

The ‘Ptolemy’ Epigram: A Scholion on the Preface of the *Syntaxis*

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THE EPIGRAM *Anth.Pal.* 9.577 has often been quoted, imitated, and translated in works on Greek astronomy from late antiquity up to present day, beginning with Synesius of Cyrene, who engraved it on an astrolabe and quoted it in his presentation letter (*De dono* 5) shortly before the year 400.¹ In both the Palatine and the Planudean anthologies it is attributed to ‘Ptolemy’,² and modern interpreters appear divided between those who identify its author as the astronomer Claudius Ptolemy, and others who accept the ascription but do not consider that it necessarily refers to *this* Ptolemy. Among the latter group, D. L. Page included it in a little collection of epigrams possibly dating after A.D. 50 under “authentic ascriptions,” but expressed his uncertainty on the authorship.³

¹ The chronology of this work is established in A. Cameron and J. Long, *Barbarians and Politics at the Court of Arcadius* (Berkeley/Los Angeles 1993) 84 and 93. See the edition of the epigram by F. Boll, “Das Epigramm des Claudius Ptolemaeus,” in V. Stegemann (ed.), *Kleine Schriften zur Sternkunde des Altertums* (Leipzig 1950: hereafter ‘Boll’) 143–155 [repr. of *Socrates* 9 (1921) 2–12], at 154–155, for the influence of the epigram on medieval and Renaissance authors such as the Byzantine Theodorus Meliteniota, the Arabic Brethren of Purity, Tycho Brahe, and Kepler. For a contemporary example see L. C. Taub, *Ptolemy’s Universe: The Natural Philosophical and Ethical Foundations of Ptolemy’s Astronomy* (Chicago 1993), with the epigram quoted in the frontispiece.

² Planudes’ lemma reads Πτολεμαίου, the Palatine’s Πτολεμαίου εις ἑσπέρων: cf. Boll 152; D. L. Page, *Further Greek Epigrams* (Cambridge 1981) 113.

³ Page, *Further Greek Epigrams* 112. He praises the view of Paton, *The Greek Anthology* III (Cambridge [Mass.] 1925) 456: “Ptolemy: uncertain, which.”

In the first group we find the most significant contribution on the issue, an old separate edition of the epigram with commentary by F. Boll, who tentatively defended that Claudius Ptolemy may have indeed been its author.⁴ Boll showed that the epigram appears consistently in two of the three main branches of the manuscript tradition of the *Syntaxis*, and edited the epigram on the basis of this attestation. Heiberg had dated the divergence of these branches to somewhat before A.D. 300, alleging that one of them has textual affinities with quotations from the *Syntaxis* by Pappus and Theon,⁵ and Boll (152–153) deduced from this that the epigram had been in the manuscripts since before that date.

It is the purpose of this contribution to reassess the evidence concerning the early history of the epigram. In particular, I will argue that the epigram, of uncertain date and author, was re-used as a scholion on the preface of the *Syntaxis* by a reader who—possibly later than Boll supposed—adapted it to the context of a concrete passage with a couple of changes. This would account for the divergences which are seen between the text in Ptolemy's manuscripts and the one shown in the anthologies and Synesius.

Let us begin by presenting the epigram with its variants in the main testimonia: I take Synesius' version as the basis, since, as I will argue, this is probably the closest to the original:

⁴ Boll 152. Boll's self-admittedly non-compelling argument is based on the ancient attestation of the epigram in Ptolemy's manuscripts and on its philosophical stance, which he finds compatible with that of Claudius Ptolemy. Page, *Further Greek Epigrams* 113, seems unaware of this article, as well as of the attestation of the poem in Ptolemy's manuscripts (cf. n.14 below). On the contrary, some editors of the anthology cite Boll's article in support of the identification: H. Beckby, *Anthologia graeca* III (Munich 1958) 807: "Dichter: der berühmte Astronom Ptolemaios"; P. Waltz and G. Soury, *Anthologie grecque* VIII (Paris 1974) 98: "paraît réellement dû à Claude Ptolémée."

⁵ J. L. Heiberg, *Claudii Ptolemaei opera quae exstant omnia II Opera astronomica minora* (Leipzig 1907) cxxvii–cxxviii, cxxxvi.

Οἶδ' ὅτι θνατὸς ἐγὼ καὶ ἐφάμερος· ἀλλ' ὅταν ἄστρον
 ἰχνεύω πυκινὰς ἀμφιδρόμους ἔλικας,
 οὐκέτ' ἐπιψάω γαίης ποσίν, ἀλλὰ παρ' αὐτῶ
 Ζηνὶ διοτρεφέος πίμπλαμαι ἀμβροσίης.⁶

*Apparatus*⁷

- 1 θνατός Syn. Plan.] θνητός BCDGλ Pal. ἐγὼ Syn. Pal. Plan. Gλ]
 ἔφον BCD ἐφήμερος λ
- 2 ἰχνεύω Syn. BCDG (G in ras.)] μαστεύω Pal. Plan. λ πυκινὰς
 Syn. Pal. Plan. Gλ] κατὰ νοῦν BCD
- 3 γαίης ποσίν Syn. BCDλ] γαία ποσίν G ποσί γαίης Pal. Plan.
- 4 Ζηνί Syn. Plan. BCDGλ] Ζανί Pal. διοτρεφέος Syn. Plan. B]
 διοτρεφέος CD θεοτροφίης Pal. θεοτρεφέος Gλ

The epigram in Ptolemy's manuscripts

I will first discuss the evidence in Ptolemy's manuscripts. Two of the three main branches of Heiberg's stemma (BC and DG) contain the epigram, and none of the main manuscripts

⁶ Translation (Paton, slightly modified): "I know that I am a mortal, a creature of a day; but when I search into the multitudinous revolving spirals of the stars my feet no longer rest on the earth, but, standing by Zeus himself, I take my fill of ambrosia, the food of the gods."

⁷ The apparatus results from a new collation of the manuscripts, although the readings coincide with those of Boll (but note that his main text is that of Ptolemy's manuscripts). Syn. = Synesius *De dono* 5.57–60 Terzaghi; Pal. = Anthologia Palatina 9.577, Plan. = Planudes, λ = Leiden BPG 78 (9th c.) f. 145^r (in a table of Ptolemy's *Handy Tables*); capital letters represent the main manuscripts of the *Syntaxis* collated by Heiberg, although G was only used for books 7–13: Heiberg, *Opera* I.2 iii–iv. B = Vat.gr. 1594 (third quarter of the 9th c.) f. 9^r; C = Marc.gr. 313 (late 9th–early 10th c.) f. 30^v; D = Vat.gr. 180 (10th c.) f. 3^r; G = Vat.gr. 184 (A.D. 1269–1270) f. 82^r. All other manuscripts of the *Syntaxis* collated by Boll are apographs of B, C, and A (= Par.gr. 2389, 9th c.), but he misunderstood Heiberg's stemma, interpreting that these three manuscripts formed a common class originating in the Alexandrian Neoplatonic school: cf. the stemma in Heiberg, *Opera* II cxxxvi, and xxxvii where Heiberg argues that the common ancestor of BC (not of A) was created by the Neoplatonists. As regards A, an exemplar with very few scholia, we know that in its model the initial summary got lost, and that only three of the numerous apographs have the epigram; cf. Boll 144, and the A stemma in Heiberg, *Opera* II lxxvi.

provides an ascription. However, there are crucial differences in the textual nature of the epigram in the two branches, which Boll did not notice: whereas in B and C the epigram is written by the hand of the main copyist, in both D and G it is obvious that a later hand has done the job, which implies that the text probably did not appear in their ancestors. In the case of D, the hand is the same as that which wrote the long scholion on the same page where the epigram is found (3^r), datable to the late eleventh or early twelfth century. As regards G, it is obvious that the transcription of the epigram was not contemporary with that of the main text, since it appears compressed in the tiny space between the table of contents and the text of the first chapter, disregarding the verse lines. The ancient transmission, then, is assured only for one branch of the manuscript tradition, which invalidates Boll's argument in dating the epigram.

In B and C the epigram is written, differently from the main text, in capital letters (specifically *Auszeichnungsschrift*); furthermore, in C the subtitle introducing the preface, which comes just after the epigram, repeats the title and author of the *Syntaxis*.⁸ The difference between the epigram's appearance in B and in C is also significant and must be discussed here in some detail. The main text of B is set up in two columns, and, particularly in the first page of the *Syntaxis*, the first column reaches exactly to the end of the table of contents. The epigram stands below the main text (Heiberg notes *in mg. inf. B* in the apparatus, I.1 4), partly occupying the space below the two columns, but neatly aligning the end of the first verse with the right limit of the second column.⁹ That the main scribe thought alignment was important is seen in the careful symmetry of the

⁸ κλαυδίου πτολεμαίου μαθηματικῆς συντάξεως προοίμιον C, similarly to what we have in D; cf. the apparatus in Heiberg, *Opera* I.1 4.

⁹ The introductory word ἠρωελεγεῖοι to the left of the epigram is by a still later hand, so it must not be taken into account here. This hand has been identified as Nicephorus Gregoras': D. Bianconi, "La biblioteca di Cora tra Massimo Planude e Niceforo Gregora. Una questione di mani," *Segno e Testo* 3 (2005) 391–438, at 418.

title of the work on the same page, justified with both the left limit of the first column and the right of the second.

When we look at the text at the end of the second column, we discover that there exists a close topical link between it and the epigram. The epigram, written in the first person, is expressed as a contrast between the narrator's affirmation of his mortal condition (1) and the description of his study of astronomy as a heavenly journey up to the abode of the gods (2–4, introduced by ἀλλ' ὅταν). For his part, Ptolemy is drawing, towards the end of the second column of B, a contrast between practical and theoretical knowledge, which he exemplifies in his own person (1.4.18–5.4 Heiberg, ἡγησάμεθα προσήκειν ἑαυτοῖς τὰς μὲν πράξεις ... τῇ δὲ σχολῇ ...), identifying theoretical knowledge with his study of astronomy.¹⁰ Later in the preface, Ptolemy states that this study propels men to a divine status, which makes the connection still more patent.¹¹

Both the two-column layout of B and the strata-differentiation of its scholia, using capitals for the older and minuscule for the new ones, suggest that this is a highly reliable facsimile of its model;¹² this is not the case with C, which derived the text from the same ancestor (cf. n.7) but shifted to full page. Here the epigram is found just after the table of contents and before the text of the preface; what seems to have happened is that the scribe of C interpreted the epigram as part of the main text rather than as marginal and integrated it in what he thought was the most appropriate place given the position in its model. It would have been very odd to interrupt the text which stands

¹⁰ *Alm.* I.1 5.4–7 Heiberg: τῇ δὲ σχολῇ χαρίζεσθαι τὸ πλεῖστον εἰς τὴν τῶν θεωρημάτων πολλῶν καὶ καλῶν ὄντων διδασκαλίαν, ἐξαιρέτως δὲ εἰς τὴν τῶν ἰδίως καλουμένων μαθηματικῶν.

¹¹ *Alm.* I.1 7.21–24 Heiberg: ἐραστὰς μὲν ποιῶσα τοὺς παρακολουθοῦντας τοῦ θεοῦ τούτου κάλλους, ἐνεθίζουσα δὲ καὶ ὡσπερ φυσιοῦσα πρὸς τὴν ὁμοίαν τῆς ψυχῆς κατάστασιν.

¹² F. Acerbi, “Une topographie du Vat. gr. 1594,” in D. Bianconi and F. Ronconi (eds.), *La “collection philosophique” face à l’histoire*, forthcoming.

closest to it, and the only other possibility was after the indexes. This position is the same as it occupies in DG.

The variant readings

Let us now look at the different versions which emerge from the variant readings. On the one hand, the *Syntaxis* manuscripts BCD are coincident with each other everywhere except for διοτροφός in CD (4), which seems an alteration of the correct reading διοτρεφός, the one found in B and in Synesius. The error probably came from the fact that διοτρεφής is used here in the active sense ('Zeus-nurturing') instead of the usual passive meaning which is seen mostly in Homer ('Zeus-nurtured'). Such change of voice in compound adjectives is attested, however, in the late ancient Egyptian poets,¹³ and therefore this was probably correct. The change of vocalism in διοτροφός—a form not found elsewhere—was probably intended to ensure the active sense, as in διότροφος ('nurse of Zeus').

For the same reasons, G shows another form instead—θεοτρεφός—attested in Nonnus with the desired active meaning (*Dion.* 9.101 θεοτρεφών ἀπὸ μαζῶν, and similarly 9.240, 35.318). This seems to be a linguistically correct solution¹⁴ combining the incorrect reading of the Palatine, θεοτροφής—an unattested word which ought to mean 'feeding of the gods' rather than 'food of the gods'¹⁵—and διοτροφός, which would also have been regarded as erroneous, as we have seen. Actually, there is one indication that in the scholion in G a later scribe collated the text that we read in BCD with the version in the Palatine, since the form ἰχνεύω (2), which is attested in BCD instead of the reading μαστεύω in Pal., appears in rasura. The manuscript λ of the *Handy Tables* has exactly the same

¹³ See L. Miguélez Cavero, *Poems in Context: Greek Poetry in the Egyptian Thebaid 200–600 AD* (Berlin 2008) 117.

¹⁴ Interestingly, this is the same solution that modern editors of the anthology put forward as a conjecture, unaware of this attestation: cf. Page, *Further Greek epigrams* 113.

¹⁵ Page, *Further Greek epigrams* 113.

version as G, except for precisely ἰχνεύω, which is replaced by μαστεύω. This latter term, as Page argues, can be interpreted as a *lectio facilior*, since it is less specialized than ἰχνεύω in relationship with πικινάς, ἔλικας, and ἐπιψάω ... ποσίν, and appears elsewhere interpolated as an inferior variant.¹⁶ A plausible hypothesis is that a scribe could have substituted it in place of ἰχνεύω with the sequence ἴχνια μαστευ- in mind, which often occurs at the beginning of hexameter in late ancient poems.¹⁷

Finally, G and λ have in common with the anthologies, and with Synesius, two forms which appear much changed in BCD: ἐγώ instead of ἔφυν (1) and πικινάς instead of κατὰ νοῦν (2). These are the most important variants of the epigram, and in my view the clue to understanding its ancient transmission. If we look at the version in most of the *Syntaxis* manuscripts (BCD), we find that the first verse (οἶδ' ὅτι θνητὸς ἔφυν) more strongly recalls the famous epitaph of Sardanapalus celebrating the life of pleasure (Ath. 8.336A: εὖ εἰδὼς ὅτι θνητὸς ἔφυς σὸν θυμὸν ἄεξε τερπόμενος θαλίῃσι) than the text in the anthologies and Synesius (ἐγώ). As Boll demonstrated, verbal allusion to this epitaph was common in epigrams that advocated exactly the contrary kind of life that Sardanapalus celebrated, and was especially apt for referring to Ptolemy's preface because Aristotle, who is cited by Ptolemy (I.1 5.8 Heiberg), was known to have expressed his criticism of Sardanapalus in this matter.¹⁸ Furthermore, ἔφυν is related to φύσις, which could be easily connected with Ptolemy's allusion to practical life. For its part, the variant of BCD in the second verse, κατὰ νοῦν, has a similar effect on a reader of Ptolemy's preface. It is especially appropriate for it, much more so than the other reading

¹⁶ Page, *Further Greek Epigrams* 113.

¹⁷ Opp. *Cyn.* 1.492, 4.358; Dionys. *Perieg. Descr.* 490; Nonn. *Dion.* 6.355, 21.187, 33.227, 44.187, 45.230, 48.944; cf. the precedent of Apoll. *Rhod. Arg.* 3.1289.

¹⁸ Cic. *Tusc.* 5.35; cf. Boll 146–147. Cf. Ath. 8.337A (Chrysippus' version), *Anth.Pal.* 7.326–327.

(πυκινάς): if the epigram discussed practical life in the first part of the first verse, the sequence (ἀλλ' ὅταν...) can be understood as a poetic vision of an astronomer's theoretical life, and it turns out that in Neoplatonic texts ἡ κατὰ νοῦν ζωὴ or ὁ κατὰ νοῦν βίος was a typical expression referring to the theoretical life.¹⁹

The fact that the two most significant variants of the version in the *Syntaxis* manuscripts are perfectly fitting for a parallel with Ptolemy's text cannot be accidental. The obvious conclusion is that the epigram, which was already in circulation in the form that we see in Synesius (the text in the anthologies would be a slightly debased version of this one), was adapted to Ptolemy's context when it was transcribed into the manuscripts of the *Syntaxis*. This would explain why there exist two quite different versions of the text.

With respect to the Doricizing features, there seems to be a consistent pattern: Synesius' θνατός (1) appears Atticized in all manuscripts of Ptolemy, including Gλ, while Planudes maintains the form; the Palatine opts for the Attic form but (in compensation?) Doricizes Synesius' Ζηνί (4). One can think that θνατός was Atticized in Ptolemy's manuscripts in order to suggest more powerfully Sardanapalus' epitaph, which is never attested with Doric features. The form ἐφάμερος was maintained—except in λ, which shows no Doricizing features—possibly because it served as an erudite allusion to Pindar.²⁰

¹⁹ Porph. *Abs.* 1.28.18, 1.41.16; Iambl. *Protr.* 4.2, 4.19, 14.17, 56.13, *Myst.* 5.18.28; Syn. *Ep.* 137.59; Hermias *In Plat. Phaedr.* 56.8, 216.6.

²⁰ There are two significant passages. First, at the beginning of *Nem.* 6, the races of humans and gods are famously compared (1 ἐν ἀνδρῶν, ἐν θεῶν γένος), and following directly from this the poet goes on to mention the common origin of both (ἐκ μιᾶς δὲ πνέομεν ματρὸς ἀμφοτέροι) and the huge difference in their situation, and again remarks on a similarity (4–5 τι προσφέρομεν ἔμπαν ἢ μέγαν νόον ἦτοι φύσιν ἀθανάτοις) and a difference, namely that we “do not know what the day will bring, nor by night what goal destiny has written for us to run” (6–7 καίπερ ἐφαμερίαν οὐκ εἰδότες οὐδὲ μετὰ νύκτας ἄμμε πότμος ἄντιν' ἔγραψε δραμεῖν ποτὶ στάθμαν, transl. based on Svarlien). The other relevant place is his other famous inquiry into

Concluding remarks

According to the evidence, it is almost certain that the epigram was already present in the model of the *Syntaxis* manuscripts BC, since in both it is written in capitals by the main scribe of the text. We also know that this ancestor of B and C was produced in the context of the Alexandrian Neoplatonic school of Heliodorus and Ammonius in the sixth century, and that the epigram was probably not present in the other branches of the manuscript tradition of the *Syntaxis* by that time (cf. n.7). Now, although no certainty seems possible, it is tempting to suggest that the epigram was added to Ptolemy's *Syntaxis* precisely in the context of this school. These are the clues: first, the reference to the theoretical life using the words *κατὰ νοῦν*—a modification of the original epigram—was typical of Neoplatonists, as has been shown. Second, the Alexandrian Neoplatonic school contributed to the manuscript tradition of the *Syntaxis*, adding what forms now the preliminary material, namely the *Prolegomena*, the *Canobic Inscription*, and the observations of Heliodorus,²¹ and therefore it would not be surprising that it also added the epigram on the very first page of the *Syntaxis*.

The question as to the context of the production of the original epigram is less clear. We are left with Synesius' words when he presents the epigram together with one of his own, defining it as “old and more simply containing a eulogy of astronomy” (*De dono* 5.55 Terzaghi, ἀρχαῖόν ἐστιν ἀπλουστέρωσ ἔχον εἰς ἀστρονομίαν ἐγκώμιον). In a probable reference to it in one of his letters, he similarly describes the four lines as “just poetic sumptuousness” and “old” (*Ep.* 143.48 Hercher, ποιητικῆς εἰσὶ τρυφώσης μόνον. καὶ ἔστιν ἀρχαῖον), adding “I

the nature of gods and men, *Pyth.* 8.95–97: ἐπάμεροι· τί δέ τις; τί δ' οὐ τις; σκιᾶς ὄναρ ἄνθρωπος. ἀλλ' ὅταν αἴγλα διόσδοτος ἔλθῃ... (compare this last verse with the epigram ἀλλ' ὅταν and διοτρεφής).

²¹ A. Jones, “Ptolemy's *Canobic Inscription* and Heliodorus' Observation Reports,” *SCLAMVS* 6 (2005) 53–97, at 54.

consider it more impious to steal words from the dead than their clothes" (59–60 ἡγοῦμαι δὲ ἀσεβέστερον ἀποθανόντων λόγους κλέπτειν ἢ θοιμάτια).²² Synesius seems preoccupied with making clear that this epigram is not his own, and he would perhaps have named its author if he had known, but he is silent about this. In any case, it is noteworthy that, as we would expect after this analysis, he does not connect the epigram with Ptolemy, even though he has cited the astronomer before in the same text (*De dono* 5.7).

It must, then, have been the presence of the epigram in Ptolemy's manuscripts which led the Palatine scribe and Planudes to consider Ptolemy the author of the epigram (cf. n.2). As we see in the anthology, this was sometimes the case with epigrams written on manuscripts such as the ones in the series *Anth.Pal.* 9.184–214.²³ Three of them (196, 197, 205) are wrongly at-

²² Synesius refers to twelve lines written "as being one epigram" (*Ep.* 148.53–54 ὡς ἐν ὄν ἐπίγραμμα) which he has encountered "at the end of a quaternion of iambics" (52 ἐν τῷ τετραδίῳ τῶν ἰαμβείων εὔρον ἐπὶ τέλους). This was clearly a different composition from the main one in that document (which he describes as one in which the author converses with his own soul: *Ep.* 141.6–7 δι' οὗ πρὸς τὴν ψυχὴν ὁ γεγραφὼς διαλέγεται), so it certainly can have been written in elegiac couplets. Furthermore, the description is very similar to that of the twelve verses inscribed on the astrolabe: the first eight verses are referred to as his own and written "with a mixture of poetry and astronomy" (*Ep.* 143.55–56 μετ' ἐπιστήμης γραφέντες ποιητικῆς, μιγείσης ἕξεως ἀστρονομικῆς, cf. *De dono* 5.63–64 μετ' ἰσχύος ἀπηγγελμένον, καὶ ἐπιστημονικῶς), the last four not his own, old and just poetic. Maybe Synesius inscribed one verse in each zodiacal sign (12 in total) on the extreme ring of the astrolabe: he says that the epigrams were engraved "along the Antarctic circle" (*De dono* 5.54–5 κατὰ τὸν ἀνταρκτικὸν κύκλον). This would imply that the astrolabe was much bigger than the medieval ones where the outer circle is the tropic of Capricorn, so that the verses might have fitted on just one line.

²³ Lyric poets (184–185, 189–190), comedy writers (186–187), Plato (188), Lycophron (191), Homer (192), Philostorgius (191–192), Asclepius (195), Marinus of Neapolis (196), Nonnus (198), Oribasius (199), Cyrinus (200), Paulus (201), Theon and Proclus (202), Achilles Tatius (203), bucolic poems (205), Herodianus (206), Epictetus (207–208), Orbicius (210), Nicander (211–213), Porphyry (214). Like the 'Ptolemy' epigram, some of these are written in a feigned first person (193, 194, 198).

tributed to the author they are referring to.²⁴ But the most exact parallel with the case of the ‘Ptolemy’ epigram seems to be the so-called ‘Themistius’ epigram, *Anth.Pal.* 11.292, according to the scenario proposed by K. W. Wilkinson: Palladas would have composed a couplet—the last two lines of the anthology’s text—not having Themistius in mind; then, long after Palladas’ death, someone found the two lines apt for a criticism of Themistius, and appended them to two lines composed by himself which contained a clear reference to this man.²⁵ As in the case of the ‘Ptolemy’ epigram, the four lines were copied in manuscripts of works of Themistius, which is the reason why the epigram was sometimes attributed to him.²⁶

July, 2014

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²⁴ In the first two cases the ascription is to Marinus of Neapolis, who is praised in the epigrams for his biography of Proclus. 9.205 is attributed to the grammarian Artemidorus of Tarsus, actually the author of the bucolic compilation gracefully introduced by the epigram. Of the series 9.184–214, only 200–203 and 214 appear to be correctly attributed, namely to the ninth-century author Leo the Philosopher, on which see B. Baldwin, “The Epigrams of Leo the Philosopher,” *BMGs* 14 (1990) 1–17.

²⁵ K. W. Wilkinson, “Palladas and the Age of Constantine,” *JRS* 99 (2009) 36–60, at 59.

²⁶ A. Cameron, “Notes on Palladas,” *CQ* 15 (1965) 215–229, at 222. Cf. Wilkinson, *JRS* 99 (2009) 57 n.127.

This paper originated in my research on this epigram for my dissertation on Claudius Ptolemy, which was financed through a FPU fellowship from the Spanish Ministerio de Educación, Cultura, y Deporte, and written in the University of Barcelona. The preliminary hypotheses about the epigram made in the dissertation have been deeply corrected here following a detailed survey of the manuscript tradition. I want to express my gratitude to my director Francesca Mestre and to the committee for their observations in the *viva voce*, including Reviel Netz, Mauro Bonazzi, Carlos Lévy, Montserrat Jufresa, and Pau Gilabert; to Jaume Pòrtulas for discussing preliminary versions of this paper; to Fabio Acerbi for his help with codicological issues and his corrections in the final version; and, last but not least, to an anonymous referee of *Classical Quarterly* and another of *GRBS* for their most helpful comments.