in the Problems. Thus the QN as a whole forges strong links with an ideal of encyclopaedic comprehensiveness that is specifically Peripatetic, and pays homage to the Peripatetic encyclopaedic achievement.

The hints at such organisational possibilities beneath the surface of miscellanistic poikilia (variety) illustrate the mechanism according to which order and disorder, coherence and fragmentation (both terms used by König) can coexist in an ancient miscellanistic text. They convey a sense of the colourful variety of ordering schemes available to Plutarch, but they also draw attention to the power of miscellanistic poikilia to supersede totalising schemes of order, even when such schemes were clearly possible. The quaestiones, we should conclude, are not collections of Plutarch’s notes, but self-consciously fashion themselves as texts-in-progress for reasons in fact intrinsic to the kind of encyclopaedic function they envisage for themselves.

Conclusion

Imperial Greco-Roman antiquity did not coin the word ‘encyclopaedia’, nor did it produce an encyclopaedic movement that can be plausibly

95 See, e.g. QN 14, with HA 622a8–13. Cf. also Athen., 7.316a–318f; Aelian, De Nat. An. 7.11, and VH 1.1.

96 Overview of the main theories in Pearson and Sandbach (1965) 138–41.

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It did however see an incredibly intensified production of miscellanistic and compilatory writings, all of which are integral expressions of wider impetus towards organising and systematising knowledge. As our study of Plutarch’s quaestiones has, I hope, shown, despite all legitimate reservations, the term ‘encyclopaedia’ is indeed good to think with when examining compilatory and miscellanistic literature produced under the empire, for a number of reasons. First, it allows us to establish that, in imperial Greco-Roman antiquity the concept of a reference work was far from unknown, and that the consultation of texts for the purpose of extracting knowledge was very much embedded in contemporary intellectual practice. Secondly, it leads us to realise that in Greco-Roman antiquity, as today, aspirations to comprehensiveness, and the desire to capture all available knowledge motivated the accumulation of knowledge and its consolidation into large textual corpora – even if the resulting textual products are far from approximating to the exhaustiveness of modern encyclopaedias. Thirdly, it brings to the fore the preoccupation with textual order that runs through this period’s compilatory writing, as well as these texts’ constant experimentation with different organisational schemes for their contents. This allows for bolder comparisons with modern encyclopaedic projects, and urges us to be more confident in tracing the precursors of modern encyclopaedism back to Greco-Roman precedents.

At the same time however, Plutarch’s quaestiones allow us to detect a distinctive aspect to Greco-Roman imperial encyclopaedism, which sets it apart from modern encyclopaedic writings’ standard function as textual archives. The works contained within this corpus do preserve an incredible bulk of informative knowledge, in the form of facts, methodological approaches, and sources cited. But they do so not because they aspire to function as passive archival writings, but because they seek to promote a creative reuse of their knowledge in new settings, and a remoulding of their knowledge for the purpose of launching new intellectual pursuits. Their readers are assigned an active role in this process, encouraged to engage with their contents by means of criticising, supplementing, expanding, adapting and reconfiguring them. It was perhaps this particular conception of didacticism that prevented such projects (with the exception, perhaps, of Pliny’s Natural History) from reaching the monumentality of the Renaissance and modern encyclopaedia.

98 See the introduction to this volume. 99 See König and Whitmarsh (2007b).