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Space, Delphi and the construction of the Greek past in Plutarch's *Greek Questions*

Abstract: This chapter explores the concept of relative/relational space in Plutarch's collection of *Greek Questions*. It argues that space, rather than geography, provides a key vantage point from which we can interpret the collection's main themes, and understand the ways in which it attempts to link the past with the present. The chapter identifies key spatial experiences that are described within the *Greek Questions*' aetiologies (such as land journey, sea voyage, colonisation, migration), and discusses their role in problematising specific aspects of social or political life in the early Greek past (which, within the work, spans mythical times, pre-*polis* and early *polis* history). It concludes that the *Greek Questions* aligns itself with attitudes to the Greek past found elsewhere in Plutarch's writings (especially in the Pythian dialogues), and which are concerned especially with the negative role civil strife, interstate conflict and political fragmentation played in Greek affairs. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how the special role the enquiries assign to the Oracle of Delphi confirms this picture, given that Delphi seems to function as a sort of hub, but not as a powerful panhellenic centre.

The *Greek Questions:* space versus geography

Plutarch's collection of *Greek Questions* comprises a total of 59 aetiological enquiries on the traditions of various Greek communities. The format of these enquiries is standard: almost all are introduced with the interrogative pronouns τίς/τί..., and as a rule they focus on the meaning of specific terms or titles.[1] The formulation is such (the main verb ἐστί is usually implied) that it allows us to infer that the terms or titles in question were in use in various Greek cities during Plutarch's time. For example, the question 'Who is the πωλήτης ('Seller') among the Epidamnians?' (*Greek Questions* 29) implies that the title 'Seller' was used of a person in the city of Epidamnus during the High Roman Empire.[2] The answer then explains the meaning of such terms or titles by tracing their origins back to local versions of mythical stories, or to events (such as migration and colonisation) that took place in the early history of the Greek city-states. It is presumed that Plutarch, in compiling the collection, widely drew on the Peripatetic tradition of cities' *Constitutions*, although it is also clear that, at least in part, he relied on personal research into local customs and tra-

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[1] Payen (1998) 40–49; Preston (2001) 95–97.
[2] Halliday (1928) 138–139; Payen (1998) 44; Boulogne (2002) 411.

ditions.[3] At any rate, the lexical focus, and the role of aetiology as a means of connecting the past with the present ('present' understood as the imperial Graeco-Roman world in which Plutarch lived) are the most distinctive markers of the collection as a whole.[4]

Another key feature, whose importance for the interpretation of the *Greek Questions* was first highlighted by Pascal Payen, is geography: indeed, Plutarch's sample of Greek cities seems to have been deliberately selected so as to draw attention to remote or provincial places, and at the same time underline their geographical diffusion, across different regions of the Greek peninsula, the Greek islands, the Asia Minor coast, Southern Italy, and Cyprus.[5] For Payen, this diffusion is to be contrasted with the focus on the imperial city of Rome in the *Roman Questions* (a collection which, as he rightly argues, is closely related to the *Greek Questions*),[6] and, among other things, puts the stress on the durability of centuries-old local Greek traditions (surviving mostly outside the centres of Hellenism), despite the eventual predominance of imperial power in the wider Mediterranean region.

In this chapter I propose that we pay close attention to the *Greek Questions*' portrayals of space, rather than geography. This is because geographical landmarks (rivers, roads, the coast), despite the fact that they frequently feature in the collection's explanations, are not part of objective descriptions of space. Further, Plutarch does not exploit the geographical theme in order to achieve some sort of cohesive presentation for the material that he has collected: he could have grouped the aetiologies together by region, for example, or employed the theme of the land journey or sea voyage, along the course of which the different Greek cities or communities could have featured as stops.[7] Instead, the haphazard order in which the different Greek cities or communities are discussed encourages a perception of them as independent microcosms, each one with its own linguistic idioms, local culture, history, and religious life.[8] In this context, geographical landmarks are mentioned because they are important to peoples' or communities' experiences of the places in which they live and act—experiences which encompass past as well as present events. The explanations' spatial references thus serve to chart a rich diversity of economic, socio-political and religious activities that shaped individual Greek communities' cultural identity across time.

Contemporary cultural geographers utilise the notions of 'relative/relational space' in order to conceptualise this fluid relationship of people to spaces. The concept of relative space refers to one's subjective experience of space: depending on the type of activities he or she engages in, a human agent might perceive space (for example, distance) in different terms. The concept of relational space, in turn, refers to

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3 Giesen (1901); Halliday (1928) 13–15.

4 On the *Greek Questions*' format, see Preston (2001) 95–97.

5 Payen (1998) 49–54; Boulogne (2002) 183–185.

6 Payen (1998) 39–40; see also Harrison (2000) and Boulogne (2002) 183–185.

7 Cf. Hutton (2005a) 54–126, on Pausanias.

8 Payen (1998) 49–54.

the ways in which relations (what is meant by that is the full range of socio-economic and cultural activities of human agents) help shape the meaning and significance spaces carry on the collective level. Relative/relational space is thus contrasted to absolute space, which is the space that the geographer can measure in objective terms, calculating distances, or identifying and describing important landmarks.[9] According to this model, an understanding of how, within the *Greek Questions*, space is perceived and lived can shed helpful light on the terms in which the collection conceptualises key aspects of the early Greek past (in terms of politics, society, economy, or religion), as well as clarify what kind of historical or cultural assessment of the early Greek world it might have invited its imperial readers to make, considering its differences from their own imperial realities.

Spatial experience within the *Greek Questions*

In the Table below I have attempted to make a distinction between different ways in which space appears to be experienced by the Greek communities which feature in the different aetiologies. It should be noted that the different types of spatial experience that I distinguish are by no means watertight, but in fact overlap: for example, as we will see, expulsions or migrations usually involve some kind of land journey or sea voyage. Precisely because of this, however, they help us conceptualise the multiple, intersecting ways in which space operates as a key field of human activity within the collection.

Types of spatial experience	Chapters within the *Greek Questions*
Overland journey	12, 15, 19, 22, 37, 39, 59
Sea voyage	11, 30, 31, 32, 35, 41, 44, 54, 56, 57, 58
Migration	13, 26, 28, 51, 55
Exile or expulsion	5, 12, 14, 21, 26, 28, 33, 37, 38, 39, 46, 56
Colonisation	11, 14, 15, 21, 30, 35
Interstate war and military expeditions	5, 11, 17, 20, 30, 34, 39, 41, 44, 46, 49, 57, 58
Private and public space	2, 8
Pre-*polis* formations (settlements κατὰ κώμας)	17, 37
Religious spaces (shrines, burial grounds)	12, 22, 23, 27, 37, 39, 40, 44, 47, 48
Trade, piracy, plunder, farming	6, 21, 24, 29, 34, 54, 55

Let us consider some characteristic case-studies which will help illuminate some of the main issues involved. My first example is *Greek Question* 2 (291E – F, transl. F.C. Babbitt, Loeb):

9 See Warf (2010); see also Thalmann (2011) 14 – 41, on relational space in Apollonius of Rhodes. On other methodological approaches to space in ancient Greek literature, see also Purves (2010), esp. 1– 23, Gilhuly and Worman (2014). On narratological approaches to space in Plutarch's *Lives*, see Beck (2012) and in this volume. See also the Introduction to this volume.

> Who is the 'woman who rides on a donkey at Cumae'? (Τίς ἡ παρὰ Κυμαίοις ὀνοβάτις;) Any woman taken in adultery they used to bring into the *agora* and set her on a certain stone in plain sight of everyone. In like manner they then proceeded to mount her upon a donkey, and when she had been led about the circuit of the entire city, she was required again to take her stand upon the same stone, and for the rest of her life to continue in disgrace, bearing the name 'donkey-rider'. After this ceremony they believed that the stone was unclean and they used ritually to purify it.

Punishments for adultery committed by women (usually death) are something of a *topos* in imperial Graeco-Roman miscellanistic compilations.[10] The particular punishment that is described here reveals that, in the close-knit communities that comprised the world of the Greek city-state, private conduct was an object of intense public scrutiny. This was especially true of places like Aeolian Cumae, which was regarded in antiquity as a backward society.[11] (The use of the imperfect throughout the answer allows us to infer that the custom that is described was instituted and held in that city at some point in the past, without any clearer indication of the precise historical time). The public nature of the offence of female adultery is underscored by the fact that its perpetrators are made to parade in shame through key civic spaces: the wider geographical precinct of the city, and, more particularly, its agora, and a chosen stone in the agora. Within the narrative context of the enquiry, these locations no longer function as venues for conducting the standard public business (such as commercial transactions, legal and political proceedings), but are re-signified as instruments of public humiliation, in the context of a cruel ritual of social exclusion. The transgressive nature of female adultery is further underlined by the fact that the places in question lay outside a woman's normal sphere of activity (limited within the confines of the *oikos*). All in all, the enquiry's focus on the use of civic space is an effective means of problematising gender relations and the interaction between individual and society in the Greek *polis*.[12]

Greek Questions 13 and 26, next, illustrate a major theme that runs through the enquiries' depictions of space, namely, the way the early Greek communities experienced it through conflict and its outcomes (migration and colonisation). Both enquiries document the continuous migrations of the Aenianians, a Greek tribe (*ethnos*) that was expelled from its area of original habitation by another *ethnos*, the Lapiths.[13] As we learn, after many adventures the Aenianians only acquired a permanent home in the region around the river Inachus after themselves expelling that area's previous inhabitants, the Inachians and Achaeans. Both explanations allow readers to conceptualise the route the nation followed in its wanderings, by making note of key geographical regions and landmarks (the Dotian plain, Aethicia, Molossia, Cassiopaea, the river Auas, Cirrha). But even for readers who are not familiar

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10 See, e. g., Plu. *Quaest. Rom.* 6; Gell. *Noct. Att.* 10.23; Ael. *VH* 2.37–38.
11 Halliday (1928) 42.
12 Cf. *Quaest. Graec.* 38–40, 49.
13 Cf. *Quaest. Graec.* 15 (Locrians).

with the regions to which all these names correspond, the cumulative effect of their being mentioned is to draw attention to the Aenianians' constant shifts of location. Moreover, both enquiries' fusion of myth and history, their focus on land conquest, and their mention of kings strongly suggest the stories they narrate are located at a time prior to the establishment of the *polis* as a key unit of political organisation. In this way, they convey a strong impression of the instability and mobility that characterised the life of communities in the early Greek world.

Other explanations shed light on the broader political and socio-economic conditions that underpinned the life and affairs of Greek communities during such unstable or transitional phases: we thus learn that migrations and expulsions were in fact the agents that propelled the Greeks' expansion northwards, to Thrace, to Italy and the West, and to the islands and Asia Minor.[14] In this connection, the enquiries also document different types of economic activity, ranging from piracy and pillaging to trade and farming—the latter developing in stable and organised environments, when communities sought to establish lasting ties with their neighbours.[15] *Greek Question* 29 suggests the challenges involved in the latter instance were considerable (297F–298A, transl. F.C. Babbitt, Loeb):

> Who is the 'Seller' (πωλήτης) among the Epidamnians? As the Epidamnians were neighbours to the Illyrians, they realised that the citizens who had dealings with them (ἐπιμιγνυμένους) were becoming corrupted (γιγνομένους πονηροὺς). Fearing a revolution (νεωτερισμὸν), every year they selected one of their fellow-citizens of proven worth, so that he could be in charge of such transactions and exchanges. This person visited the barbarians and provided a market and an opportunity for sale for all citizens, and was for this reason called the 'Seller'.

The enquiry discusses a remote Greek colony, Epidamnus in Illyria, whose closest neighbours and trading partners were barbarians. Contact with them, the answer informs us, increasingly corrupted the citizen body: the term πονηρός probably refers to democratically-inclined citizens: Thucydides (1.24) confirms that in Epidamnus there were political disputes between the oligarchs and the *demos*, which eventually erupted into a full-blown civil war: just prior to the Peloponnesian war, the *demos* expelled the aristocrats, who then formed an alliance with the barbarians, and attacked the city.[16] The story is thus a reminder of the kind of factionalism and political feuding that was chronically plaguing Greek city-states during the archaic and classical periods, often resulting in civil strife. The Epidamnians' solution, according to the explanation, was to appoint one select citizen every year as head of all economic transactions with the Illyrians (who was for this reason named 'Seller'), so that contact between locals and their barbarian neighbours could be minimised or at any rate controlled. A key point of the aetiological story, then, is to place the readers before the difficulties facing Greek colonists

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14 See Table above, and Payen (1998) 49–54, 61–64.
15 See Table above.
16 See Payen (1998) 44; Halliday (1928) 138–139.

whose cities, geographically distant from the Greek motherland, lay close to a barbarian hinterland: on the one hand they had to maintain economic ties with barbarians, as they depended on them for their survival; but, on the other, they faced the pressure to preserve and protect local traditions or institutions against external influences that posed a threat. Other enquiries yield additional insights into the question of what territorial proximity to other communities, Greek and non-Greek, meant for Greek city-states: in all cases it is depicted as a factor that often generated interstate conflict, leading to disputes or invasions.[17]

To sum up so far, the experiences of space encoded within the *Greek Questions* point to an underlying perception of the early Greek world as a system of loosely tied *polis*-type structures or tribal regions. It is characteristic of the collection as a whole that it does not ascribe a prominent role to Athens, Sparta or the coastal Greek cities of Asia Minor, which, as we know, were centres of economic and political power in the classical and post-classical period.[18] Instead, what the explanations foreground is the role of regional and inter-city networks,[19] usually formed as a result of geographical proximity, maintained on grounds of old mythical ties, or cultivated through political alliances, marriage partnerships, and joint colonising missions. Thus, the explanations make mention of treaties between Peloponnesian communities (Sparta and Tegea, *Quaest. Graec.* 5), trade or travel between the Ionian islands and the west coast of the Balkan peninsula or Italy (*Quaest. Graec.* 14, 29),[20] and close contacts between the east Aegean islands and the Asia Minor coast (*Quaest. Graec.* 20, 55, 56, 58), or between places such as Boeotia, Megara and Corinth (*Quaest. Graec.* 16, 17). Despite the fact that the existence of networks somewhat mitigates the impression that the early Greek world comprised geographically isolated communities (since it brings the aspect of their interconnectivity to the fore), it does not override the sense that these communities were inherently unstable formations, subject to recurrent outbreaks of civil or interstate warfare.[21]

Delphi as a religious centre

Even though the communities that feature within the *Greek Questions*' aetiologies appear to lack a political centre, they have a clear religious centre, Delphi. It is notable

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17 See, e.g., *Quaest. Graec.* 11, 16, 17, 49.

18 Note the relative scarcity of enquiries devoted to Athens, Sparta and Asia Minor cities. See *Quaest. Graec.* 5, 20, 21, 35, 39, 45, 48, 56.

19 On networks in the ancient Mediterranean, see Malkin (2011). On island networks in specific, see Constantakopoulou (2007).

20 But note Hartman's correction at *Quaest. Graec.* 14, 294D: Αἰτωλίαν for Ἰταλίαν, which would link the Ionian islands with the western coast of the Greek mainland, as in *Quaest. Graec.* 29. See Halliday (1928) 79–80.

21 This perception of the early Greek world goes back to Thucydides' *Archaeology* (*Hist*. 1.2–19).

that the *Greek Questions* shows a special interest in Delphic religious customs, as well as in the cultural tradition of the wider region around Delphi, Locris—an interest that probably reflects Plutarch's personal ties to the Oracle, which he had served as a priest.[22] Delphi's religious significance is highlighted by two especially lengthy enquiries, 9 and 12, where aspects of the Delphic oracular and festival calendar are elucidated.[23] In both explanations, the alternation of present and past tenses is characteristic: Plutarch uses the former in a way that suggests the names of Delphian religious officials (the ὅσιος), festivals and calendar months (the Χάριλλα, the Βύσιος, respectively) that are discussed were still in use in the imperial period. He even makes explicit references to his own time twice, through the use of the temporal expressions ὀψέ ('late', 'recently') and ἔτι καὶ νῦν ('now still', 'even now');[24] the past tense on the other hand is used in order to trace the origin of the Oracle's religious activities and customs back to key mythological or legendary stories (such as the myth of Apollo and the serpent Python, itself a story of migration, located in the mythical past), as well as in the context of describing alterations in religious practice, in contrast with how things used to stand. Through these discursive features, the Oracle's diachronic significance in Greek affairs is underscored, subject to an underlying pattern of continuity and change.

Further, various aetiological stories within the collection depict the Oracle as a key player in the affairs of diverse Greek communities, however remote or provincial. *Greek Question* 35, for example, seeks to investigate the origins of an old song-line, chanted by the maidens of Bottiaea (a region in the north of Greece) at festivals, namely, 'let us go to Athens' (ἴωμεν εἰς Ἀθήνας, 298F).[25] According to the explanation, the song-line recalled Bottiaea's colonisation history. Some Cretan men who had been sent to Delphi as a sacred offering (ἀπαρχήν, 298F) set out from the Oracle in order to found a colony (εἰς ἀποικίαν ὁρμῆσαι, 299A). First they settled in Iapygia, in southern Italy, and then they ended up establishing a colony in the northern region of Bottiaea.[26] As it turns out, the colony also comprised some Athenians, survivors from the city's yearly offering of young men to the mythical Cretan king Minos, who had also travelled to Delphi together with the Cretan youths. Sea voyage, colonisation and migration form central themes in the enquiry, all set against an expansive geographical backdrop. What is most notable about the explanation however is that it puts the panhellenic significance of the Oracle of Delphi into relief: Delphi functions in the story as a key

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[22] Note that the Oracle features in other aetiological stories within the *Quaest. Graec.*, such as 15, 35, 48; cf. Boeotia, Plutarch's home region, which also surfaces quite regularly in the aetiologies: see *Quaest. Graec.* 16, 19, 38, 39, 41, 43. On Plutarch's ties to Delphi, see Jones (1971) 10, 26, 28; Lamberton (2001) 52–59; Swain (1991); Stadter (2015) 70–97.

[23] See Halliday (1928), ad loc.

[24] On the use of such phrases in question-and-answer texts, see Oikonomopoulou (2013) 46–59. See also Alcalde-Martín, Frazier and Roskam in this volume.

[25] Cf. Plu. *Thes.* 16.2–3, Arist. fr. 490.1–2 Gigon.

[26] See Halliday (1928), ad loc.

point of reference for Greek communities as geographically remote from the mainland as Crete. Its role as a sort of hub that guarantees the cohesion of an otherwise fragmented Greek world is apparent in several other enquiries as well, where it is consulted about local affairs, as well as prior to the foundation of colonies.[27]

Additional testimony to the Oracle's religious authority is furnished by enquiries such as *Greek Question* 59, in which it appears to undertake an actively interventionist role in interstate disputes. The enquiry sets out to explain the meaning of the term 'Wagon-rollers' (ἀμαξοκυλισταί, 304E) in Megara. The explanation typically blends in geographical references and the theme of the overland journey, in order to problematise the violent results of political instability in the Greek *polis*. Most probably relying on anti-democratic sources, the explanation links the theme of violence to democracy, as it locates its account in 'the time of the unbridled democracy (ἐπὶ τῆς ἀκολάστου δημοκρατίας) which brought about both the return-interest (παλιντοκία) and the temple sacrilege' (304E). The statement is an internal cross-reference to *Greek Question* 18, whose explanation narrates the complete collapse of social stability, after the Megarians deposed their tyrant Theagenes and instituted 'freedom without measure' (ἄκρατον … ἐλευθερίαν, 295D). This loss of control on the part of the Megarian populace, as *Greek Question* 59 explains, culminated in the crime that drunken Megarians committed against some Peloponnesian pilgrims (θεωρία, 304E, ἱερᾶς τῆς θεωρίας οὔσης, 304F) who were travelling through their land on their way to Delphi: the Megarians pushed the religious delegates' wagons into a lake, causing some of them to drown. As the Megarians themselves took no action over this crime due to the politically unstable situation of their city, the Amphictyonic assembly intervened in order to guarantee the attribution of justice for the sacred Peloponnesian mission, determining that the perpetrators be punished with penalties as extreme as banishment and death.[28]

Despite the fact that Delphi is the sole institution that furnishes some sort of centre to an otherwise polycentric Greek world, it is far from fulfilling the role of a power structure capable of uniting the Greek communities, or quelling conflicts between them. Such power structures only surfaced after the conquests of Alexander, and the later rise of Rome.[29] This perception is in line with the manner in which the Oracle's role in Greek affairs is portrayed in texts such as Plutarch's *Dinner of the Seven Wise Men*, also set in the archaic past. There too, the Oracle is mentioned in terms of its function as a religious reference-point (as evinced by its buildings and dedications), as well as in terms of its involvement in colonising expeditions.[30] Yet the world in which it exercises its influence is one that runs the risk of being destabilised

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27 See Table above.
28 On the Amphictyonic League, see Davies (1988); Richardson (1992) 224, 231.
29 See Payen (1998) 49–64.
30 See *Sept. sap. conv.* 150A, 163B, 164A.

by strife.[31] Further, both the *Greek Questions*' and the *Dinner of the Seven Wise Men*'s portrayal of the Oracle's role in Greek affairs of the pre-classical past can be correlated with Plutarch's dialogue *On the Oracles of the Pythia*. There, the character Theon rebuffs his interlocutor Serapion, who had earlier suggested that votive dedications to the sanctuary by courtesans were morally reprehensible, in the following terms:

> ... καὶ σύ μοι δοκεῖς ὁμοίως γύναιον εἴργειν τοῦ ἱεροῦ χρησάμενον ὥρα σώματος οὐκ ἐλευθερίως, φόνων δὲ καὶ πολέμων καὶ λεηλασιῶν ἀπαρχαῖς καὶ δεκάταις κύκλῳ περιεχόμενον τὸν θεὸν ὁρῶν καὶ τὸν νεὼν σκύλων Ἑλληνικῶν ἀνάπλεων καὶ λαφύρων οὐ δυσχεραίνεις οὐδ᾽ οἰκτίρεις τοὺς Ἕλληνας ἐπὶ τῶν καλῶν ἀναθημάτων αἰσχίστας ἀναγιγνώσκων ἐπιγραφάς ᾽Βρασίδας καὶ Ἀκάνθιοι ἀπ᾽ Ἀθηναίων᾽ καὶ ᾽Ἀθηναῖοι ἀπὸ Κορινθίων᾽ καὶ ᾽Φωκεῖς ἀπὸ Θεσσαλῶν᾽, ᾽Ὀρνεᾶται δ᾽ ἀπὸ Σικυωνίων᾽, ᾽Ἀμφικτύονες δ᾽ ἀπὸ Φωκέων᾽.

> ... so you also seem to me, in a similar way, to be excluding from this shrine a poor weak woman who put the beauty of her person to a base use, but when you see the god completely surrounded by choice offerings and tithes from murders, wars, and plunderings, and his temple crowded with spoils and booty from the Greeks, you show no indignation, nor do you feel pity for the Greeks when upon the beautiful votive offerings you read the most disgraceful inscriptions: 'Brasidas and the Acanthians from the Athenians', and 'The Athenians from the Corinthians', and 'The Phocians from the Thessalians', and 'The Orneatans from the Sicyonians', and 'The Amphictyons from the Phocians'. (401C–D, transl. F.C. Babbitt, Loeb)

Coming from the standpoint of an imperial Graeco-Roman speaker, Theon's remark not only confirms that certain (violent) aspects of the Greek historical past were reflected on in negative terms during the imperial period, it also captures a fundamental unease with Delphi's role as a panhellenic reference-point, given that, for a considerable segment of its history, it amassed wealth and prestige in dedications which were tainted with Greek blood.[32] Such strong explicit sentiments are absent from the *Greek Questions*' aetiologies that mention Delphi. Yet there is no doubt, given the enquiries' overall focus on the migratory and politically unstable nature of early Greek communities, that the aetiologies in question would invite imperial readers at the very least to reflect on the Oracle's efficacy and shortcomings as a centre of sorts at times in history different from their own. In this way, Delphi would play a key role in enabling imperial readers to relate the world of the *Greek Questions* to their own political realities, marked by the presence of a strong political centre, imperial Rome.

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31 See esp. *Sept. sap. conv.* 149C–E, where Diocles interprets the birth of the hybrid animal (half-human and half-horse) as a portent of strife (στάσις) and discord (διαφορά).
32 On Plutarch's political views, especially on *stasis*, see *Praec. ger. reip.* 823F–825D, and Aalders (1982) 26–27, 51–53; Swain (1996) 173–183; Duff (1999) 89–91, 296–297; Zadorojnyi (2005a) 113–114; on *stasis* in Rome, see Ash (1997); Buszard (2005). See also Brenk and Pelling in this volume.

Conclusions

I conclude that space, in the sense of space that is lived and experienced by subjects (what cultural geographers call relative and relational space), is a key connecting thread between the disparate *aitia* that comprise the *Greek Questions*. As we saw, the experiences of space that are encoded in the different aetiologies vary, and include migrations, colonisations, trade routes, diplomatic missions, or military expeditions across a vast geographical backdrop, namely, the greater Mediterranean world of Greek myth or early Greek history. They also offer accounts of the social processes, singular or collective actions, and political or economic decisions that shaped relations between different communities located in the Greek mainland, or beyond. Last but not least, they convey a strong sense of the inherent instability and lack of cohesion that marked the early Greek world. The technique of the *aition*, applied with a view to explaining the origins of customs, usages or practices, firmly locates these experiences in the mythical past, at a time either prior to the formation of Greek city-states, or during the early phases of *polis*-history. As a result, space functions within the *Greek Questions* as a powerful tool for re-constructing the early Greek past, and understanding its distinctive dynamic.

There is no doubt that this reconstruction betrays the influence of key cultural trends in Plutarch's time: we know that Greek intellectuals of the Second Sophistic sought to locate cultural authenticity in obscure, or local (understood in the sense: 'non-cosmopolitan', or 'unadulterated') versions of Greek myths or customs.[33] However, the *Greek Questions*' exclusive focus on the mythical and pre-classical past diverges from the overall fascination with classical (5th-century) antiquity that runs through Second Sophistic literature. To an extent, this divergence may come down to limitations in Plutarch's source-material, but it may also bespeak a self-conscious attempt to look beyond rose-tinted accounts of the Greek past prior to Rome (for example, the Persian wars; cf. *Praec. ger. reip.* 814B-C), and into much earlier phases of Greek history that often projected a darker, so to speak, image. The mythical and archaic past of Greek communities in particular, characterised by fragmentation and instability, forms a choice that stands in sharp contrast both to the glorious 5th century, marked by the emergence of a coherent 'Greek' cultural identity, and to the Roman imperial present. Plutarch's rather idiosyncratic historical focus[34] in the *Greek Questions* does not make him a historical revisionist, let alone an apologist for the Roman Empire. But it certainly suggests that his view of the 'Greek past' was not singular or single-minded, and that he ascribed value to exploring alternative models of Greek political and cultural life before Rome.

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33 See Whitmarsh (2001a) 104 – 108; and the articles in Whitmarsh (ed.) (2010).
34 See also Kim in this volume, discussing Plutarch's notion of the 'archaic' in more detail.